

# African or Andean? Origin Myths and Musical Performance in the Cradle of Black Peru<sup>1</sup>

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About two hours south of Lima on the Pan-American Highway, near a Peruvian port where enslaved Africans disembarked on the Pacific Coast, lies the rural province of Chincha. A dirt road leads inland to several small districts where Blacks settled after abolition, continuing to perform agricultural labor. A painted wall at the end of the road beckons: “Welcome to the district of El Carmen, cradle and capital of the black arts of Peru” (figure 1).



**Figure 1. Entrance to the district of El Carmen (Chincha). Photo by the author.**

This small, dusty town would not appear at first glance to be a hub for tourism. But cultural tourists flock to the El Carmen district in Chincha at certain times of year, when the residents perform the traditions that put Chincha on the map as Peru’s recreated “Africa” in the Black Pacific.

Chincha is located at the crossroads of two projects: the Afro-Peruvian revival and cultural tourism. In early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Peru, race was perceived as malleable and whiteness was equated with social mobility. Most urban Black Peruvians identified with Whites as *criollos*, sharing a set of European-identified cultural and musical practices (see León Quirós 1997; Lloréns Amico 1983; Romero 1994; Tompkins 1981). In the 1960s, the Afro-Peruvian revival of music and dance reignited African diasporic consciousness (see Feldman 2006). Urban revival artists flocked to Chincha in search of African-descended music. By the 1970s, scholars learned that Chincha was the source of the new urban Black folklore and began to disseminate publications about its traditions.

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<sup>1</sup> Portions of this paper are excerpted from the author’s book *Black Rhythms of Peru: Reviving African Musical Heritage in the Black Pacific* (Wesleyan University Press, 2006).

Tourism infrastructure and publicity developed, marketing regional festivals of Black arts as tourist attractions.

By the time I arrived on the scene in the 1990s, Chincha was widely considered the center of Black musical heritage in Peru and a full-fledged tourist attraction. The legend of Chincha was disseminated by tourism offices and brochures, newspaper articles, cab drivers, scholars, films, and television, preparing visitors for an enclave of African survivals. As a result of this buildup, when I visited Chincha, I was surprised at how *Andean* (meaning similar to indigenous and mestizo Peruvian styles) some of the local traditions seemed. Why do certain public discourses about Chincha seem to ignore these comparisons to Andean traditions?

### **Situational Ethnicity and Cultural Expediency**

In ethnicity studies, the situational approach (Anderson 1997; Barth 1969; Cohen 1969; Okamura 1981; Royce 1982; Wade 1997) holds that individuals and groups may affirm alternate ethnic identifications for themselves and others in response to different social situations. This does not mean that people alternate between multiple identities at will; rather, it suggests that people choose pragmatically to emphasize one or another facet of multiple ethnic identifications available to them (or about others) in different contexts (Hale 2004). Raúl Romero (1994) has observed that, before the Afro-Peruvian revival, urban Blacks in Peru did not constitute an ethnic group in the Barthian sense (Barth 1969), because they shared no commonly perceived cultural practices that differentiated them from other ethnic groups. By reclaiming Black ethnicity in the revival, Afro-Peruvians transformed a previously perceived social handicap into a cultural resource that connected them to a larger African diaspora. To paraphrase Livio Sansone and Ulf Hannerz, globalization made it worthwhile to be ethnically different (Sansone 2003:4; Hannerz 1992).

As George Yúdice notes (2003), in the global era, elites and subaltern groups increasingly convert culture into a resource that connects local citizens to global economies. Exemplifying Yúdice's notion of cultural expediency, Chinchanos and their global co-producers have used blackness as cultural capital since the 1970s. On any given weekend at the modest home of the Ballumbrosios, El Carmen's designated family of culture bearers, one is likely to find a crew of international tourists, artists, scholars, filmmakers, and others who wish to document, analyze, or simply experience Black Peru's rural origins. The public emphasis on the African over the Andean side of Chincha's multi-ethnic heritage converts local Black culture into a resource for both tourism and the commerce in "authentic" rural Afro-Peruvian music and dance. This phenomenon is particularly apparent in the two festivals widely deemed most representative of the area's African-descended culture: the *yunza* and Black Christmas.

### **The *Yunza***

The *yunza* is a group dance performed throughout the Peruvian Andes at the end of Carnival (see R. Vásquez Rodríguez 1998). Each year, a host decorates a tree with fruits,

candies, gifts, balloons, toilet paper, or other adornments. Locally popular music styles are played, and members of the community perform a circle dance around the tree. Periodically, a man and woman dance in the center of the circle and then use an axe to chop at the tree. The couple that knocks the tree down must host the following year's yunza. The following are two yunza scenes: the first from the indigenous Colca community in the highlands of Ayacucho:

**Example 1: Yunza in district of Colca, Fajardo province, Ayacucho (February 27, 2001), field videorecording by Jonathan Ritter.**  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eO7SEsreC04>

and the second from El Carmen.

**Example 2: Yunza in El Carmen 2000, field videorecording by the author.**  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IH6nLEWV4-0>

According to Afro-Peruvian revival leader Nicomedes Santa Cruz, the yunza is an “Andean survival” in Black Peru (1969:12). The main difference between El Carmen’s yunza and its Andean counterparts is the music, which in El Carmen includes Afro-Peruvian styles popularized by the urban revival. A typical yunza band in El Carmen prominently features the *cajón* (box drum)—the symbol of Black music since the revival—along with two or more guitars, singers, and small percussion. However, according to Miki González, a musician who lived in El Carmen in 1978, there were no cajones in El Carmen until *after* the revival (González 2000). If this is true, the “Black” music that separates El Carmen’s yunza from its Andean counterpart was borrowed from the urban revival, rather than preserved in El Carmen.

Another feature that marks El Carmen’s yunza as “Black” for many tourists and some urban Afro-Peruvians is the eroticism of the couple dances, reconstructed as an African retention since the revival. For example, Lima-based Afro-Peruvian musician Juanchi Vásquez encouraged me to visit El Carmen during Carnival in order to experience the roots of African culture in Peru, noting that the erotic dance of the yunza expressed an African-descended aesthetic that had been lost in urban Black communities (J. Vásquez 2000). This same assumption may have fueled the gleam in several cab drivers’ eyes when they asked me if I had seen how the Black girls dance in Chincha.

Exemplifying Yúdice’s notion of cultural expediency, in 2000 the yunza was part of the 15<sup>th</sup> annual Verano Negro (Black Summer) festival. Organized by the Municipality of Chincha to promote tourism, the festival also included plays, concerts, and a beauty contest. T-shirts and posters displaying caricatures of large-lipped, voluptuous, dancing Black women were sold in the street. This strategic ethnic marketing relies on cultural stereotypes separating the sexualized Black female body from the virginal Inca maiden in the national imagination (see Poole 1997). Ironically, at the 2000 yunza, it was primarily tourists who danced erotically around the tree, their inhibitions apparently unleashed by their visit to the cradle of Black Peru.

## Black Christmas

Like the *yunza*, the Festival of the Virgin of El Carmen (commonly known as Black Christmas) has Andean parallels. The structure of the events mirrors that of Catholicized Andean ritual festivals dedicated to saints, as described by Zoila Mendoza (2000). Such festivals revolve around the recreation and worship of particular saints and icons that represent the Virgin Mary and Jesus, are organized by *cofradías* (or religious lay brotherhoods), and are enacted through ritual-theatrical dance performance by *comparsas* (dramatizing certain symbolic roles or personae) as well as processions with brass bands. During the festival, groups of girls called *pallas*, dressed in bridal-type gowns and veils and carrying staffs, sing and dance to guitar and/or violin accompaniment in homage to the Virgin of El Carmen, a facet of the Virgin Mary, and to baby Jesus (figure 2). In the indigenous Quechua language, “*palla*” describes a noblewoman in the Inca court, and similar *pallas* dances are found in Christmas festivals of indigenous communities from the north to central Andes (see Cánepa Koch 1998; García Gutiérrez de Barriga 2001).



**Figure 2. *Pallas* dance in the Festival of the Virgin of Carmen, 2000.  
Photos (captured from video) by the author.**

In addition, groups of young boys and men, called *hatajos de negritos*, sing and dance to violin accompaniment in front of nativity scenes, in the *plaza de armas*, and in front of the church. *Negritos* dances have been documented in Peru since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when Blacks performed in religious and State ceremonies (Tompkins 1981:340). Groups of Black negritos were once widespread throughout the region, but the hatajo of El Carmen is one of the few remaining Black groups. In fact, most of the visiting groups from nearby towns in 2000 were mestizos. Whether Black or mestizo, the negritos sing a standard repertoire of strophic traditional Spanish Christmas songs (or *villancicos*) honoring the Virgin and Jesus. As you will see in the following video from Black Christmas 2000, the negritos carry rope whips and mark beats with handbells, and between sung verses they perform unison *zapateo* (tap dancing) steps in two parallel line formations, with each line managed by a *caporal* (foreman), suggesting images of both slavery and Christianization.

**Example 3: Hatajo de negritos of El Carmen, Festival of the Virgin of El Carmen 2000, videorecording by the author.**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rb6KRBdw6EE>

Dances called negritos are performed in many festivals in Peru's indigenous and mestizo highland communities, commemorating the historical presence of Black slaves. Andean negritos dances are said to have originated when Spanish colonialists obligated Native Peruvian nobles to perform imagined versions of Black dances in religious festivals (Salas Carreño 1998:110). Michelle Bigenho writes that in Lucanas, Ayacucho, Native Peruvians—wearing Black masks, carrying whips and shaking handbells—dance in two parallel lines, directed by a “foreman” and accompanied by violin and other instruments (Bigenho 1998). In this video, we see the Qhapaq Negro of Cuzco, in which indigenous and mestizo Peruvians wear Black masks and portray slaves offering their devotion to the Virgin.

**Example 4: Qhapaq Negro of Cuzco, from *Fiesta de la Virgen del Carmen de Paucartambo*, produced by Institute of Ethnomusicology, Catholic University of Peru, copyright 1994, used by permission.**

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E4Cb\\_-73-tI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E4Cb_-73-tI)

Is the negritos repertoire of Chinchá an Andean survival in which Afro-Peruvians imitate an imitation of themselves? Or is it the only remnant of the prototype imitated by indigenous and mestizo Peruvians? I have no answer to this question today. But I am puzzled by the readiness with which certain discourses affirm an African origin myth without providing historical documentation or explanations for Andean parallels. I wish, therefore, to delineate some shared aspects of Chinchá's negritos repertoire and Andean music, and to discuss examples of discourses that alternately affirm and ignore Andean comparisons.

In a study of the Andean negritos dances, Peruvian anthropologist Guillermo Salas Carreño claims that no musical cross fertilization occurred among Native Peruvians and Blacks in the highlands, and he calls the music and dance of the negritos of El Carmen “purely Black” (1998:115). Yet, ethnomusicologist William Tompkins noted several

apparent Andean traits in El Carmen’s negritos music, and he suggests that some of the songs resemble the popular Andean *wayno* (Tompkins 1981: 338). As in the wayno, each phrase is usually repeated twice, melodies often use five-note scales, and almost all songs are in duple meter (see R. Vásquez Rodríguez 1982:85-172). Tompkins also observed that Black performers in the 1970s sometimes appeared to mimic Andean vocal style (Tompkins 1981:338). In fact, Amador Ballumbrosio (director of the El Carmen group) affirms that a local Andean composer wrote several of the melodies.<sup>2</sup> Additional evidence of an Andean aesthetic includes the use of violin (a ubiquitous instrument in Andean, but not Afro-Peruvian, music), and the full-footed zapateo dance style (Ballumbrosio 2000; Sandoval 2000).

In light of these similarities, consider Peruvian musicologist Chalena Vásquez’ analysis of the music of the negritos. In her book on the negritos tradition of El Carmen, Vásquez noted but dismissed the possibility of Andean influence on the music, pointing out that five-note scales used in the negritos repertoire differed from Andean pentatonic ones. She contended that the melodies bore closer resemblance to church modes, and she recommended comparative research into African pentatonic scales (1982:164-170). Vásquez transcribed the songs in 2/4 meter with duple subdivisions, with the exception of one motif (figure 3) common in the violin and dance parts, which alternated duple and triple subdivisions (R. Vásquez Rodríguez 1982:136).



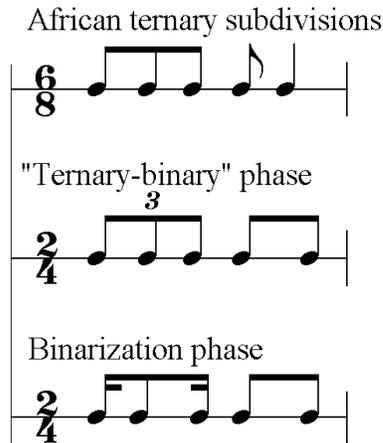
**Figure 3. Common rhythmic motif, *hatajo de negritos* (Vásquez Rodríguez)**

In his own book, Cuban musicologist Rolando Pérez Fernández (1988) argued that ternary African rhythms were binarized in Latin America through syncretism with Hispanic metric systems, and he used Vásquez’ transcriptions to show that some of Chíncha’s rhythms were in an intermediate “ternary-binary phase” of that process (figure 4, following page) (1988:86).

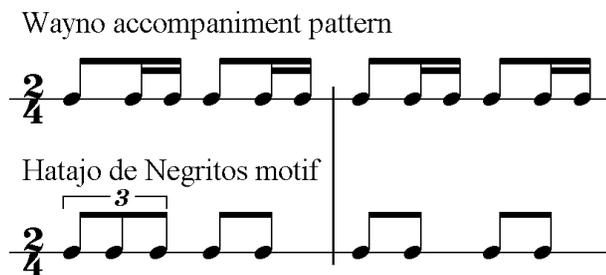
In so doing, Pérez Fernández assumed an African ternary rhythmic origin for the Christmas songs that has yet to be documented. For the sake of argument, the triplet figure in the “ternary-binary” rhythmic motif could just as easily be viewed as a “ternarizing” variation on the basic accompaniment pattern of the Andean wayno (figure 5).

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<sup>2</sup> Personal communication.



**Figure 4. Binarization of ternary African rhythms in Latin America (Pérez Fernández 1988)**



**Figure 5. Alternate origin myth: binary *wayno* rhythm and “ternarizing” *negritos* motif**

I am not suggesting that the wayno was the origin of the negritos songs; rather, I wish to demonstrate that, in the absence of historical evidence, whether a rhythmic motif that demonstrates tension between duple and triple subdivisions is heard as “binarizing” or “ternarized”—problematic links to ethnicity in the first place—may depend on the predispositions of the listener.

Consider also a feature article about the negritos dance of El Carmen in a 1968 issue of Peru’s *Caretas* magazine (Barrionue Vo 1968). The author does not mention Andean parallels, emphasizing El Carmen’s poverty and its exotic foreign traditions, in which Black children without shoes or toys appear as “little African princes.” Then there is the travel writing of Linda Villarosa, an African American journalist who visited El Carmen in 1993. Villarosa published an article about her trip in *Essence* magazine, which has since been reprinted as a chapter in *Go Girl: The Black Woman’s Book of Travel and Adventure* (Lee 1997). About Amador Ballumbrosio, she writes, “When he plays [the violin] he looks like Chicken George of Roots fame” (Villarosa 2004). She goes on to describe how “the African influence was in full swing” the day after Christmas,

comparing the negritos dance to a fraternity step show. In heartfelt terms, she describes her feelings at a late night jam session in the Ballumbrosios' home: "As I sat there listening to the soulful rhythms and watching the children tear up the dance floor, it was at once eerie and empowering to realize the far-reaching and enduring strength of our collective African ancestry" (Villarosa 2004). Like many visitors, Villarosa found what she was looking for in Chincha—confirmation of the musical kinship of the African diaspora.

Interestingly, William Tompkins noted that in the late 1970s many Black negritos dancers in Chincha did not consider the tradition to be Afro-Peruvian (Tompkins 1981:329). In my own experience, many Chincha residents talk openly about their indigenous heritage and multiethnic identifications—perhaps embracing a newly expedient Afro-mestizo identity<sup>3</sup>—even as they willingly participate in the framing of their traditions as African survivals for the global market. Thus, if, as Paul Connerton argues, ritual is in large part defined by its claim to commemorate continuity with the past (1989:48), the question is *which* past is commemorated in Chincha's ritual events.

## Conclusion

All cultures appropriate and indigenize other people's traditions. So why is it important to acknowledge the Andean influences on Afro-Peruvian music in Chincha?

First, the presence of Andeanisms challenges a long-standing myth of Black-Native animosity in Peru. The existence of parallel cultural forms—such as the *yunza*, *negritos*, and *pallas* dances—affirms that Blacks and indigenous Peruvians may not historically have been as divided as it might seem, and that the birth of Afro-Peruvian culture resulted from the blending of various African, Spanish, and indigenous traditions.

The second reason is Chincha's role as the legendary site of origins for the urban Afro-Peruvian revival (see Feldman 2006; León Quirós 2003:83-84). Ironically, Chincha's traditions sometimes appear less stereotypically African than the recreated ones they inspired. For example, the revival group Peru Negro's printed concert programs often have noted the influence of Andean music on their Afro-Peruvian repertoire. However, Rony Campos, who succeeded his late father, Ronaldo Campos, as the company's director, explained to me that after the revival artists collected Black music and dances in Chincha, young Peru Negro company members improvised staged choreographies—and then his father "made them blacker" (Campos 2000). Thus, while Chincha became Peru's "Africa" in the discourse of revival artists, Chincha's music and dance traditions may better represent the multi-ethnic choices available to Afro-Peruvians. Talking about apparent Andeanisms in Chincha's traditions therefore suggests that the revival's musical reconstructions of the forgotten Afro-Peruvian past may owe as much to the Andes as they do to Africa.

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<sup>3</sup> The idea that an Afro-mestizo identity represents a new form of cultural expediency in Chincha is supported by observations made to me in personal communications from Javier León.

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