

Colombian Caribbean *marimba de pierna*: preserving the sounds of the guazuma tree

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ABSTRACT

The *marimba de pierna* (leg marimba) is a traditional musical instrument found in the southern region of the department of Atlántico, Colombia, specifically in the municipality of Santa Lucía. Blending indigenous and African traditions, its exact origins are uncertain. Along with other musical instruments from the Colombian Caribbean region, the *marimba de pierna* was widely used in the aforementioned municipality, but its execution began to decline with the advent of electricity in the population. More recently, the phenomenon of globalisation has impacted negatively on the conservation of indigenous traditions of many

peoples. In the case of the *marimba de pierna*, it has become less and less interpreted, with only a few families still manufacturing and playing it. This paper presents the results of a research study of this endangered instrument, highlighting its social function, organological structure and repertoire in the hope of contributing to the dissemination and reactivation of this instrument.

Keywords

Endangered musical instruments, Colombian Caribbean region, Marimba de pierna, African diaspora, musical tradition, preservation, son de negro, son de pajarito, cumbia.

Introduction

In the mid-21st century, in a time of rapid development, the world feels increasingly small. The strengthening of communication media has enabled distances to be overcome and information and ideas to be disseminated quickly and easily around the world, such as this story of a musical instrument from the Colombian Caribbean that is in danger of becoming extinct.

Globalisation has brought many advantages to humanity, such as permeability and cultural exchange, leading to a high degree of multiculturalism, especially in large cities where the interaction of diverse music

and instruments creates innovative and rich musical proposals. However, the standardisation of processes and ideas threatens subjectivity and identity, especially in the case of minority communities. The industrialisation and commercialisation of cultural products propose the massification of musical tastes, leaving little space and budget for proposals that diverge from established canons.

This socio-cultural phenomenon negatively affects cultural traditions that have been guarded by generations, disregarding their value and causing them to fall into disuse. This is the case with the *marimba de pierna* of the Colombian Caribbean, an idiophone instrument that has

its origins in African and Austronesian traditions and has overcome dark episodes in human history (slavery and armed conflict) through oral tradition.

This article aims to show the importance of this instrument for the community that guards it, as well as for the global community, through the study of its historical context, social function, organological structure and repertoire.

Context

Although the *marimba de pierna* (leg marimba) was once found in various parts of the Colombian Caribbean, today it has been identified as still being in use only in Santa Lucía, a small town in the department (state) of Atlántico. Santa Lucía is located close to the *Canal del Dique* (Dique Channel), a branch of the Magdalena River (one of Colombia's main rivers). According to Professor Julio Cesar Cassiani,¹ this location shaped the town's economic and cultural dynamics. It has a small urban area and an extensive rural zone. The climate is dry, with little rainfall throughout the year, and vegetation is abundant, especially near the river. Among the most common trees are the *guásimo* (guazuma) and *balso* (ochroma) trees, the latter widely used by locals to craft instruments and boats.

Santa Lucía's economy revolves primarily around fishing, a traditional activity strengthened by its proximity to the *Canal del Dique*. The most common fish species in the area are *bocachico*, *mojarra* and *arenque*. Agriculture is also practised, although it has lost prominence over time. Additionally, commerce has benefited from the municipality's proximity to the bridge over the Magdalena River, which connects it to nearby towns such as Calamar.

In terms of housing, Santa Lucía has undergone considerable transformation. In the past, there were stilt houses (*palafitos*) and palm-thatched homes typical of riverside communities. However, solid constructions with tiled roofs now dominate. This shift reflects urbanisation and adaptation to new conditions, although some accounts suggest that the older houses disappeared before many could witness them firsthand.

Life in Santa Lucía is characterised by simplicity and the warmth of its people. A curious feature that visitors note is the prevalence of uncommon names among its inhabitants, which adds a distinctive touch to local identity.

Despite changes, the community preserves certain customs, though many are at risk of disappearing without active conservation efforts.

Santa Lucía's cultural life is notably vibrant. Its main celebration is the *Son de Negro* festival, an Afro-Colombian cultural expression that has gained regional, and even national, recognition. This festival brings together neighbouring communities and universities that participate in or research local traditions.

According to Herrera (2006, 2010, as cited by Díaz 2022), the *Son de Negro* is an artistic expression combining multiple art forms (music, dance, performance, literature) where 'the imaginaries and ancestral creative spirit of men and women from the Canal del Dique and Bajo Magdalena regions are consolidated' (32). It is also important to note that this practice originated as 'a mockery of the Spanish by enslaved people during the colonial era' (Jumeau 2015, as cited by Díaz 2022, 33–34).

Professor Cassiani names among other key local festivities the celebration of the Barranquilla carnival and the patronal feast in honour of Santa Lucía. Among traditional cultural practices, the *marimba de pierna* stands out. The instrument was once played in familial settings and was passed down through generations. Also commonly used by the community were drums made of *guásimo* or *balso* wood, as well as *canonas* (small boats) used for fishing and transportation.

As noted by Villalón, a historian and professor at Universidad del Norte (cited by Barrios and Rodríguez 2016), Santa Lucía possesses 'an artistic and cultural legacy of Black origin, with marked African traditions rooted in Colombia through slavery brought by the Spanish upon their arrival in Cartagena – a city connected to Santa Lucía via the Canal del Dique'. Villalón's words highlight how this region received a significant African-descendant population during colonial times. These communities brought with them their cultural practices, which may have included the *marimba de pierna*. While this remains a hypothesis, the following sections of the paper explore the striking similarities between the *marimba de pierna* and other African idiophones and beyond.

It is essential to mention that many of Santa Lucía's traditions are now fading. Key factors include population shifts due to historic floods, which forced entire families to

relocate to other municipalities. This migration disrupted the continuity of ancestral knowledge. Additionally, the exclusion of traditional instruments from modern musical formats, the decline of oral and familial transmission, and waning interest in local customs have accelerated this loss. The tradition of the *marimba de pierna*, for instance, is among the most affected.

Background

This study is based on the ethnomusicological and organological studies of the music program at Universidad Reformada in Barranquilla, Colombia, as part of the research project '*Ruta de instrumentos musicales del Caribe colombiano en peligro de extinción*'. The main objective of this research is to establish the presence of endangered instruments in the Colombian Caribbean, based on their history, social function, sound and interpretive forms, and to identify the reasons for their increasing disappearance.

The *marimba de pierna* is played in Colombia, specifically in the department of Atlántico, in the aforementioned town of Santa Lucía, which has a strong African influence. In this municipality, one family has been identified as maintaining the tradition of playing the instrument. Of the Olivo family members, the grandfather, a nephew and a grandson make and play the *marimba de pierna*.

This study was carried out between 2019 and 2020 in Santa Lucía. The main sources of information were as follows: documentary analysis (books and phonographic recordings); direct observation; and interviews with the instrument players. (At the time of the study, José Olivo was around 80 years old; his nephew, Eliuth Manuel Olivo Rojano, was around 50, and the grandson, Denicer Olivo, was around 25.) Based on the data collected, it was possible to determine the method of construction of the instrument and its musical characteristics, as well as the social and cultural context of the municipality. Some possible reasons have also been identified for the instrument's virtual disappearance, despite its having been passed down from generation to generation within the Olivo family.

Historical overview

To understand the origins of the *marimba de pierna*,

we need to take a historical journey through the African continent and the Austronesian region, where there are records of the leg xylophone (which belongs to the organological category of 'free key xylophones'). It can be said that 'the leg xylophone is one of the earliest xylophone types, where human legs are the frames for the xylophone keys and the space between the two legs becomes the resonator' (Bae 2001, 27).

This type of instrument differs from its Colombian counterpart. In the case of the Colombian Caribbean *marimba de pierna*, performers sit on a chair to play the instrument; in the case of examples found in Africa and Asia, in contrast, performers sit on the ground, stretching their legs to hold the xylophone logs. It can also be observed that the number of logs varies from one specimen to another. The Colombian *marimba de pierna* is constructed with three logs, while in other parts of the world it can range from two to twelve logs, depending on the needs of the music being played. Another difference is the number of performers playing the instrument. In Colombia, the *marimba* is traditionally played by a single performer, while in some places like Madagascar, it is played by two, or even three, performers simultaneously.

According to Bae, in Africa, this type of instrument is 'usually played by young girls or boys to keep birds or monkeys out of the area or as a practice activity in Senegal. Two to six keys are played on the performer's thighs' (2001, 13). Bae also identifies the presence of the leg xylophone in different countries in Africa, especially those located on the western coast such as Senegal, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast, Togo, Benin, Southeast Nigeria and Central African Republic. Towards the southern part of the continent, he mentions the countries of Zambia, Malawi and Madagascar (13).

Madagascar has great relevance to the history of the leg xylophone, as its geographical position serves as a cultural bridge between African and Austronesian musical traditions. In Madagascar, the instrument is known by different names depending on the community that plays it. The names include *antranatra*, *atragnatra*, *atranatra*, *atranatrana*, *bakilo*, *hatranatra*, *katiboke*, *kilangay* and *valihambalo* (Sachs 2020, 58). Several authors mention that this type of instrument is exclusively played by women, particularly young ones (Schmidhofer 2004; Sachs 2020; Godínez 2015).

It can be said about its social function that 'the xylophone is usually played solo. Singing, dancing, clapping may accompany the game. But this is not a common practice' (Schmidhofer 2004, 109). Based on this, it can be inferred that the leg xylophone is a solo instrument, like the Colombian Caribbean *marimba de pierna*, and that it, too, is in danger of extinction.

According to Schmidhofer (2004), the Malagasy xylophone is composed of six plates on the legs and one on the thighs, which can be exchanged (as mentioned earlier). In this case, the lower plates are placed in the middle and the higher ones on the edges, creating a melodic order that differs from the progressive order of the Caribbean Colombian *marimba de pierna*, which goes from the lowest to the highest sounds. The construction of this instrument is also artisanal, and the 'tuning is therefore selective, taking care of the main chords and always carried out with musical pieces. The most common chords are those called thirds and fourths in Western terminology' (Schmidhofer 2004, 113).

Schmidhofer also comments that most of the musical genres in southern Madagascar, as well as xylophone music, are characterised by a cyclical² structure. The instrument is played by two women and the parts of the two performers include short phrases and formulas that are repeated with frequent variations. Performer 1 often quotes a known vocal music theme, while Performer 2 provides a uniform accompaniment. 'With the desired emphasis, melodies that form during listening (inherent melodies) can be emphasised and the musical structure made explicit' (Schmidhofer 2004, 111).

The Austronesian region can be defined as:

... [a] linguistic concept that has gained considerable currency in archaeology and genetics. It is widely accepted that a large number of languages (ca. 1000), spreading from Taiwan to Easter Island via Madagascar are closely related, and that their likely homeland is Taiwan, where much the greatest diversity is found, linguistically speaking. (Blust 1995, cited by Blench 2004, 1)

Currently, Austronesian culture extends from Taiwan through Southeast Asia, Micronesia, Melanesia and Polynesia, places where the presence of the leg xylophone has been identified more specifically in New

Britain, New Ireland, the Duke of York Islands, Tami and Morobe province in Eastern Papua New Guinea, and the Philippines (Blench 2004, 5). According to Bae (2001), this instrument is also present in Indonesia in the Mentawai Islands, West Madura, Sumbawa and Flores, Lio, Central Timor, Taniembar and North Celebes (40).

According to Blench (2004), in the case of Taiwan, the instrument is called '*muqin*' in the Atayal language, referring to a five-plate instrument. Another instrument with three plates is known as '*kokan*' or '*tanax*' in the Amis language. The author mentions that the plates of the instrument are mounted on a small frame that is held by the legs of the interpreter, who sits on the ground (just like the interpreters in Madagascar). Other names identified by this author for the leg xylophone in the Austronesian region include *talonggating* (Philippines), *doli-doli* (Nias), *tundukut*, *tutukat* and *lelega* (Mentawai). Finally, Blench notes:

The leg-xylophone was known to the earliest Austronesian groups and ... they carried it with them at least as far as New Britain during their expansion. The current distribution suggests that the instrument only survives at the margins of the area, having been displaced by more complex instruments through the central region. (2004, 5)

It is important to note that there is currently not enough information to determine the exact place of origin of the leg xylophone. As observed, the instrument has been most prevalent in the African continent and the Austronesian region, and it has possibly accompanied humanity for centuries but now faces extinction.

In the case of Latin America, no other instruments similar to the *marimba de pierna* from the Colombian Caribbean have been found, but the history of the *marimba* in this continent will be briefly described. The *marimba* is present in the Central American region, in countries such as Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras and Costa Rica. In South America, it has been identified in Colombia and Ecuador.

Godínez (2015, 76) comments that Armas (1964) found, that prior to the arrival of the Spanish in the American continent in 1492, there is a record within Maya culture in Guatemala, , referring to a type of instrument that can be called a '*marimba de brazo*' (arm marimba) with

approximately ten keys. However, it should be noted that for some scholars, this reference is considered unreliable as the original document containing the image of the instrument is lost (Godínez 2015).

In the case of Central America, the existence of the *marimba* is first recorded in 1680 in what is now Guatemala. This record refers to the '*marimba de arco de tecomates*' as having an average of 21 keys. It is considered an ancestor of the chromatic *marimba* that is currently present in this part of the continent (Godínez 2015). This instrument has a high degree of development in its organological structure, including up to two keyboards, and it is widely accepted – even being recognised as a national symbol in some countries.

In Colombia and Ecuador, the *marimba de chonta* is present in the Pacific region. Regarding its structure, it can be said that:

It commonly has between 19 and 23 boards made of different palm woods (chontaduro, gualte, pambil, etc.), and its resonators are made of guadua. Although in recent years there have been constructions with diatonic or tempered chromatic tuning, traditionally its tuning is diatonic (7 notes per octave) (...) It is played with wooden mallets, covered with vegetable rubber at the tip to produce a smooth and round sound. (Sevilla et al. 2008, 39)

Regarding the instrument's social function, it is commonly played within traditional musical ensembles of the region as part of 'various ritual, religious, or festive events to celebrate life, worship saints, or bid farewell to the deceased' (UNESCO n.d.). The instrument is first mentioned in records dating back to 1734 relating to slaves who worked in the mines near the urban centre of Barbacoas. During the colonial period, especially in the early 20th century, the *marimba* faced strong repression from missionaries (Larrea 1947, cited by Sevilla et al. 2008), a situation that was also common to many cultural and musical practices in the country, including the *marimba de pierna*, which may also have suffered as a result.

In 2015, the music and dances of the *marimba de chonta* were recognised on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. UNESCO states that they 'promote family and collective integration through ancestral practices that strengthen

the sense of belonging to a specific human group linked to a territory and a common historical past' (n.d.).

Finally, within this geographical journey, we will refer to the instrument under study, the *marimba de pierna* of the Colombian Caribbean. According to Professor Julio Cesar Cassiani, the leader of the research, there is evidence of the performance of this instrument in the municipalities of Santa Lucia in the department of Atlántico and in the municipality of San Basilio de Palenque in the department of Bolívar.

As stated earlier, Santa Lucia is located on the banks of the Canal del Dique, a tributary of the Magdalena River. The municipality received a large number of Afro-descendants who were used as slaves in this rural area. The influence of African traditions is still very much present today in the municipality, where the *Son de Negro* festival pays tribute to the African ancestors of the region. As mentioned, the *marimba de pierna* in this municipality consists of three plates that are placed on the legs of the performer, who sits on a chair and plays the instrument with a pair of mallets. The municipality of San Basilio de Palenque is recognised as being the first free town in colonial America, having been founded by African slaves who escaped from the Spanish in order to live in freedom. In 2005, it was declared a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO, as it has managed to preserve a large number of African-origin traditions to this day, including its language, cuisine, music and religious rituals. Like Santa Lucia, this municipality is located near the Canal del Dique, 50 kilometres from the city of Cartagena.

The *marimba de pierna* is no longer performed in San Basilio de Palenque, but an audiovisual record was found in the documentary *Lumbalu. Dance of the Dead*, made by Erwin Goggel in 1992. In the documentary, a man can be seen sitting on the ground (similar to in Madagascar) with three plates placed on his legs, with the highest-pitched plate closest to his torso and the lowest-pitched plate closest to his feet. The rhythm played is cyclical, repeating the execution of the highest-pitched plate. The tuning of this instrument is lower than that of the *marimba de pierna* in the municipality of Santa Lucia. Professor Cassiani recounts that in San Basilio de Palenque, the instrument is typically played solo, was used in festive activities to accompany singing and to scare birds from the rice fields.

Organological classification

The *marimba de pierna* is an idiophone instrument, composed of three wooden logs cut from a tree called *guásimo* (guazuma tree), which is abundant in the municipality and ‘has a better sound’, according to Eliuth Olivo. Each of the wooden bars has a different size, as they are cut according to the width of the legs of the maker-performer. Eliuth comments that the mallets used to play the *marimba* should be made of guayacán wood, ‘for their weight’.

The *marimba de pierna* does not have a specific tuning, since it is not a melodic instrument. It is an instrument that accompanies or serves as percussion for various rhythms of the Colombian Caribbean, mainly in the southern region of the department of Atlántico. In this respect, Eliuth says of the instrument’s construction, ‘one must rely on the ear, seeking the difference in the three tones: high, low, and middle’ (Corporación Universitaria Reformada, 2019, 4:24). To maintain the ‘sonic box’, it is placed over the legs’ opening, with the longest wooden bar positioned near the knees on the thigh, the shortest one near the waist, and the medium-sized one between them (see Figure 1).

Table 1 presents the classification of this instrument as outlined by the researchers who have written this article, based on the work of scholars such as José Pérez de Arce (2013), who in turn drew from the classification system developed by German musicologists Hornbostel and Sachs. (The table model is taken from Londoño 2000.)

According to the Royal Spanish Academy (RAE), the *marimba* is defined as ‘a type of drum used in some parts of Africa’ (2021), and is described as ‘a musical instrument in which wooden bars are struck, similar to a xylophone’



Figure 1
Opening of the legs and positioning of the *marimba de pierna* on them.
Source: Raíz Research Group, Corporación Universitaria Reformada, 2019.

(RAE 2021). It is pertinent to mention that, according to the perspective of the interviewed performers, the *marimba de pierna* serves a percussive function, similar to the role of drums within the community, as will be explained in the following section.

Repertoire

Eliuth Olivo is the heir to a dynasty of singers and drummers (Corporación Universitaria Reformada 2019, 1:32). He affirms that the instrument is a legacy of the indigenous traditions. He dismisses the notion that it originated from Cuba (Corporación Universitaria Reformada 2019, 1:44). Regarding the learning of the instrument, Eliuth says: ‘By listening to my grandfather and my uncle, they started teaching me from a young age because they raised me. They would put the boards, the sticks on my legs and hold my hands, and since I was born with that dexterity and musical heritage, it was easy for me to learn’ (Corporación Universitaria Reformada 2019, 1:47).

Table 1

Classification of the *marimba de pierna* according to Hornbostel and Sachs (Pérez de Arce 2013, 41)

| Decimal classification | Characteristics | Description |
|------------------------|---------------------------|--|
| 1 | Idiophone | |
| 1 1 | Struck idiophone | |
| 1 1 1 | Directly struck idiophone | The instrument is struck directly by the performer |
| 1 1 1.2 | Percussion idiophone | The sound is produced by striking the plates of the <i>marimba</i> with an object |
| 1 1 1.2 1 | Percussion stick | |
| 1 1 1.2 1 2 | Set of percussion sticks | Multiple percussion sticks of different tonal heights are joined in one instrument |



Figure 2
Positioning of the feet to play the *marimba de pierna*.
Source: Raíz Research Group, Corporación Universitaria Reformada, 2019.

Although it is identified as a solo instrument, on some occasions, it can be incorporated into the traditional drum format, as Eliuth Olivo states. 'It has an affinity for music, in the cuts, and with that, you can play *bullerengue*, *pajarito*, and *Son de Negro* ... It fits with the chords of that music ... The *marimba* carries the rhythmic pattern and serves for improvisation' (Corporación Universitaria Reformada 2019, 1:47).

For the performance of the instrument, in addition to the position of the *marimba* on the legs of the performer, Eliuth demonstrates the foot posture, considering that the musician is seated on a chair (see [Figure 2](#)).

As mentioned above, the *marimba de pierna* can serve as the percussion instrument in a traditional folk ensemble of the Colombian Caribbean, which demonstrates its versatility. Each of the wooden logs of the instrument represents one of the drums in the rhythms. According to

Eliuth, the central log serves as the *llamador*, the smaller log serves as the *tambor alegre*, and the larger log serves as the *tambora* (Corporación Universitaria Reformada 2019, 5:10–5:57).

Traditional rhythms of the region, such as the aforementioned *Son de Negro*, the *Son de Pajarito* and *Cumbia*, are often performed on this instrument, with the *marimba de pierna* synthesising some of the beats or rhythmic patterns performed by the *tambora*, *llamador* or *alegre*. The *Son de Negro* rhythm, which is primarily executed in the area where the municipality of Santa Lucía is located and other surrounding locations, 'is a tripartite artistic expression and/or a compendium of multiple musical, dance, literary, and performative languages, consolidating the imaginaries and the spirit of ancestral human creation of men and women from the Canal del Dique and Lower Magdalena region' (Herrera 2010, 28). According to Victoriano Valencia, the *Son de Negro*, 'like the *tambora*, is characterised by solo-choir alternation with accompaniment of clapping and instrumental percussion' (2004, 11). In terms of its instrumental format, it consists of wooden boards (which accompany the clapping), a wooden *guacharaca* and a seated *tambor alegre*. The rhythmic pattern is illustrated as shown in [Figure 3](#).

Eliuth Olivo explains that the *marimba de pierna*, each wooden block of which represents one of the instruments in [Figure 3](#), performs a rhythmic pattern, as described in [Figure 4](#).

The performer interprets the *Son de Negro*, the *Cumbia* and the *Son de Pajarito* on the *marimba de pierna* with slight variations on the original pattern of each rhythm, as

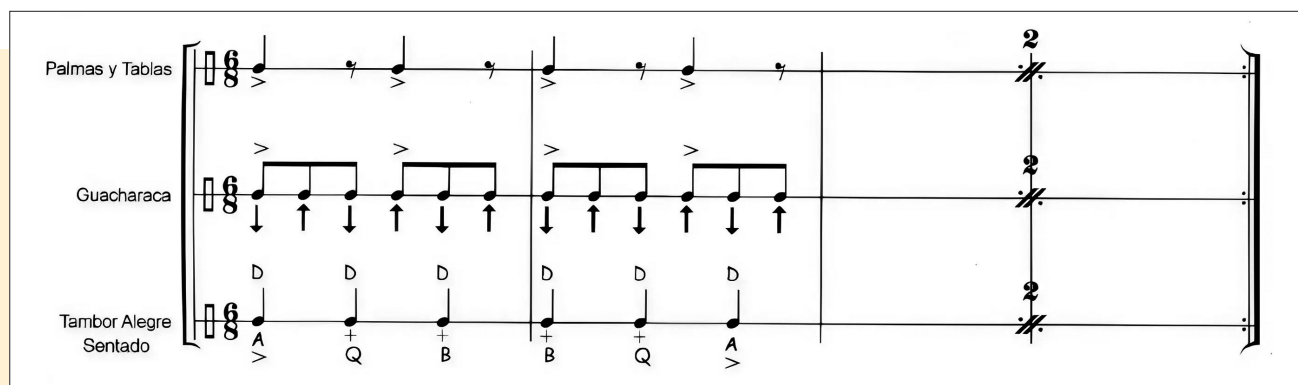


Figure 3
Rhythmic pattern of the *Son de Negro*. Source: Valencia, 2004.

Son de negro

Eliuth Olivo
Julio Cassiani
Juan Oñoro

Figure 4
Rhythmic pattern of the *Son de Negro* performed on the *marimba de pierna*.
Source: Taken from the performance of leg marimba by Eliuth Olivo, transcribed by Julio Cassiani and edited by Juan Diaz, 2023.

can be seen in the relevant images (Figures 4 and 5).

Of the *Son de Pajarito*, Herrera says: “[I]t is characterized as a dance considered by the singing, drumming, and dancing grandparents as “cantao” music and dance, in which literate characters (knowledge of reading and writing) participated, and sometimes they integrated for singing and percussion, relatives with artistic abilities’

(2006, 117). The instrumental format of *Son de Pajarito* consists of clapping, small wooden boards, *llamador* and *alegre*. Its rhythmic pattern, according to how Eliuth himself interprets it, and as described by Professor Cassiani, is illustrated in Figure 5.

This rhythm, when performed on the *marimba de pierna*, is played as shown in Figure 6.

Son de pajarito

Eliuth Olivo
Julio Cassiani
Juan Oñoro

Figure 5
Rhythmic pattern of the *Son de Pajarito*.
Source: Taken from the performance by Eliuth Olivo with the *tambor alegre*, transcribed by Julio Cassiani and edited by Juan Diaz, 2023.

Son de pajarito

Eliuth Olivo
Julio Cassiani
Juan Oñoro

The musical score for 'Son de pajarito' consists of three staves. The top staff is labeled 'Madero largo', the middle 'Madero intermedio', and the bottom 'Madero corto'. Each staff begins with a treble clef and a 2/2 time signature. The music is divided into three measures by vertical bar lines. The first measure shows the initial notes for each part. The second measure continues the melody, and the third measure concludes the phrase with a double bar line.

Figure 6
Rhythmic pattern of the *Son de Pajarito* played on the *marimba de pierna*.
Source: Taken from the performance of leg marimba by Eliuth Olivo, transcribed by Julio Cassiani and edited by Juan Diaz, 2023.

Professor Cassiani says of the internationally famous *Cumbia*:

It is a musical rhythm with a binary character in 2/2 time signature (cut time), with a tempo ranging from andante to moderato, between 80 and 110 beats per minute. Its rhythmic structure consists of two sections that alternate during the performance: the base section and the improvisational section. These sections are directly related to the instrumental prominence of percussion. (2019, 98)

The rhythmic pattern of the *Cumbia*, which Cassiani refers to as the 'base section structure' (2019, 101), is depicted in [Figure 7](#).

In general terms, it is this *Cumbia* structure that the *marimba de pierna* performers use to interpret the instrument, as observed in the rhythmic pattern depicted in [Figure 8](#).

As seen in the previous examples, the *marimba de pierna* is a highly versatile instrument that can emulate the

The musical score for 'Cumbia' features four staves. The top staff is labeled 'Guache o Maracas', the second 'Llamador', the third 'Alegre', and the bottom 'Tambora'. Each staff begins with a treble clef and a 2/2 time signature. The music is divided into four measures by vertical bar lines. The first measure shows the initial notes for each part. The second measure continues the melody, and the third measure concludes the phrase with a double bar line. The bottom staff (Tambora) uses 'x' marks to represent percussive hits.

Figure 7
Rhythmic pattern of the *Cumbia*. Source: Cassiani, 2019.

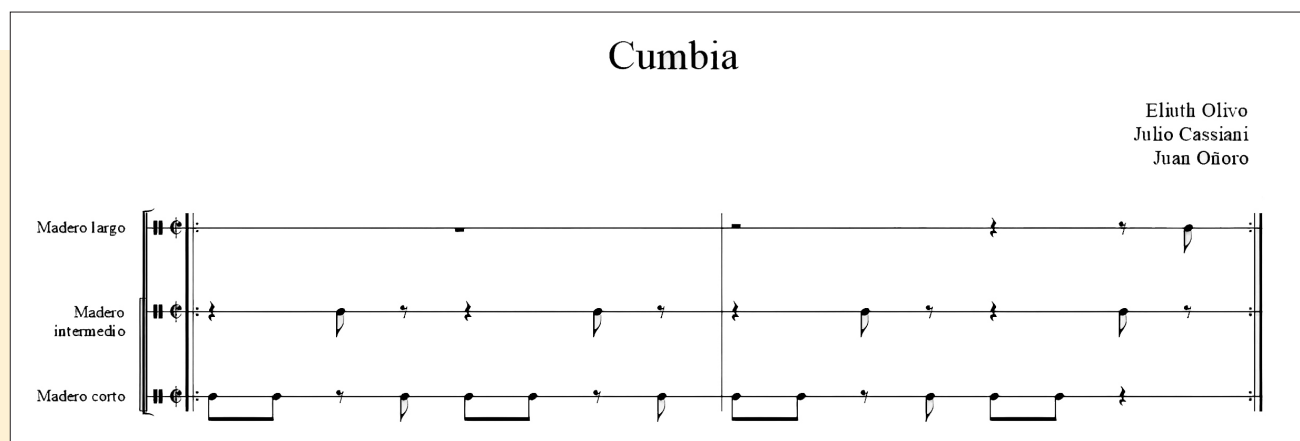


Figure 8
Rhythmic pattern of the *Cumbia* performed on the *marimba de pierna*.
Source: Taken from the performance of leg marimba by Eliuth Olivo, transcribed by Julio Cassiani and edited by Juan Diaz, 2023.

format of *pitos y tambores*, one of the most representative musical genres in the Colombian Caribbean, interpreting rhythms such as *Son de Negro*, *Son de Pajarito* and *Cumbia*. In line with this, and according to the statement of one of the performers, it is also possible to interpret other rhythms and musical genres on this instrument, opening up the possibility of including the *marimba de pierna* in various musical formats.

Recommendations for safeguarding the marimba de pierna

According to Professor Cassiani, the gradual disappearance of the *marimba de pierna* in communities like Santa Lucía and Palenque can be explained by a series of local and socio-cultural factors that have transformed the uses, contexts and perceptions of this traditional instrument.

First, the *marimba de pierna* was primarily a recreational instrument. Its use was tied to agricultural labour, particularly during land-clearing activities (*corte en el monte*), where men working the fields would play it during breaks, singing songs about their daily lives. These moments became spaces for sharing stories, anecdotes and spontaneous musical expression. However, as these farming practices declined in the region, so too did the contexts in which the *marimba* had meaning and functionality.

Another critical factor is the instrument's ephemeral nature. Constructed from natural materials like *guásimo* or *balso* wood and never intended for long-term preservation or formal performance, many *marimbas* were quickly

discarded – sometimes even repurposed as firewood – once their recreational role ended. This underscores its transient place in community life.

Moreover, the instrument never achieved a widespread presence in these communities. Few knew how to build or play it, limiting its intergenerational transmission. This fragility was exacerbated by dwindling interest among younger generations, who turned to modernisation and new forms of entertainment. The construction of roads and the arrival of electricity brought significant changes, including commercial centres, new technologies, and devices like radios, which gradually displaced traditional expressions.

A decisive factor in this process was the absence of cultural organisations dedicated to preserving this knowledge. Unlike other traditions – such as the *Carnaval* or the *Festival del Son de Negro*, which benefit from protective initiatives – the *marimba de pierna* was never institutionalised as a cultural heritage. The community regarded it as a minor element, practised only by a small group of specialists, rather than a collective cultural asset.

Finally, Professor Cassiani concludes that the lack of public policies to recognise and safeguard this practice, coupled with limited community awareness of its significance, has contributed to its marginalisation and eventual decline.

It is not possible to determine the details of the arrival of the *marimba de pierna* on the American continent, as its history has been erased by the sands of time. It can be said

that this instrument, like others in danger of extinction, is resilient to death, just like the community that safeguards it, where slavery ended the lives of countless generations and living conditions still reveal the deficiencies and unsatisfied needs caused by an absent state. The sounds of the *marimba de pierna* evoke the melodies of nature, which is also threatened by consumerism and the standardisation of lifestyles and thinking.

For these reasons, in order to safeguard this instrument, it is necessary first to recognise its value as a symbol of resilience and cultural diversity in the community of Santa Lucía. The *marimba de pierna* preserves an important part of the identity of this community, which is closely connected to the rural space to which this instrument belongs. It has travelled through the forests of the African continent, the Austronesian region and the Colombian Caribbean, possibly for several centuries.

Second, it is necessary for the music of this instrument to be inscribed and recognised as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, as it is relevant to its community, continuously re-created and transmitted from one generation to the next (UNESCO n.d.).

Third, entities dedicated to cultural processes from the government, academia and international community should provide support for documentation, preservation and transmission of knowledge related to the history, performance and construction of the *marimba de pierna*. In other words, spaces should be created where this instrument is recognised and learned by more people in the community. Its performance can also be revitalised by incorporating the *marimba de pierna* into regional music formats and festivals or emerging artistic proposals, allowing young people to appropriate and redefine the cultural heritage that identifies them. This can be achieved through non-traditional musical practices, where the instrument can find an innovative role that appeals to new audiences both within and outside the community. By utilising new music technologies to record and sample the sounds of this instrument, a new market can be created to introduce the instrument to young artists and producers interested in ethnic soundscapes.

Regarding music education for this instrument, it is important to provide financial support to practitioners and to employ them as music educators for the *marimba de pierna*. Additionally, local or regional governments should

explore the possibility of providing pensions to these practitioners, allowing them to dedicate themselves full-time to their artistic work.

In this regard, it is necessary to develop and implement a vocational curriculum in schools where students can learn to play the instrument. Furthermore, the municipality's cultural centre should create spaces for teaching the instrument, with funding provided by the local authorities for both the practitioners and the participants, particularly young people. Universities can also consider incorporating a course or space to showcase local cultural expressions that are at risk of extinction, including instruments like the *marimba de pierna*.

Conclusions

The advent of electricity,³ radio and television in the communities of the Colombian Caribbean region, along with the subsequent phenomenon of globalisation, has brought new entertainment and communication alternatives, as well as different musical sounds. These technological advancements have opened the door to new music and cultures, but they have also highlighted the lack of knowledge of cultural roots and of the identity that these communities have of themselves.

As a result, the technological massification and the new consumer markets are causing the community in Santa Lucía, located in the Colombian Caribbean region, to relegate and forget its cultural identity, which their ancestors defended even with their own lives.

Furthermore, since the practice of instrumental performance and the origins of this instrument have been transmitted through oral tradition, many details have been lost over time, leaving certain unresolved questions regarding its execution and social function. Nonetheless, the essence of these instruments still persists despite the difficulties they have had to overcome.

Lastly, as an instrument that is at risk of disappearing from cultural tradition, a call is made not only to the communities but also to academia, government entities and the international community to revive and invigorate the *marimba de pierna* and its generational chain that has been broken in order to acknowledge, through music, the importance of the uniqueness of the human experience throughout time. 🇵🇷

ENDNOTES

1. Unpublished interview with Julio C. Cassiani M., conducted by Juan M. Díaz Oñoro, 12 April 2025. Interview 1, transcription and recording, Research Group Raíz, Corporación Universitaria Reformada. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1hW5pdrPWgqsH26ijXK5fJWWtUUUP0nOe/view?usp=sharing>.
2. To learn more about the instrument, visit the following website: <https://raiz.unireformada.edu.co/>. To listen to the music of this instrument, visit the following link: <https://youtu.be/q0ZbT6h1szU>.
3. For more information, please visit the following link: <https://es.slideshare.net/llezcan2/3historia-de-la-electricidad-en-las-regiones-en-colombia-37971424>.

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