

# MANUEL ZAPATA OLIVELLA'S LA MARACA EMBRUJADA POR JIBANÁ (THE SHAKE BEWITCHED BY A WITCH DOCTOR): PRE-TEXTS AND RE-WRITING

LA MARACA EMBRUJADA POR JIBANÁ,  
DE MANUEL ZAPATA OLIVELLA:  
PRE-TEXTOS Y RE-ESCRITURA

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**Abstract:** This article analyzes the presence of pre-texts in Manuel Zapata Olivella’s unpublished novel *La maraca embrujada por jibaná* (The Shake Bewitched by a Jibaná). Through the concept of “geography of imagination” (Trouillot, 2011), we argue that, the op-eds published in the magazines *El Figaro* and *Cromos* set up the ideological ground seen in the novel on issues such as health, scientific explorations, and a view of the Colombian Pacific region, and that some short stories in *Pasión vagabunda* (Wanderlust, 1947) were the starting point for the construction of *La maraca embrujada por jibaná*, but catching up with the 1960s social discourses.

**Keywords:** Colombian Pacific region, health, modernity, medicine, Manuel Zapata Olivella.

**Resumen:** Este artículo analiza la presencia de pre-textos en la novela inédita *La maraca embrujada por jibaná*, de Manuel Zapata Olivella. A través del concepto de “geografía de la imaginación” (Trouillot, 2011) se argumenta, por un lado, que las columnas aparecidas en *El figaro* y *Cromos* sedimentan la base ideológica que se revela en la novela en términos de salud, exploraciones científicas y visión del Pacífico colombiano; y por otro, que algunos relatos de *Pasión vagabunda* (1947) fueron el punto de partida para la construcción narrativa de *La maraca* pero desde una perspectiva actualizada en función de los discursos sociales de los años 60.

**Palabras clave:** Pacífico colombiano, medicina, salud, modernidad, Manuel Zapata Olivella.

## Introduction

Over the twenty-year period between the publication of *En Chima nace un santo* (A saint is born in Chima; 1964) and *Changó, el gran putas* (*Changó, the Browbeater*; 1983), Manuel Zapata Olivella (1920-2004) was busy with other narrative experiments, the results of which were *El fusilamiento del diablo* (The devil's fusillading, 1986), which in its first version was called *¡Viva el putas!* (Long live the Browbeater!), and two unpublished novels, *El cirujano de la selva* (The jungle surgeon) and *La maraca embrujada por jibaná* (The shake bewitched by a witch doctor). Although critics have acknowledged the existence of these last two works (Díaz Granados, 2003; Garcés González, 2002; Quintero, 1998), they have only referred to them as experimental works without talking about the texts themselves. Zapata himself confirmed that both projects were merely attempts in the narrative quest leading to *Changó*. Anyhow, this article is the first approach to those novels, specifically to *La maraca embrujada*.<sup>1</sup>

*El cirujano de la selva* and *La maraca embrujada por jibaná* are not two different stories but part of Zapata's various attempts to construct a novel. The first is a preliminary unfinished manuscript more than five hundred pages long; a shorter second attempt also left the story incomplete. The third version, to which Zapata changed the title to *La maraca embrujada por jibaná*, was finally completed by the author. Although it is not possible to establish its exact date of creation, as it was left unpublished, evidence from pre- and inter- textual approaches, as well as some references to social science studies produced at the time, allow us to place it well into the 1960s.

*La maraca embrujada*, on which this article will focus on, tells the story of an episode in the life of Jueves Santo Doria<sup>2</sup>, a recently graduated doctor in Bogotá who takes up a vacancy at a hospital in Condoto after the doctor who occupied it, Dr. Fonseca, committed suicide. Once Jueves Santo arrives in Condoto, he comes up against three challenges: 1) the promised health post is nonexistent; 2) native inhabitants refuse to

<sup>1</sup> In 2023 we published the book *Manuel Zapata Olivella. Hacia una medicina nacional en el Pacífico colombiano*, which contains critical studies and the genetic and critical edition of *The shake bewitched by a witch doctor*. This book is a closure of the research project "Tensiones entre ciencia y empirismo en el proyecto narrativo de las novelas inéditas *El cirujano de la selva* y *La maraca embrujada por jibaná* de Manuel Zapata Olivella: una lectura desde la crítica genética y literaria" (Tensions between science and empiricism in the narrative project with Manuel Zapata Olivella's unpublished novels *The jungle surgeon* and *The shake bewitched by a witch doctor* —A reading in the light of genetic and literary criticism), by research group Comunidades Imaginadas Latinoamericanas (Latin American Imagined Communities —CILA), supported by Universidad de Cartagena (Res. 01385/2021). However, this article was written previously, from the archives located at Vanderbilt University.

<sup>2</sup> The character's name reads Holy Thursday Doria in English (*TN*).

follow medical instructions as they have more confidence in the ancestral knowledge of two community healers –an Indigenous and a Black one–, who use natural medicines and magical rituals in their treatments; and 3) Dr. Fonseca's notebook, which Jueves Santo manages to recover despite his secretary, led by otherworldly fears, attempts to make it disappear. These last two discoveries trigger the novel's conflict: the first because it leads to a confrontation with the natives, highlighting Jueves Santo's "civilizing" perspective against local health conceptions; the second because Dr. Fonseca's notes, serving as testimony to his explorations of local plants and fauna that might allow a local medical practice, act as a catalyst to destabilize Jueves Santo's view of progress and science as the only possible way to perceive reality.

These two medical characters can be interpreted as epistemic devices in the dialectics presented in the novel: Jueves Santo's mainstream scientific discourse and the interruption of that discourse by the native population. Fonseca's writings, who was not free from conflicts himself, would serve as the synthesis of this dialectics by virtue of the proposed autochthonous medical practice. All this happened against the backdrop of the brutal impact caused on nature and the community living conditions by the Chocó-Pacifico mining company.

Manuel Zapata Olivella got to know Chocó in 1940, as he himself recounts (1999), while studying medicine at the Universidad Nacional of Colombia. He later recorded his experience in *Pasión vagabunda* (Wanderlust in English, 1949), a book compiling short stories that testify to his journeys throughout Colombia and Central America<sup>3</sup>. I argue that *La maraca* is not merely a product of Manuel Zapata Olivella's experience in Chocó, but the transformation of three stories contained in *Pasión vagabunda* into a novel, with some added experiences from the Loricá region, as the author recounts in his autobiography *Levántate mulato* (Rise up, Mulatto). Therefore, understanding that *La maraca* originates from "Tras las huellas del difunto (Following the steps of the dead man)," "Oro y miseria (Gold and misery)," and "El cirujano de los negros (A surgeon for Black people)," I am interested in exploring the convergences and divergences with those pre-texts published twenty years before *La maraca*. Based upon that approach, I will try to answer the following questions: Why return in the 1960s to an

<sup>3</sup> Curiously, when it comes to young Zapata Olivella's journeys, critics have focused on his itinerary throughout Central and North America (see, for example, Aldana, 2020; Maddox, 2016), leaving aside Zapata's testimony about his experience in Colombian Pacific region, despite this is one rare manuscript focusing on that region.

experience already lived and recounted in the 1940s? What is Zapata's motivation to fictionalize those chronicles by focusing on medicine, health, and hygiene, topics he had already reflected on in *Pasión vagabunda*? If critics and the author himself agree that these were experimental works leading up to the conception of *Changó, el gran putas*, why is the novel set in the Colombian Pacific, an area that would not be later revisited in *Changó*?

To attempt to answer to these questions, and relying on Michael Truillot's concept of "geography of the imagination", this article will be structured in two parts: the first part will briefly explore the ideological traces in some op-ed columns published by Zapata in newspapers, even before *Pasión vagabunda*, which persist in *La maraca embrujada*. This is relevant as, while I consider the former being the seeds of *La maraca*, there are shifts in meaning between both texts and the inclusion of issues in the novel that indicate it was also connecting with earlier writings. In the second part, the article will introduce the impact exerted by some personalities from the fields of medical and social sciences on the construction of the texts here discussed. This will help to understand Zapata's discussion regarding the social role of medicine as well as its incidence in anthropological studies produced in the 1960s. Aligned with this, the article examines the setting up of Chocó's nature and people by the young Zapata in *Pasión vagabunda* and, through Jueves Santo, in *La maraca embrujada por jibaná*.

### **Ideological Traces in Zapata Olivella's Early Writings**

Michel Trouillot (2011) suggests two cartographies coexisted through which global capitalism could be read from its inception: the geography of imagination and the geography of management. Coexisting, the geography of management refers to the "elaboration and implementation of procedures and institutions of control both at home and abroad" (p. 83), as well as to the "material and organizational features that reorganize space for political or economic purposes" (p. 84). In this line of thought, the geography of management, corresponding to the modernization inherent to capitalism, creates places "as a relationship within a concrete space" (p. 84). On the other hand, the geography of imagination is associated with management in that it is constantly recreating the West (p. 91). Linked to modernity, the geography of imagination projects a place over an unlimited space—rather than a specific place. To prefigure this unlimited space, the geography of imagination needs to refer to a single temporality in which the subject

located in that place is positioned. From this perspective, and as part of the geography of imagination, modernity required two inseparable complementary spaces: the Here and the Elsewhere, which imply a subject inside and outside of the historical line along which capitalist modernization runs, the power of which is a condition of possibility, in addition to modernity. Trouillot (2011) states:

Not everyone can be at the same point along that line. Some become more advanced than others. From the viewpoint of anyone anywhere in that line, others are somewhere else, ahead or behind. Being behind suggests in and of itself an elsewhere that is both in and out of the space defined by modernity: out to the extent that these others have not yet reached the place where judgment occurs; and in to the extent that the place they now occupy can be perceived from that other place within the line (p. 92).

Following this reading, my starting point for approaching *La maraca* is not so much to explore the discursive mechanism through which Zapata Olivella positions the world of his fiction in the space known as the geography of imagination, but rather to examine the relocation of that novel twenty years after publishing *Pasión vagabunda*, in the concepts of hygiene, progress, and civilization as the only way, in the novel, to conceive different national realities, in which it aligns with the medical discourses of the early 20th century.<sup>4</sup>

While *Pasión vagabunda* is the most important pre-text in the construction of *La maraca embrujada*, reading the novel immediately brings us back to the early newspaper articles published by the young Zapata, as their ideological traces are found in his fiction and essay writings of the 1960s and 1970s. Taking those into account is relevant because I understand that *La maraca* does not have a beginning or an end in itself, but rather its entirety transcends its own materiality as we find Zapata's stance on scientific thought and modernity long before writing it, in the op-eds "Misticismo" (Mysticism) and "Las ciencias naturales en el Nuevo Reino de Granada" (Natural sciences in the Kingdom of New Granada) both from 1938, and more specifically in relation to the novel to be studied here, "Panorama y vida del Chocó" (An overview and life of Chocó) from 1940.

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<sup>4</sup> The fact that we set aside the tension between Western scientific medical practice and sacred-magical thinking in this article, even though it is the main conflict in *La maraca*, is due to the fact that illnesses and healing by means of ancestral practices was not even mentioned in *Pasión vagabunda*. For the same reason, the figure of Fonseca and his proposal of an "autochthonous medical practice", which was introduced in *La maraca*, is not addressed in this analysis either.

Zapata was a great admirer of 18th-century travelers. In the article titled “Las ciencias naturales en el Nuevo Reino de Granada” (*El Figaro*, June 27, 1938), he expressed his appeal to José Celestino Mutis’ work and other 18th-century explorers, not only for the contribution of their research to understanding local flora, but also because he read their work as a catalyst of a nationalist sentiment that would contribute to the advance of the nation: “This era of progress, unforgettable thanks to the pleiade of Criollo scholars, the fruitful investigations, and the constant recognition of our homeland, has not been renewed since it perished, either because of Mutis’ death (1808) [...] or the independence war” (Zapata Olivella, 1938a, p. 6).

In both articles in *El Figaro*, it is unavoidable to read the impact of Zapata’s father’s ideas on the young boy. Thus, the conviction that science held the explanations for all truths was combined with the belief that religious-based justifications are a mental and cultural regression (Martán Tamayo, 2018, p. 75). Zapata, as he later does in *La maraca* toward the ancestral beliefs of the population, seeks to undermine the thinking that grants power to the divine forces of Catholicism in his op-ed “Misticismo.” Here, Zapata Olivella (1938b) explains how medical research solved the mystery of year-long fasting and the mystical experience of two young European girls with the aid of science. It is clear, then, that the writer’s adherence to the idea of progress—which has been forever associated with modernity and Enlightenment thought, “centered on the prediction, control, and domination of the physical and natural world” (Acevedo et al., 2022, p. 13)—was already apparent.

In these early newspaper publications by Zapata Olivella, his reflections on the sacred-magical beliefs of Colombia’s Indigenous or Black communities were not yet apparent, upon which he would ponder years later, when he had different experiences and readings. In any case, his early foray into Chocó in 1940 left its first impression, recorded in his article “Panorama y vida del Chocó” (An overview of Chocó and its life), published in *Cromos* magazine that same year.

In “Panorama,” Zapata focused on the socioeconomic and vital issues of Chocó population, where mining exploitation and climate are the two most challenging factors affecting people’s lives. The territory is already observed as threatening to humans and civilization: he revisits the rhetoric of his time that we found in his articles from two years earlier, now describing the place from the perspective of backwardness and unhealthy conditions:

That is Chocó: jungle, water, and (natural) riches. (...) The people of Chocó struggle against the aggressiveness of the foliage hidden in its depths: the severity of the tropics plagued by yellow fevers, the suffocating heat of an unbearable sun licking the miner's back; torrential downpours and underground humidity<sup>5</sup> (Zapata Olivella, 1940, p. 6).

This viewpoint is reaffirmed by the captions of photographs illustrating the article. This can be seen, for instance, in “Four men driven by the search for gold withdraw from civilization” (p. 7) or “A pair of Indigenous Chocó individuals, a strong and healthy race that withstands the harshness of the climate and primitive life” (p. 7), which are striking for their similarity to judgments made by the 19th-century Corographic Commission, but also align with some scientists and politicians' assertions about the most marginal and socioculturally peripheral areas<sup>6</sup>. They emphasized the need for public hygiene policies in areas deemed more backward in terms of civilization, progress, and modernity, as a result of physical and mental health issues evidencing the “degeneration of the race” in Colombia (Castro Gómez, 2007; Restrepo, 2007, p. 47; Solodkow, 2022; Villegas Vélez & Castrillón Gallego, 2006). Among other impacts in the field of public health, sanitation was also part of the positivist ideal of “redemption of peoples through science” (Hernández, 2000, p. 27), which involved an economic interest as, on one hand, it would sustain manpower and would aid progress by improving races, and on the other hand, it would prevent the spread of diseases and infections that could affect international trade, a circumstance for which certain prevention parameters were established at the VII Pan-American Sanitary Conference held in Havana in 1929 (Quevedo, 1996, p. 352)<sup>7</sup>. Additionally, there was the idea of “the tropical” that had been present since the 19th century, as a geographical space with unique characteristics regarding population, nature, and diseases, according to which it was difficult for these territories to enter the category of “civilized” (Stepan, 2001; Villegas Vélez & Castrillón

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<sup>5</sup> Eso es el Chocó: selva, agua y riquezas. [...] El chochoano lucha con la agresividad del follaje que se esconde en sus entrañas: la reciedumbre del trópico arañado de fiebres amarillas, el ardor sofocante de un sol insoportable que lame el dorso del minero; aguaceros torrenciales y la humedad subterránea.

<sup>6</sup> While that way of thinking is typical of the elites in the early 20th century, Appelbaum, Macpherson, and Roseblatt (2003) state that throughout the 1950s and 1960s in Latin America, modernization and development theories were still being informed after earlier civilizing discourses in issues such as the reification of culture, space, and human biology (p. 8).

<sup>7</sup> According to Quevedo (1996), Colombia signed Inter-American Health Agreements, and in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it began a race to develop its healthcare structure, leading to the creation of the Ministry of Public Health and Sanitation in 1946 (p. 352). Thus, the public health drive made evident the lack of doctors, especially in rural areas (Soriano Lleras, 1970, p. 67), which is one of the issues underscored by Zapata Olivella in this novel.

Gallego, 2006). These reified distinctions helped to create power relations rooted in land, as spatial borders were informed by racialized ideas of progress and modernity (Appelbaum et al., 2003, p. 10).

In light of the above, it is easy to reveal that Jueves Santo's view of Condoto and its surroundings—defining *La maraca* time, space, and inhabitants— is anchored in this dual aspect: on one hand, the dystopian view of both the jungle and rainy geography, almost uninhabitable from this perspective, and people themselves, whose daily lives were conditioned by and adapted to that “aquatic space” (Oslender, 2008); on the other hand, the modernizing thought that, similar to the geography of the imagination proposed by Trouillot, sought to reproduce scientific advancement as a driver of civilization.

***La maraca embrujada por jibaná: Twenty Years After Writing Pasión vagabunda***

In the 1960s, moved by a search for “the national” in cultural productions<sup>8</sup>, Zapata decided to combine his three interests—literature, medicine, and anthropology—into a single text that would ultimately become *La maraca embrujada*. He drew inspiration from the three stories in *Pasión vagabunda*—“Tras la huella del difunto,” “Oro y miseria,” and “El cirujano de los negros”—both for constructing the characters of Jueves Santo, Dr. Fonseca, and Dr. Ballesteros, and for representing the vast nature and the inhabitants of the region. In the novel, with a national focus revolving around the proposal to create a form of medical practice combining scientific and empirical knowledge, he delves into the geographic issues of Chocó, the effects of mining on the environment and inhabitants, and the challenges of introducing a Western scientific medical practice as it opposed the beliefs of native population, mostly Indigenous people but also Black and mestizo.

Taking up our questions about Zapata's interest in revisiting the stories from *Pasión vagabunda* some twenty years later, it is clear that *La maraca* engages in a double remembrance exercise. That first remembrance exercise that was *Pasión vagabunda*—which was published a few years after the writer's first foray into Chocó— unfolds now for a second time to be reshaped from a perspective akin to the anthropological discourses

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<sup>8</sup> In 1965, Zapata founded the magazine *Letras Nacionales* with an aim to enhance literary practice across the country. In 1966, while serving as the Director of the Cultural Dissemination Department in the Ministry of Education, he hosted the First National Conference of Colombian Culture, which was held throughout a month in different cities of the country. With *La maraca*, Zapata introduced the idea of an “autochthonous medical practice.”



that were the buzzword when the novel was written and the author's own stance on public health at that time. Between 1961 and 1965, Zapata Olivella served as head of the Health Education Section in the Bogotá Secretariat of Public Education. The research he conducted as a social physician around that time would be the basis for a project he presented to Colciencias in 1972, aimed at studying empirical and traditional patterns that would influence the behavior and health of the Colombian population.

Therefore, the three stories from *Pasión vagabunda*—which can be read from an autobiographical platform—move towards another dimension in *La maraca*. While the first aimed to testify to a reality experienced by himself—even though writing, by relying on the sign, distances the signified thing (Jitrik, 2005)—essentially focused on three axes: the unhealthy conditions in Chocó, the lack of medical attention, and the reality of natives conditioned by extractive powers. In the novel, that same experience is reactivated and updated based on the present of enunciation. Additionally, including in *La maraca* events related to the magical beliefs of the inhabitants is also an interest Zapata showed at the time, as evidenced by drafts of his lectures and some publications on the topic such as “Medicina y conciencia mágica” (Medical practices and magical consciousness” (1966) and “Medicina y brujería (Medical practices and witchcraft” (1975).

This is where the novel connects with mid-century anthropological studies and explains why resuming *Pasión vagabunda* in the 1960s as well as including popular healing knowledge in *La maraca*. Since the 1950s, anthropology, one of Zapata's passions, had been moving towards its social branch as an “instrument to rationally promote campaigns for social transformation” (Duque Gómez, 1970, p. 233), since a medical paradigm had been established in which the social and environmental would be the key to understanding reality, as well as some anthropologists questioning why people in certain sectors trusted healers and popular medicine more than doctors (Gutiérrez de Pineda, 1961; Velásquez, 1958). The epistemological standpoint from which the writer conceives *La maraca embrujada* and weighs its meaning has no equal in the literary tradition, both Colombian and of the author himself, but not in terms of the frame of reference around him, because scientific thinking at that time moved in the same direction. Some of the information or questions raised by the texts published during that period in Colombia are present in the novel explicitly, such as Rogerio Velásquez's, or implicitly, as Virginia Gutiérrez de Pineda's *Medicina popular en Colombia. Razones de su arraigo* (Popular medicine in Colombia. Why is it so deeply rooted, 1961).

### Anthropology, Medicine, and Literature

The arrival of Zapata Olivella, as he recounts in *Pasión vagabunda*, and the character Jueves Santo in *La maraca*, to the health post in Chocó occurs under different circumstances. In the novel, Jueves Santo goes to Condoto on his own initiative to fill the vacancy left by the deceased Dr. Fonseca. In “Tras la huella del difunto,” young Manuel recounts that after several days of wandering without food and sleeping outdoors, he decided to seek help at the Directorate of Sanitation in Buenaventura. There, he encountered the funeral of the person who, unbeknownst to the writer at the time, would later become the character of Fonseca in *La maraca*. The vacancy left by this death in Nuquí was offered to the still-student Zapata.

From “Tras la huella del difunto” emerges the first impression of the population of Nuquí:

[...] a handful of emaciated, ragged, and gloomy men. I noticed that the adults moved sluggishly; they seemed like ghosts rooted to the ground. Later I found out that they suffered from yaws, rheumatism, malaria, and parasitic infections, and that they lived due to the stubbornness of the Black race wanting to survive the tropics<sup>9</sup> (Zapata Olivella, 2020, p. 62).

Many years later, while recounting his first impression of arriving in Chocó in *La maraca*, Jueves Santo reflected:

Quibdó. Un puñado de casuchas con techo de palma y zinc, se achataban contra la orilla. Los niños manoseándose los ombligos herniados. [...] La promiscuidad de los negros le había ensombrecido el rostro. Los ventorreos y bodegas con los arrumes de quesos, plátanos y bultos de carne salada en las puertas. En el recuerdo su hedor se mezclaba con el de las úlceras pianosas // Quibdó. A handful of huts with palm and zinc roofs were pressed against the shore. Children touching their herniated navels. [...] The promiscuity of Black people had darkened their faces. The small shops and bodegas with piles of cheese, plantains, and sacks of salted meat at the doors. In memory, their stench mixed with that of yaws-infected ulcers. (Zapata Olivella, s. f, p. 2).

In both texts, the region is defined by misery, disease, lack of hygiene, unhealthy climate, and racialized moral defects (“the promiscuity of Black people”). From these encounters with the unhealthy conditions in Nuquí and Condoto, the author felt the need to find similarities with doctors who went through similar situations according to his reading of the events and circumstances.

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<sup>9</sup> [...] un puñado de hombres famélicos, desarrapados y sombríos [...]. Noté que los adultos se movían con pereza; parecían fantasmas clavados en la tierra. Después supe que eran pianosos, reumáticos, palúdicos y parasitados, que vivían merced a esa obstinación de la raza negra queriendo sobrevivir al trópico.

In *Pasión vagabunda*, Zapata saw himself as called to imitate Dr. David Livingstone (1813-1873)—a Scottish explorer who in 1865 was sent to Africa by the British Royal Geographical Society, where he remained until his death—with the idea that he himself, as a doctor, would become “un nuevo Livingstone [*sic*] en aquella aldea. Con paciencia y abnegación me convertiría en el apóstol de aquellos negros enfermos, abatidos por la inclemencia y el abandono // a new Livingstone in that village. With patience and self-sacrifice, I would become the apostle of those sick Black people, beaten down by harshness and neglect” (Zapata Olivella, 2020, p. 62).

The mention of Livingstone in *Pasión vagabunda* is notable as, although he was a doctor, he dedicated his life to the geographical exploration of Africa for economic purposes beneficial to England, which suggests that Zapata focused on the profession and the place where Livingstone spent his life without delving into the true objectives of the explorer. This position regarding the figure of the doctor who will save the most impoverished populations on the planet will be repeated later, as we shall see.

In *La maraca*, Livingstone will be replaced by Dr. Schweitzer. The years that elapsed between *Pasión vagabunda* and *La maraca* allowed Zapata access to *Between Water and the Virgin Forest* (1920), the account of the first years in Africa of this Alsatian-born doctor who settled in Lambaréné, present-day Gabon, in 1913 and where he would remain until his death in 1965. The Spanish translation for Latin America of these memoirs was published by Hachette in the 1950s, an edition that undoubtedly was available to Zapata. The writer likely found in Schweitzer's account a common ground with his experience in Chocó and a primary source to expand and enrich that network of scientists united by the idea of the scientist bringing civilization to areas considered primitive. The decision of a doctor to venture into the African jungle, inspired by the advancement of tropical medicine at the beginning of the century and trained in modern medicine, had some parallels with Zapata's first foray into Chocó as recounted in *Pasión vagabunda*, as the anchoring point for both was the lack of medical science in those regions and its consequent impact on the population.

This connection that Zapata establishes in his texts with European scientists who settle in Africa and whom he reads as saviors of “unprotected” populations seems to indicate that, in some sense, the author imagined a proximity between the Pacific coast of Colombia and some region of Africa based on the idea that both are concentrated solely in terms of needs, poverty, and disease. In the case of the Pacific, the prevailing

perception in Colombia in the mid-20th century, following Eduardo Restrepo (2011), was one of poverty and marginality (p. 246), along with the notion that the order and truth regime that modernity fed on “is reflected in an objectivist and empiricist position”, which dictated that anything lied outside it must be “intervened upon from the outside” (Escobar, 1998, p. 27). From this perspective, people were seen as full of needs, without options, and consequently, the presence of the scientist/intellectual was thought to be a guiding beacon for subaltern sectors. This position of Zapata regarding the intellectual as a spokesperson and instrument of social transformation was constant in his work, and can be traced in his novels and in his participation in the debates of the First Congress of Black Culture of the Americas in 1977 (Valero, 2020, p. 91).

But Livingstone and Schweitzer were not the only scientists who would renew and give new depths to Zapata’s perspective when writing *La maraca*. The author dedicated the novel to Rogerio Velásquez, “forgotten anthropologist, tireless seeker of the wisdom of the ancestors, to whom this book owes so much.” It is evident that his publication of “La medicina popular en la costa colombiana del Pacífico” (Popular medicine in the Colombian Pacific Coast) in 1957 was of great importance for constructing the setting and characters of *La maraca*. From Velásquez (1958), Zapata may have taken the idea of a doctor who joins forces with a shaman to expand his clients (p. 101) as well as descriptions of certain habits and customs and Indigenous terms for naming various activities, beliefs, etc. Furthermore, the novel includes a glossary at the end with terms related to Indigenous beliefs, which gives the work a certain ethnographic aura. Also, before starting *La maraca*, Zapata Olivella transcribed a thought attributed to the Barcelona-born doctor José de Letamendi (1828-1897), which he extracts from Rogerio Velásquez’s book: “After four centuries of medical therapeutic investigation, we still owe more to the savages than to the wise men; such is the power of accumulated experience in medicine, even if accumulated through ignorance.” (in Zapata Olivella, n. d.).

The reference to Letamendi is relevant because he had drawn attention to one of the aspects that Zapata questioned regarding the lack of training in the social service component of the medical career: the impact that the environment–cosmos, for Letamendi–has on people’s health (Peiro Rando, 1968), a critique present in both *Pasión vagabunda* and *La maraca*. At the end of the 19th century, Letamendi and Dr. Claudio Bernard –whose work was the subject of Zapata’s thesis– had grounded physiology upon observation and experience, two aspects of science that the character of Dr. Fonseca in

the novel would discover in his notes as essential, after many years of working with the communities of Condoto in a fruitless struggle to impose Western scientific medicine and when, already exhausted, he sought to find the origin of the possible benefits of the local flora for health.

Zapata was evidently aware of the anthropological studies at that time, which blamed the preference of the population for healers over doctors on the state's neglect shown in the absence of public health policies and doctors in the most marginalized areas of Colombia, but also on "communication failures, the government's neglect in educating the masses, and population poverty" (Velásquez, 1958, p. 100). His knowledge can be seen in the following dialogue between Jueves Santo and the mayor of Condoto:

- Don't forget you have arrived here as a doctor, and superstition is one of our endemic diseases.  
 (...) —Are the boundaries of authority here confined to those of deceit?  
 Without losing his understanding tone, (the mayor) traced hieroglyphs in the air with his cane.  
 —You are mistaken, doctor. Around here, we don't ride on the back of a trotting mule. We travel in slow canoes that let themselves be carried by the current, taking as many turns as the river wants before reaching the desired place.  
 (...) —A doctor is not the King of Creation. Abandoned by medicine, we have endured our rustic life relying on the healer as much as on the river. (...) That we need improvement is testified by our cries for you to be sent here. But, my dear doctor, know once and for all that just by your presence, things will not improve. For a long time, you will be as unnecessary here as when you didn't exist" (Zapata Olivella, s. f., pp. 46-49)<sup>10</sup>.

*La maraca* is constructed as a polyphonic text. This allows Zapata to present the position of Jueves Santo as a bearer of authority. This authority he assumed by virtue of possessing scientific knowledge in a community of Indigenous people whom he considers uneducated. Furthermore, Zapata confronts Jueves Santo with another authoritative voice, that of the state representative in Condoto. The mayor seeks to guide the doctor in understanding the logic of the place where he finds himself, thus he feels obliged

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<sup>10</sup> —¡No olvide que ha llegado como médico y que la superstición es una de nuestras enfermedades endémicas.  
 [...] —¿Los límites de la autoridad confinan aquí con los de la superchería?  
 Sin dejar su tono comprensivo, [el alcalde] trazó jeroglíficos en el aire con el bastón.  
 —Se equivoca usted, doctor. Por aquí no andamos a lomo de muía trotona. Viajamos en canoas lentas que se dejan arrastrar de la corriente, dando tantas vueltas como quiera el río antes de llegar al sitio deseado.  
 [...] —Un médico no es el Rey de la Creación. Abandonados de la medicina hemos soportado nuestra rústica vida ateniendos al curandero tanto como al río. [...] Que necesitamos mejoría, lo testimonian nuestros gritos para que lo enviaran acá. Pero mi querido doctor, sepa de una vez por todas, que con su sola presencia las cosas no mejorarán. Por mucho tiempo será usted aquí tan innecesario como cuando no existía

to confront him with his own ignorance, which is also a way for the novel to challenge university education, in that it does not prepare future doctors to mediate with the diverse realities of the people.

### **The Geography of Imagination in the Chocó Region**

It is important to differentiate that while Jueves Santo in *La maraca* upholds the ideal of progress through the image of what does NOT form part of that ideal—the inhospitable wild setting and people’s magical wisdom—, there is a critical view of certain dynamics such as the mining concessions to transnational companies that directly affect the native population and nature with their technology and modern methods, which the author had already condemned in “Oro y miseria:”

Today, one can see what is typical in the region: on one hand, the large American mining companies, dredging the rivers and tributaries in search of the precious metals that abound in their silt; on the other hand, the exploitation, slavery, and hunger of miners, who cannot afford their maintenance or the medicines to heal their endemic illnesses with their miserly wages.<sup>11</sup> (Zapata Olivella, 2020, p. 64).

This perspective did not change in Zapata, as twenty years later he fictionalized the situation in similar terms through the main character’s voice and focalization:

The foreign company continued with the dredging of the rivers and tributaries. [...] The miners expelled from their lands looked at the dredge with hatred and envy. Without the gold grains, hunger became more oppressive. The disturbed beds of the rivers and tributaries poisoned the little water available. [...] An illness previously unknown began to spread. Purrutén, an onomatopoeia for its flatulence and diarrhea. It was accompanied by fevers with bone pain and chills<sup>12</sup> (Zapata Olivella, s. f., p. 95).

This suggests that for Zapata, there is a type of necessary modernity related to science and education that allows the integration of populations into the nation. In contrast, it highlights the other modernity, that of material and human plunder, which runs counter to his nationalist perspective.

<sup>11</sup> Hoy puede verse en ella lo característico de la región: por un lado las grandes compañías mineras norteamericanas, dragando los ríos y afluentes en busca de los metales preciosos que abundan en su cieno y por otro la explotación, la esclavitud, y el hambre de los mineros que no alcanzan a cubrir con el mezquino salario el pago de su manutención ni las medicinas para curarse de los males endémicos.

<sup>12</sup> La compañía extranjera persistía con el dragado de los ríos y afluentes. [...] Los mineros expulsados de sus tierras miraban a la draga con odio y envidia. Sin los granos de oro el hambre se hacía más agobiadora. El lecho revuelto de los ríos y años envenenaba las pocas aguas. [...] se propalaba un mal hasta entonces desconocido. Purrutén. Onomatopeya de sus ventosees y las diarreas que producía. Se le sumaban fiebres con dolores de huesos y escalofríos.

However, the writer's view of the Chocó jungle in their first encounter most clearly testifies to the change that his perception will undergo later in the novel. When the author dwells on the impact that the vastness of the jungle has on him in *Pasión vagabunda* as he decides to cross it to leave Nuquí, reach Istmina, and begin retracing his steps thinking about returning home, his assessment of the geographic space is that of an observer astonished by the unknown, in a style that resembles an Edenic view of the tropics:

The untamed nature, showing its muddy fangs, its chlorophyll eyes, its endless rain-filled manes, and its invisible but ever-present brown body at every step. I confess that in the face of the beauty of the spectacle, under the audaciousness of the water and the landscape, I felt very far from the tiger, the snake, and the tapir that had been mentioned so often to frighten me<sup>13</sup>. (Zapata Olivella, 2020, p. 64).

The romantic dimension he grants to the jungle, perhaps driven by the excitement of his wanderings, will eventually lose its impetus in the face of the modern valuation in *La maraca* as a monopolizing vision of the natural geography that extends throughout the novel through the voice of Jueves Santo. Entering the jungle produces "primitive fears," "insecurity" for the doctor, leading him to state that "The jungle needs to be sanitized. Schools, roads, telegraphs. Health posts need to be established on all the rivers" (Zapata Olivella, n. d., p. 119). The imagination of that space in terms of modernity, compared to what the real space is offering him, and how the character perceives it, also includes the inhabitants who make up those two inseparable complementary spaces, the Here and the Elsewhere as discussed by Trouillot (2011):

[...] an outside to the extent that these others have not yet reached the place where understanding occurs; inside to the extent that the place they now occupy can be perceived from that other place along the line. Framing the matter in these terms highlights the relationship between modernity and the ideology of progress<sup>14</sup> (p. 92).

In that double complementary spatiality that is part of Jueves Santo's logic of knowledge, there is no room for considering the disruption of the ancestral system of

<sup>13</sup> La naturaleza bravía, mostrando sus colmillos de barro, sus ojos de clorofila, sus cabelleras de lluvias sin fin y su cuerpo moreno, invisible, pero presente a cada paso. Confieso que ante la belleza del espectáculo, bajo la impudicia del agua y del paisaje, me sentí muy lejos del tigre, de la serpiente y del tapir que tanto mencionaran para amedrentarme

<sup>14</sup> [...] un afuera en la medida en que estos otros aún no han llegado al lugar donde ocurre el entendimiento; adentro en la medida en que el lugar que ocupan ahora puede ser percibido desde ese otro lugar en la línea. Poner el asunto en estos términos es notar la relación entre la modernidad y la ideología del progreso

values and the spiritual imbalance that a transformation of the territory in the communities would cause. The territorial imagination is thus linked to the space and time conceived by the modern state, which Gilles Sautter (1985) refers to as “geographical ideology” (l’idéologie géographique), that is, the idea of a territory the political and administrative control of which is foreshadowed with a normatized order and is perceived as a first step toward a larger organization where each individual has their own place (Bonnemaison & Cambrezy, 1996; Sautter, 1985), ignoring the relationship forged by the community with the terrestrial and aquatic space. Thus, the geography Jueves Santo faces is dictated by its “tropical character.” The terms in which he defines the jungle and rivers surrounding Condoto clearly represent the space that needs to be tamed for it to be productive for the state. From this perspective, both the State and the mining companies, and even the doctor himself with his ideology of progress, play the role of extending the geography of imagination in the novel to the extent that they seek to impose themselves.

### Coda

Zapata Olivella aligned his encyclopedic knowledge with the concerns of the 1960s social sciences, thus assuming literature as a second-degree knowledge in the sense that the writing of the novel is “a specific way in which the novel takes on social discourse” (Angenot, 2015, p. 266). This space represented in the novel, described through its rivers, settlements, and jungles, can refer to any other territory in the deep regions of Colombia, where its inhabitants do not culturally align with the logic of central State and live in a different timeline. However, the writer chose Chocó perhaps because he already had an initial approach that had planted a seed to germinate in those three stories from 1949. The space of poverty, marginalization, and neglect, particularly in terms of public health, that was associated with that region is re-symbolized in Zapata’s writing. But it is also a call to incorporate that territory and its people and remove them from the externality explained by Restrepo (2011). Incorporating Chocó into the nation required not only a change in the idea of recognizing its natural and cultural riches but also that they undergo a process of civilization or modernity.

The Enlightenment thought of the first half of the 20th century, conceiving science and the scientist as a source of progress and freedom, maintains its privilege in *La maraca*, even in Fonseca’s more “relative” thinking, which is not addressed in this article.



Zapata Olivella adds a biopolitical rewriting framed within the situated problems of Latin American fiction to the novel, as David Solodkow described so well (2022, pp. 41-44). It is clear, then, that Manuel Zapata Olivella's concern about what to do with traditional knowledge in health and the role of healers had its counterpart in the contemporary scientific discourse. This implied betting on a model of civilization that, under the premise of the need for modernization, would intervene in feeding, educational, and sanitary habits (Zapata Olivella, n. d., p. 60), and, in the case of *La maraca*, specifically, betting on the modernization of space and the knowledge tied to healing diseases.

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