

On traditional knowledge and communities: a talk with Maestro Pacho Torres

Zum traditionellen Wissen: ein Gespräch mit Maestro Pacho Torres

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The 2003 *UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* set an important new tone by empowering communities to define their own cultural heritage (UNESCO 2003). Therefore, and as a methodological approach in cultural research that corresponds to the 2003 *Convention*, documenting and investigating the performing arts of people must be in tune with, and in collaborative interaction with, the respective cultural bearers and practitioners.

In the UNESCO Convention text of 2003, the phenomenon of intangible cultural heritage is considered as a mainspring of cultural diversity. Practices of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) may function as a guarantee of sustainable development. Besides that, and according to the Convention, there is a deep-seated interdependence between the intangible and the tangible cultural and natural heritage, described and outlined in the *UNESCO World Heritage Convention*, ratified three decades earlier in 1972 (UNESCO 1972).

Circulating knowledges

Since the colonial period, knowledges, skills and practices from different origins have regularly crossed the Atlantic. In Latin America, worldviews from various indigenous groups, going along with those of other people originating from various African and European regions, have met and become engaged in different transcultural processes.

A research project with Colombian and Brazilian institutions and communities entitled *Circulating Knowledge - Bridging Academic and Traditional Knowledge on Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) and Music in Colombia and Brazil* was funded by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and realized within the framework of partnership agreements

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between the Weimar UNESCO Chair on Transcultural Music Studies and universities in Cali, Colombia, and in the Recôncavo of Bahia, Brazil (DAAD 2023). The aim of the project is to promote encounters between traditional knowledges (*saberes tradicionais*) of cultural bearers, musicians and ensembles with local partner universities so that they can be directly passed on to an academic public through workshops and discussion groups. Elements of intangible cultural heritage, in the core of the project, already inscribed into the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity are the *marimba de chonta* music from the Colombian Pacific Coast and the *samba-de-roda* from the Recôncavo region in Bahia, Brazil.

A further goal of *Circulating Knowledges* is to empower the voices of cultural bearers in partnership with academia, connecting these voices also to their historical background in Africa. To communicate and initiate collaborative research in local contexts, together with practitioners, is one possible path to promote awareness about the historical significance of African elements in intangible cultural heritage—or living heritage (as ICH has more recently been labeled).

By opening to other epistemologies, the collaborative actions amongst communities and universities seek to circulate diverse kinds of knowledges in several directions and ways: between traditional and academic contexts in Colombia and Brazil, between Western, indigenous, and African contexts, as well as to promote access to knowledges stored in register devices such as university archives. While the latter are still mainly reserved for people with privileged access, the project aims to facilitate circulation across marginalized spaces and bodies by creating open and sustainable access to traditional cultural knowledge, including collectively shared repertoires of cultural bearers and practitioners, in need of accessibility, from outside their respective context.

Regarding history in Colombia and Brazil, almost any African account is far too little known and nearly absent from the basic school curricula in both countries, though the historical African contribution to the respective national culture is paramount. Simultaneously, this is the part of history shared by both countries. To uncover and define cultural affinities based on shared African history, through living practices in Colombia and Brazil, is another expected aftermath of the project.

I had the opportunity to meet Maestro Pacho Torres and to attend his lectures in January 2023, at the Universidad del Valle in Cali in the framework of *Circulating Knowledges*, where he and other traditional

masters from the Colombian Pacific Cauca Region spent a week to teach their art and to pass their knowledges on to a young academic audience. Torres, a musician and *marimba de chonta* master (*chonta* refers to the wood used for the instrument), lives in a palafitte house at the margin of the Guapi river, half an hour boat ride from Guapi, the nearest by village in the Cauca Province, located in the South Pacific coast of Colombia.

Communities in the Pacific Coast region of Colombia, in particular communities of African ancestry in the Cauca Valley, such as of the one where Pacho Torres lives, still play an important role in the production, safeguarding, maintenance and recreation of intangible cultural heritage. Though this region has faced armed conflicts of the Colombian narco-traffic war in the past decades, when people and their cultural practices were put under serious risk, Pacho Torres, his family and few immediate neighbors remained at the margin of Guapi river. A sort of internal information web keeps people along this river up-to-date on whether they can leave home, or if staying is recommended, until armed conflicts—that may suddenly break out—have ceased (ALVARADO BURBANO 2022).

For the first time in his life, Pacho Torres was invited to talk to university students thanks to *Circulating Knowledges*. Together with two other traditional experts from Guapi, the *maestras* Nani and Analia, and backed by several young musicians and singers from the Cauca Province, now based in Cali, he revealed how traditional knowledge about a specific element of ICH may be conceptualized, making sense to different audiences, thereby ascertaining its vitality. His lectures motivated students to raise questions and to interact. Besides that, Maestro Pacho also attended my, and other teaching staff lectures, academic and non-academic, an experience that became a stimulus for him. The presentation by Maria Ximena Alvarado Burbano, professor at the Universidad del Valle and local organizer of the event, who recently concluded her PhD at the UNESCO Chair in Weimar on the *marimba de chonta* (ALVARADO BURBANO 2022), especially filled Maestro Pacho with much enthusiasm. The presentation reminded him of his collaborative interactions with Maria Ximena in previous years, now reformulated as an opportunity to recount knowledges inserted in another context—an academic one.

Carried by this mood, Maestro Pacho and I had several conversation sessions in the evenings after intense working days in the university. First inquiries were made about the overall repertory of Maestro Pachos' instruments, the *marimba* and the *bombo*, and about different repertories and their importance in structuring the festivities calendar of his

home region and their impact on social life. Following these matters, I focused on two other issues, namely on Pacho Torres' comprehension of ICH in conceptual terms, and his perception of African elements in the performing arts of his cultural environment. Both issues are central to the *Circulating Knowledges* project and have been of major importance for research and collaborative activities in Colombia, and also in the Recôncavo Region in Bahia, Brazil.

The original conversation with Torres was conducted in Spanish. The English translation of the conversation excerpts that follow are my own.

Our heritage is the one that sounds

“*Nuestro patrimonio es el que suena*—our heritage is the one that sounds.” With this statement Francisco (Pacho) Torres summarizes the ultimate criterion for artifacts of intangible cultural heritage in his own social, environmental and historical contexts. Torres' concept of a living heritage is based on the importance and the use of tools—*herramientas*—as both specific instruments for his daily maintenance as a fisherman, subsistence farmer and as musician, but also and foremost as a term of its own, with a fundamental metaphorical significance in relation to ICH.

“*Para trabajar se necesita la herramienta*—for working, one needs the tool,” is Pacho Torres' basic assumption.

Pacho Torres: What is the tool for? It is good for... eating and for work, because no house, no building, no engine moves without a tool. A car—everything goes with tools. The marimba too.

It is necessary to know how to handle the tool. I have this knowledge in part because I play the bass drum, I play the cununo (drum), I play the marimba, I play the guazá (rattle). I do it, I play it, I dance to it, and I also sell it. The only thing is that at the moment I have nowhere to sell it. Then I have to fish, must dedicate myself to agriculture, to keep myself. If I don't have a tool, I don't have anything.

Tiago de Oliveira Pinto: Is the marimba a herramienta—a tool—as well?

Pacho Torres: Yes, of course. Furthermore, the marimba is like a woman. Because whoever doesn't take care of a marimba isn't able to take care of a woman. Everything is a tool. In the local festivities there is a tool because there is music. Without music there is nothing in the church.

Music is the tool of the church as it is everywhere. Because if you're unpleasant and bored and there's a party, boredom will go away in a while. You will think something else, another life, because whoever does not appreciate music is not in this life. Because to hear and see implies to be in this life. Without tools there is no human being living in this life. And with music you are able to make another tool. And since with the eyes one does not see inside, but outside, there is always something that one does not follow. The eyes see the bad things and may follow the good ones. Costumes are tools too.

Music is the basis of this life. Music is the glory of this life (he points to the ground). If you are bored or weighing something far away and you listen to music, what will you see? They are dancing. It makes you want to dance. And you can do it as well. It's like water. If you feel like it, you're going to drink water. It is a tool. You feel like dancing, you dance, it's a tool. If he doesn't know how to play and he likes it, he starts learning, it's a tool. Or that you like one, you do it. What I like to do the most is in the house, having my food, having my tools so that I can work. With a tool I make music, with a tool my wife eats, like me and someone who may come to visit me, something which is needed, let's buy it. With what? With a tool, because the tool is used for many things. For the human being... something that secures well-being.

Knowledges are tools. The brain is one. But the brain without another tool does nothing. And what is the brain's tool? Eat, and eat well. The knowledge goes through the tool. And the tool puts everything here (he points to his head). Because if you don't have a tool, nothing enters here. For example, the spoon is the gutter of the mouth. By hand it takes longer. With the spoon you walk faster. All things have their own measure.

Encouraged by the experiences with *Circulating Knowledges*, Maestro Pacho has recently started to offer courses in a school led by Maestra Nani in Guapi. By practicing and showing engagement in transmitting his skills and knowledges to younger generations in the region, Pacho Torres supports cultural diversity and local creativity. Simultaneously he raises awareness for the *marimba de chonta* tradition. By doing so, the *marimba* master underlines the importance of the *marimba de chonta* as an element inscribed into the *UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity*.

Recalling the 2003 *UNESCO Convention* (UNESCO 2003), Maestro Pacho's recent endeavors support the spirit of the convention, by helping

to “ensure respect for the intangible cultural heritage of the communities, groups and individuals concerned” (Article 2, § 1, b) and by being supportive “for international cooperation and assistance” (Article 2, § 1, d), playing a leading role in an international cooperation project such as *Circulating Knowledges*. All of these activities together go towards safeguarding of the *marimba de chonta* in the Colombian Pacific coast.

The overall Cauca society is also addressed by comments to the 2003 *Convention*, where one reads that the access of communities, groups and individuals to the instruments, objects, artefacts, cultural and natural spaces and places of memory whose existence is necessary for expressing the intangible cultural heritage” should be ensured, “including in situations of armed conflict (UNESCO BASIC TEXTS 2020, § 5, 113, 114).

The ICH in the Colombian Pacific coast has often enough proven that access and securing cultural heritage is not always fully possible. Nevertheless, Pacho Torres’ actions and those of other traditional bearers of knowledge are an important step in this direction. Pacho Torres’ commitment proves that safeguarding of ICH is foremost dependent on the activities and engagement of practitioners. It cannot be accomplished by external initiatives alone.

de Oliveira Pinto: What does Africa signify to you?

Torres: Africa for me? It contains that Africa for me is the black people... Africa. It is where the marimba was born. In Africa. The marimba is from Africa. In Africa they make it, but instead of guadua, bamboo, how we call it, they put calabash below. Because there in Africa, there are a lot of calabashes. And the bamboo is little. The elders who traveled from Africa took the template along. But since there was no gourd here, they put the guadua, the bamboo below. The first tube is shorter, and they keep growing and growing (he laughs).

The guazá rattle comes from Africa too. The drum. The elder ones would travel a lot to get here, and when they see something they like, they come here and make it. So, for what? For things to move on. And that’s how it happened with the marimba. Was it born here? No! In Africa.

de Oliveira Pinto: What else is from Africa?

Torres: Many things. Lots of pretty things. The dress from Africa is not like the dress here. It is another one. Two people can fit in one of these dresses. A very large clothes. And the marimba, and the toque (musical

pattern) from there is different. It's different from the one we're talking about here. This is just the change. Our music is not like the one over there. The one from Africa is one, the one from here is another. The music from Choco is another, and the one here, I say again, is another. Everything has its variations.



Fig. 1: Pacho Torres talking about the marimba de chonta at the Universidad del Valle, Cali, Colombia, January 2023 (photo by the author)

The sound of the marimba from Africa is a more different sound from here. It is a different music. And the one here is music from another sound. Because here we play the marimba, the bass drum, the cununo, but this one is obvious. It's how you put on a charm. To get attention. And Africans don't play like that. They play jumping, jumping, jumping—as this is their trace, we had to look for another sound. And we had it. Here it is more enchanting. The charm that our music has here is that you listen to it and it gives you an emotion, you stop and if you are very far away it makes you want to dance, or if you are close enough to see the musicians who are playing, because the time is to sing, it is your blood to walk, from the foot of the hall. So, this is called a melody. Not so in Africa. In Africa they just play and jump, like the birds in the branches of the thickets. This is their music there. But that the marimba is from Africa, it is from Africa. The marimba is from Africa. The elders who traveled to here brought it along and they all made it here in this form. But here it is played with more melody. This is the subject we are talking about.

The elder ones here put more melody on the marimba. They introduced another way [of playing the marimba]. And we have a happier way. The African has only a little emotion, but an open emotion. Not concentrated. Because when they start playing, one instrument goes one way and the other instrument goes another one, with another sound. They don't have the sounds like we play it, which gives more emotion. We play here excited. All goes by one rule. The rule is to play only one way. With everything alright. But the African, in Africa, goes around a curve, another curve, and another... always playing. The sound of the marimba from Africa is a more different sound from here.

By commenting about Africa and remarking on music from the other continent, Pacho Torres reveals more about his own traditional concepts than about those of African musicians. His comparative approach is similar to other settings where musicians speak about African music from a transatlantic perspective (OLIVEIRA PINTO 1996); that is to say that performers of African Colombian or African Brazilian traditions reveal particular concepts about Africa that derive from the standpoint of their own practices leading to a much more thorough description of their own instead of any real African tradition. As a methodological tool in cultural research, drawing interviewees to comparative interpretations may result in significant data. In fact, Pacho Torres' perception of Africa turned out to represent his own aesthetic conviction.

It remains unclear where Maestro Pacho derives his information about African music since he has never left his home country, remaining for short periods only twice outside Cauca Province. Furthermore, he has no TV, since his house has no electricity. Regardless, Pacho Torres is clear when he explains his particular way of conceptualizing the art of playing *marimba* and of relating it to what he calls *melodia* in the music of the Colombian Pacific coast. Significant, is his conviction that in the past, people of African ancestry maintained their traditions "for things to move on." This specific move recognized by Pacho Torres, took place in Colombia. It opened the path for his own commitments in cultural heritage, providing him, therefore, with the necessary *herramientas*.

To sum up, intangible cultural heritage through its different practices helps in perceiving one's own cultural activities as something inserted into a lively process, supported by tools—*herramientas*—that make it work. In addition, a given cultural practice is filled with the right enchantment (and emotions), without which no music tradition could really achieve a deeper meaning—*aesthetical* or *social*. The concluding

comparative explanation in regard to Africa evinces clearly that these emotions, provided with a specific tool Pacho Torres calls *melodia*, are personal and culture-specific. They can't be simply adopted—or adapted—from another cultural concept.

Pacho Torres' account draws attention to what I have called the *fact-act-artifact chain in ICH*. His *herramienta* concept illustrates how different stages of a living heritage, based on the specific knowledge of ICH, will always lead to a factual result, or artifacts, which all need specific *herramientas*—the skills in cultural heritage—to be concretized. This is made possible by specific skills, which, again, rely on knowledges to be put in action. In this sense, ICH seems to be driven by cyclic, or at least by interconnected processes that, according to Pacho Torres, will only function if one has the appropriate tools—*herramientas*—at disposal.

Finally, Francisco (Pacho) Torres, practitioner of a tradition that was inscribed as an element into the *UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Heritage of Humanity* in 2015, expresses his vision and concern about the ICH he was raised in and that nowadays owes much to his endeavor. More than that, keeping cultural heritage alive works for him by interacting with society and the environment, while passing knowledge on to younger generations, giving comfort to his elder correlates and filling local festivities with vibrancy. Together they provide the most fundamental sense of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Pacho Torres teaches us that an appropriate way of being in the world is possible, most likely when the respective living heritage is renewed, especially in a sensory way, every day, again and again.

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