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# Chota, Ecuador

Marlon Bishop visits the Chota Valley, home to a large Afro-Ecuadorian population and also to a bizarre musical phenomenon

Backstage at Quito's Teatro Sucre, Segundo Carabali looks around apprehensively, drawing his fingers along the smooth, white walls. The Sucre, long the bastion of opera and classical music in Ecuador, is for the first time in its distinguished 130-year-plus history presenting a programme in tribute to Afro-Ecuadorian musical traditions. In the hall, well-heeled Quiteños await the main act: a performance by the Banda Mocha of Changuayacu, the last of the Afro-Ecuadorian vegetable orchestras. A dozen or so musicians are warming up in the dressing room, making adjustments to their *puros* – trumpets and tubas ingeniously fashioned out of dried gourds. One man takes a broad orange tree leaf out of his pocket, folds it over, places it between his lips and blows, producing a bright, clarinet-like tone. Segundo simply takes in his surroundings, admiring the plush digs. "It's like España," he says, with a grin.

Segundo has never visited Spain, but the Sucre must seem just as far from home. Earlier this morning, the band departed Changuayacu, a village of low-slung cinder block homes located in the arid Chota Valley, a smooth five-hour ride from the capital on the winding Pan-American highway. Chota is an anomaly in the northern highlands – a real-deal desert valley in the middle of the Andes. Driving down into the valley, a hot curtain of air replaces the mountain gale, and terraced hillside farms recede into orchard-lined riverbanks. When the Jesuits arrived here in the 17th century, they recognised a climate ideal for sugar cane cultivation, and brought enslaved Africans to work the land.

Today, Chota is home to around 25,000 Afro-Ecuadorians, who continue to grow fruit and sugar in valley's fickle soils. Afro-Ecuadorians are thought to make up as much as ten per cent of the country's population, yet entrenched racial prejudice in Ecuador has long kept their history and culture out of the spotlight.



Above: members of the last of the Afro-Ecuadorian vegetable orchestras, Banda Mocha of Changuayacu. Segundo is on the left, playing a *puro* (gourd trumpet)  
Left: Chota in the northern highlands of the Andes  
Below: one of the band members playing an orange tree leaf

Within Ecuador, Chota is best known for producing the country's top footballers, and for *bomba*, a local Afro-Andean music style (with no relation to the Puerto Rican genre of the same name.) When not played by a vegetable wind band, the music is performed on a flurry of guitars and percussion, melding Spanish guitar stylings, pentatonic Quichwa melodies, and slippery African-derived rhythms. The songs deal with love, loss, and the hardships brought on by the valley's cruel cycles of drought and flooding.

Segundo, age 78, grew up in Chota long before the slithering Pan-American highway was built through the valley, bringing electric light and modern ways in its wake. He began playing the *puro* when he was 16, back when there was a *banda mocha* in every Chota village. In those days, every respectable Ecuadorian town had its own brass band, and the gourd trumpets and orange-leaf flutes came about as a creative way of working around the valley's poverty. The highway brought commerce and opportunity, and with it, metal instruments. "There were other *bandas*," says Segundo. "But they got over-excited by the idea of having a brass band. Now they aren't playing anything at all. And we're still here."

The 12 men of Segundo's band continue to perform in the streets for festivals and holidays. Unfortunately, they aren't getting any younger. Segundo is the oldest in the band, but not by much. "We're getting a little old now, and pretty soon we're going to die," he says, matter-of-factly. "We need to find young people so that we don't lose this tradition."

Bomba music in general, however, has been thriving in recent years. "If there isn't *bomba* at a party, people don't dance," says Raúl Suarez of the Auténticos del Valle, a *bomba* group also performing at the Sucre. "Now, the youth are putting value on our music. Fifteen years ago, it wasn't like that. If you put *bomba* on, people walked out of the dances." Bomba has become quite popular outside of the valley as well, allowing bands such as Raúl's to make a healthy living playing in *discotecas* up and down the Ecuadorian Andes.

Back at the Teatro Sucre, the grizzled septuagenarians of the Banda Mocha take to the stage with their homemade instruments and begin to play. The *puros* strike up a backbeat, while the leaf players execute a crisp melody, embellished with tight trills. The song is 'Carpuela,' a much beloved *bomba* classic. To the surprise of the band, a group of hip-looking university students recognise the tune and begin to sing along, springing out of their seats to dance in the aisles. *Ya no quiero vivir en este Carpuela...* The last note strikes, the curtain closes and Segundo shuffles contentedly off the stage towards the dressing rooms, where busy television crews and flashing cameras await the old men. Who would have thought this day would come. ●

