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Armin Schwegler*

**Black Ritual Insulting in the Americas:
On the Art of “Vociferar” (Colombia), “Vacilar” (Ecuador)
and “Snapping”, “Sounding” or “Playing the Dozens”
(U.S.A.)****

Summary: Dollard (1939), Abrahams (1962) and Labov (1974) were among the first to study an important ritualized speech event called “signifying” (also known as “the dozens”, “sounding”, “joaning”, “snapping”, etc.). Traditionally limited Black North American sub-culture, “signifying” typically consists of an exchange of ritualized insults directed at an opponent’s mother or relative. The practice can also include personal insults of a simpler form. Representative examples are:

“If ugliness were bricks, your mother would be a housing project.”
“Your mother is so ugly, she had to find a beautician that makes house calls.”

African slaves also appear to have brought this practice to other parts of the Americas (Cuba, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, etc.). But to date, scholars of Latin America have paid virtually no attention to the phenomenon, and the few who did report on it failed to connect it to the North American tradition of “signifying”.

This study first reviews the basic tenets of “signifying” as practiced in the United States. Thereafter, a series of texts recorded by the author in Afro-Colombian and Afro-Ecuadorian communities will be examined in order to

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illustrate that “signifying” is indeed a Black *pan-American* (rather than simply *North-American*) phenomenon.

Resumen: Dollard (1939), Abrahams (1962) y Labov (1974) figuran entre los primeros investigadores que estudian una práctica verbal que, en la subcultura afroamericana de los EE.UU., se conoce bajo el término de *signifying* ‘vociferar, vacilar’ (otros términos son “the dozens”, “sounding”, “joaning”, “snapping”, etc.). Tradicionalmente limitado a los EE. UU., “signifying” típicamente consiste en un intercambio ritualizado de insultos dirigidos a la madre (o a otro pariente) del oponente. La práctica puede también incluir insultos personales más simples. Dos ejemplos representativos son:

“If ugliness were bricks, your mother would be a housing project.”

“Your mother is so ugly, she had to find a beautician that makes house calls.”

Los esclavos africanos parecen haber llevado dicha práctica a varias partes de las Américas (incluso a Cuba, Brasil, Colombia, Ecuador, etc.). Pero hasta la fecha, los latinoamericanistas han prestado muy poca atención al fenómeno en cuestión, y quienes sí lo han hecho jamás lo han relacionado con la tradición norteamericana del “signifying”.

Este estudio primero examina las características generales del “signifying” norteamericano. Luego examinará varios textos recogidos por el autor en comunidades afrolatinoamericanas de Colombia y Ecuador. Esta aproximación comparativa permitirá establecer que la práctica de la vociferación (o de las “vaciladas”) efectivamente es un fenómeno pan-americano (en vez de simplemente norteamericano).

1. Introduction

Ultimately, mastery of the dozens demands that you go to that place where humor, anger, joy, and pain all reside. It is from that cauldron that the greatest snaps are born and delivered (*Snaps* 1994: 167).

The Dozens was clearly one of the whetstones on which [Cassius] Clay [Muhammad Ali] honed his oral style. Verbal art was central in black culture, and the formalized joking relationships so popular with black youth functioned as one of its primary training grounds (“The Ritual of Insult”, in *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, Levine 1978: 350).

Dollard (1939), Abrahams (1962), Kochman (1968), Labov (1972; 1974) and Levine (1978) were among the first to study an important ritualized speech event in Black North America known today as “snapping”.¹ Across the U.S.A., there are many names for playing the game, including “bagging”, “bursting”, “busting”, “capping”, “cracking”, “cutting”, “dissing”, “dropping lugs”, “joaning”, “playing the dozens”, “putting someone in the dozens”, “screaming”, “sigging”, “signifying”, “slipping”, “sounding”, and “snapping”, the last a recent word adopted here as a cover term. But, to quote from the first collective volume of *Snaps*, “while the names vary, the rules of the game remain the same” (*Snaps* 1994: 162).

“Snapping” typically consists of an exchange of ritualized insults directed at an opponent’s mother or another relative, but it can also include personal insults of a simpler form. Typical insults are:

“Your mother is so ugly, she had to find a beautician that makes house calls.”

“If ugliness were bricks, your mother would be a housing project.”

“Your tits are so small, you have to tattoo FRONT on your chest.”

Linguistic etiquette requires practitioners to have excellent verbal skills and a keen sense of the rules that govern such speech acts.² Ultimately, these ritual insults are used to establish social distance (or proximity) and social rank.

Snapping is remarkably similar throughout Black communities in the United States. Similarly ritualized language is found in many parts of Africa, which may explain why the North American phenomenon originated in (and has essentially remained confined to) Black communities. Interestingly, African slaves also appear to have brought the practice of snapping to other parts of the Americas (Cuba, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, etc.). But to date, scholars have paid virtually no attention to the phenomenon in Latin America, and the few who did report rarely if ever connected it to the North American tradition of snapping. Moreover, scholars have established unconvincing hypotheses about the origin of snapping, linking it for instance with movements of slave resistance rather than age-old West- and Central-West African practices.

This paper first reviews the basic tenets of snapping as practiced in the United States. Thereafter, a series of texts recorded by the author in Afro-Colombian and Afro-Ecuadorian communities will be examined in order to illustrate the *pan-Afro-American* (rather than simply *North-American*) nature of the tradition.

1 Abrahams (1962: 219, n5) refers to several other early sources that commented upon the institution of “playing the dozen” (snapping).

2 For a recent study of this and related types of verbal dueling, see Sokol (2004, esp. pp. 122-123).

2. Snapping in the United States

Snapping has undoubtedly been around for a long time, and was widespread in the early twentieth century North American Black culture (Smitherman 1995: 23). Until recently, few scholars were aware that the tradition is also common outside the African-American community. As pointed out in the Introduction to the best-selling *Snaps* (1994: 21) –the first in a series of collective volumes of ritual insults–, the verbal repartee of the dozens remained an almost secret language. As such, it has been one of the least-studied phenomena of Afro-American verbal traditions.

Played mainly by groups of male adolescents (Sommer 1980: 291, Mitchell-Kernan 1972: 316), snapping involves two or more participants who engage in the ritualized verbal contest of hurling insults or “snaps” against each other.³ As Majors (1994) explains, “the loser of the battle is the one who either backs down, runs out of snaps, or loses his cool, which occasionally results in a physical fight” (*Snaps* 1994: 28). The language appropriated for such ritual events is rough, insulting, aggressive, crude, disrespectful, and, at times, downright foul, and is meant to produce comic effects in the participating audience. Not surprisingly, persons unfamiliar with this ritual tradition may find its language deeply offensive. To the practitioners too the words are rough, but these are never to be taken literally.

A set of finite rules and stock conventions dictate how the game is to be played. To be good in the game, a “snap” must be 1) exaggerated (the wilder, the better), 2) creative in terms of figures of speech, 3) timed right, 4) delivered immediately and spontaneously (no lengthy deliberations are allowed) (Smitherman 1995: 26), 5) clever and original, and 6) crafted just for your opponent (*Snaps* 1994: 164). Some additional rules are: 7) Do not touch the opponent; 8) use a referee (audience); 9) snap in front of a crowd, and 10) don’t spit (*Triple Snaps* 1996: 15). Perhaps the most fundamental convention of the game is that players must be known to each other.

Limitations of space prevent me here from offering a more detailed description of the activity of snapping (but see “Anatomy of Snapping from a comparative perspective” in Table 1). The following examples may, however, give non-initiates a basic insight into the nature of this ritualized speech event. The snaps in Group A are from actual snapping sessions, and therefore are examples of contextualized ritual insults (with rejoinder). The examples in Group B are from the three collective volumes of *Snaps*, which contain one-liners that are entirely decontextualized (and, therefore, never followed up by an opponent’s rejoinder). Readers may find some lines particu-

3 An anonymous writer in *Snaps* contends that “historically the dozens has been a male experience, but increasingly women are playing” (*Snaps* 1994: 166). Evidence adduced below from Latin America suggests that this may not have been necessarily so, and that initially the game was played by both genders.

larly offensive. As other authors have done before me, I have presented the ritual insults exactly as they were recorded.

Snaps Group A (contextualized, with rejoinder):

A: Your mother so old she got spider webs under her arms.

B: Your mother so old she can stretch her head and lick out her ass.

B: Your mother raised you on raw corn.

A: Your mother raised you with big lips.

B: Your mother gave you milk out a cave.

Your mother gave you milk out her ass.

... When you just born, she say "Take a shot" (Labov 1974: 88, 91, respectively).

Snaps Group B (decontextualized, without rejoinder):

"Your mother is so fat, when she dances the band skips" (*Snaps* 1994: 49).

"Your mother is so fat, she went to the salad bar and pulled up a chair" (*Snaps* 1994: 53).

"Your mother's nose is so big, you can go bowling with her boogers" (*Snaps* 1994: 84).

"Your mother is so old, her tits give powdered milk" (*Snaps* 1994: 121).

"Your mother is so dumb, she almost strangled herself with a cordless phone" (*Double Snaps* 1995: 57).

"Your mother is so horny, her vibrator has dual exhaust" (*Double Snaps* 1995: 154).

"Your mother is so loose, she's got "Over One Billion Served" tattooed between her legs" (*Double Snaps* 1995: 156).

"Your mother's pussy is so big, when your father puts it in he says, "Baby, it's cold outside" (*Double Snaps* 1995: 157).

"Your mother is so black, she sweats Pennzoil" (*Triple Snaps* 1996: 132).

"Your mother is so white, when she has the runs she shits mashed potatoes" (*Triple Snaps* 1996: 132).

"Your mother is so loose, her idea of going on a diet is not swallowing" (*Triple Snaps* 1996: 140).

"Your father is so poor, he can't afford to pay attention" (*Snaps* 1994: 129).

"Your father is so horny, he asked, "How was it for you?" and his partner said, "Moo" (*Triple Snaps* 1996: 144).

"I could have been your father, but the line was too long" (*Triple Snaps* 1996: 138).

"Your sister is so skinny, she can Hula Hoop with a Cheerio" (*Snaps* 1994: 143).

"You are so skinny, your nipples touch" (*Snaps* 1994: 141).

Ritual insults are just that, i.e., "ritual". As such they are not intended as factual statements (Labov 1974: 103), but rather as a means of getting your opponent worked up to the maximum amount possible. By definition, snapping is a thinking person's game (*Snaps* 1994: 167). But snapping is more than a game – it is "a battle for respect", "a war of words", and, as one writer put it, "perhaps the best type of war there is" (*Snaps* 1994: 162).

In the Black Oral tradition, the verbal practice under examination consists of two types: (a) ritual insult and (b) applied insult (Labov 1974: 100, 106). Traditionally, the *ritual insult* was referred to as “the dozens” or “playing the dozens”. The dozens consisted of verbal attacks leveled at a person’s mother or other relatives. Done for their own sake, these ritual insults are answered by other ritual insults. *Applied insulting*, on the other hand, was known as *signifying*. This applied, personal insult is normally answered by denial, excuse, or mitigation, and tends to focus on the addressee himself. But as Smitherman (1995: 16) points out, “today, the two types [*ritual* and *applied* insults] are being conflated under a more general form of play, which we may refer to as ‘snaps,’ an emerging term for the game”.⁴ Personal insulting remains little documented, no doubt because it tends to be applied in the midst of other, more-difficult-to record verbal encounters.⁵

As already mentioned, ritual insults were briefly described in a number of pre-1970s sources (Dollard 1939; Abrahams 1962; Kochman 1968). Labov (1972; 1974) offered the first in-depth linguistic analysis of the activity.⁶ Smitherman (1977: 128-134) then included a discussion of Snaps as the Dozens in a chapter of her *Talkin and Testifyin*. Other relevant post 1960s works include Mitchell-Kernan (1972), Gregersen (1974), Sommer (1980), and Smitherman (1995). But it was not until the publication of the first volume of *Snaps* (1994) that snapping began to enter the consciousness of North American white society, spreading beyond the school play-grounds and into offices and dinner conversations. *Double Snaps* (1995) followed a year later (the book features an introductory piece by Smitherman on the history and contemporary significance of snapping); *Triple Snaps* (1996) then further expanded the collection, bringing the total of published snaps to a respectable size of more than 1000 one-liners. Capitalizing on the new-gained popularity of snaps outside of Black society, companies like MTV, FOX, Nike, and Hallmark cards soon featured them for an ever wider audience.⁷

4 Mitchell-Kernan (1972: 316-317) examines the differences between signifying and sounding (as found in Chicago) in considerable depth.

5 For the documentation of one such personal insult, see Labov (1974: 104-105).

6 Labov/Cohen/Robins/Lewis (1968) is an uncondensed presentation of the same work. See also Labov (1972).

7 There is now even a snaps computer bulletin board on Prodigy (*Double Snaps* 1995: 8). And the principle authors of the aforementioned *Snaps* volumes have produced a series of *Snaps* TV specials for HBO, as well as a *Snaps CD* for Atlantic Records (*Triple Snaps* 1996: 157). As of late, several web sites post collections of snaps. See, for instance, <www.pimpdaddy.com/yomama-default.shtml> (03.09.2007). Morgan’s insightful *Language, Discourse and Power in African American Culture* (2002) provides a useful framework for contextualizing snapping and similar practices within the changing and complex African American and general American speech communities.

3. Snapping in Latin America

I have witnessed ritual insulting in Palenque (Colombia),⁸ a village inhabited by the descendants of maroons, and also recorded examples in the Andean highland valley of El Chota, Ecuador⁹ (for the location of Palenque and El Chota, see map 1). Both of these localities may be characterized as culturally and linguistically conservative, with Palenque arguably being the most “African” (e.g. culturally, linguistically and phenotypically “Black”) community in Spanish-speaking Latin America.¹⁰ Palenque also has special status because, in addition to Spanish, half of its inhabitants still speak “Palenquero”, the only true extant Afro-Iberian creole in America.¹¹ Ritual insults also surfaced sporadically in my field work in the city of Cartagena¹² (Colombia) as well as in the Pacific Lowlands¹³ of Western Colombia (Map 1). I have also observed similar verbal behavior among Afro-Cubans during a recent brief stay in Santiago¹⁴ de Cuba.

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- 8 The village is also known as “El Palenque de San Basilio de Palenque”, or “San Basilio de Palenque”. I have been carrying out field work on Palenquero language and culture for the past twenty years, and am a fluent speaker of the local creole. For an overview of Palenquero history and language, see Schwegler (1996a; 1998), and Schwegler/Green (in press). The Spanish (rather than creole) of Palenque is examined for the first time in Schwegler/Morton (2003).
- 9 I visited the Chota Valley for two weeks during the summer of 1993, and then again in 2000. For a recent detailed historical introduction on this region, see Tardieu (1997). Three articles by Lipski (1982; 1986; 1990) offer brief but useful studies of Chota Spanish. To date, there exists no monograph-length investigation of the Chota Spanish dialect.
- 10 In Palenque, racial intermixing with the surrounding population seemingly never occurred; in the Chota, there are indications that a certain amount of intermixing with the local Indian population did take place early on (18th century), but that subsequent generations have striven to maintain their “pureza de sangre” (‘purity of blood’).
- 11 The Palenquero creole is studied by Schwegler (1996a; 1998; 2002; 2006; in press), Schwegler/Green (in press), Moñino/Schwegler (2002), and Hualde/Schwegler (in press). The most recent of these works contain up-to-date references to additional publications on the creole.
- 12 Founded in 1533, Cartagena became the principal “African” gateway to the Americas during the 17th century. See Borrego Plá (1983), Böttcher (1995), Calvo Stevenson/Meisel Roca (1998), Del Castillo (1982), Navarrete (1995), Palacios Preciado (1973), and Pavy (1967).
- 13 Needing labor for fluvial gold mining, Spanish colonists transshipped thousands of African slaves to these Lowlands, located in one of the world’s most remote and least hospitable rain forest areas. Today, Blacks are numerically dominant throughout most of the region, and Pavy (1966) may be correct in characterizing the Pacific Coast of Colombia as *the* major Afro-American zone of the Western Hemisphere. For an overview of social, economic, and linguistic history of this vast region, see Granda (1977), Whitten (1974), Romero Vergara (1997), Sharp (1976), and West (1952; 1957). Despite the dated nature of some of these publications, they continue to be most useful sources of information. Discourse samples of Western Colombian Spanish are given in Schwegler (1991). Importantly, during the past five years or so, violence caused by civil war has prompted the relocation of thousands of Chocoanos (Arocha 1997; 1998). Many of them currently live in the slums of Cali (Map 1), where ritual insulting must now be common.
- 14 In terms of language, culture, ethnic mixture, and history, Santiago de Cuba and Cartagena have much in common. Although separated by 1000 kilometers, the two cities were in close commercial

Lauria (1964: 61-62) and more recently Rivera (2003: 39-40) make claims for the existence of ritualized insulting in Puerto Rico.¹⁵ This paper, however, will concentrate almost exclusively on the ethnically homogeneous Palenque and the Chota Highland.

Map 1: Areas where the author witnessed snapping



contact during colonial times (Del Castillo 1997), which explains in part why their Spanish dialects and “popular” speech styles are so similar.

- 15 Rivera argues – correctly so in my view – that ritualized insulting (snapping, sounding, toasting, boasting, the dozens) “are part of the African American oral tradition that has nourished hip hop’s lyrical styles” and “this genre thus draws heavily from African-derived cultural traditions that not only break with perception of an ‘essential’ Puerto Rican Hispanicity but also transcend the borders ascribed to Puerto Rican national culture” (2003: 39, 41, respectively).

Ritual insults can be observed quite readily in Palenque as well as in El Chota. This is so in part because local youths derive considerable pleasure from its practice, as they are keenly aware that it continues to be a rich local source of entertainment. Palenqueros and Choteños both easily recognize ritual insults as a distinct speech genre – one that they universally tie to local (Black) folklore. But despite Palenqueros' fondness for ritualized insults, the activity itself has no local name in either of their languages (Spanish or Palenquero). This contrasts with the situation found in El Chota, where *vacilada* ('snap' [n.]) and *vacilar* ('to snap, etc.') are common local terms.

Ritual insults have never been studied in depth in any Afro-Latin American community, and Palenque and the Chota are no exceptions. Colombia's foremost expert on Afro-American culture, Nina de Friedemann (Friedemann/Patiño Rosselli 1983: 56) did notice the practice while doing research in Palenque in the late 1970s and early 1980s, calling it *vociferación* – a term we shall also adopt here, together with *vociferar* 'to snap'. Thirty years earlier, Escalante ([1954] 1979: 112) had already documented clear cases of *vociferación*, without however recognizing its special nature as a separate speech genre.¹⁶ Schwegler (1996a: 274-281; 1998: 281) offers the first *recorded* examples of Chota and Palenque *vociferación* as well as a brief discussion about its possible connection to Central West-African oral traditions.

3.1 Contrastive analysis of *vociferación* (Palenque) and *snapping* (U.S.A.)

Vociferación and *snapping* share many traits, but there are also important differences. Let us first concentrate on important similarities (for a fuller comparison, see Table 1). In both *vociferación* and *snapping*, participants insult each other in a ritualized manner, usually initiating the exchange by drawing from a conventional repertoire of insults. In Palenquero creole, one such common insult begins with *kala si apalesé ...* 'your face looks like + ATTRIBUTE', as seen in the example hereafter:

Kala si apalesé hopo baka.
'Your face looks like a cow's ass'.

In Palenque too the activity is profoundly competitive, and subject to immediate evaluation by the audience. And much like snapping, Palenquero *vociferación* has a cadence, rhythm and accompanying body language of its own that openly marks it as a special, ritualized speech act (to non-initiates, a *vociferación* in full swing may sound and look like a dead-serious dispute about to get out of control). As in the United States, in Palenque this ritual play is limited to in-groups, i.e., people who know each

16 Failure to identify it as such subsequently led to scholarly misinterpretations of some Palenquero corpora. Examples of such misidentified segments are listed in Schwegler (1996a: 275-276, nn. 140, 142, respectively).

other well (for this reason, Palenquero *vociferación* can only be played with *familia*, i.e., relatives and friends who share a close social and cultural association). And here too the activity is generally considered decent despite its openly vulgar language.

Like their North-American counterparts, Palenqueros only snap in the presence of an audience,¹⁷ and it is this audience that ultimately pushes and controls the tempo of ritualized verbal wars. In terms of main functions, similarities are also easy to detect: As in the U.S.A., in Palenque the activity is ultimately an instrument used to manipulate and control people, and to get them to react to the manipulation. *Vociferación* thus essentially holds the dual expressive and pragmatic function in Palenque that snapping holds in the United States. That is, it is used to project the participants' personality onto a scene, and to borrow status from an antagonist through the exercise of verbal power. In Palenque too *vociferación* is thus a dramatization of oneself to others, a fundamentally theatrical event in which one *shows off* (it is neither for the shy nor for the timid, as only "big mouths" with a "mean attitude" qualify for the contest). And here too a good snap must meet the criteria of wild exaggeration, perfect timing, and creative figurative speech.

Crucially, in Palenque as well insults consist of two types: a) ritual (ludic) insult and b) applied (ritual non-ludic) insult. The ludic insult is played for its own sake, and has *entertainment* and *comedy* as its stated primary purpose (an *unstated* primary purpose is to establish social rank based on oral performance skills). In its ludic form, *vociferación* is never meant to convey genuine expressions of feelings. Everything is done under the pretext of "this is a game, acted out as if it were real 'applied' [personal] insulting". Analogous to the ludic insulting (the dozens) of the United States, ludic *vociferación* consists of an imaginary text whose ultimate goal is to provide the audience with a game of fun, and to test the participants' verbal skills and thinking abilities. And in perfect parallelism to the dozens, in ritual *vociferación* the "war of words" is supposed to be settled as soon as a winner emerges, no matter how worked up the sparring partners may have become during the fight.

In Palenque (as in the U.S.A.), *applied* insults are used for particular purposes – typically to settle a personal score or dispute – in the midst of other verbal encounters. Never ludic in character, they are by definition serious personal business, with heavy involvement of the participants' egos. Applied insults occur at the spur of the moment, and are often triggered by the release of pent-up emotions.¹⁸ Applied insults are in-

17 I occasionally did witness two-person *vociferación* situations, but under such circumstances the two antagonists treated each other as representing the audience (for similar behavior in the U.S.A., see Labov 1974: 110). A further limitation is that in Palenque such two-person *vociferación* only exist in *ritual* (rather than applied) *vociferación*. The difference between these two types is discussed below.

18 In contrast, ludic *vociferación* is often a planned event, organized in advance to unite players and a suitable audience. In this sense ludic *vociferación* is more of a social event than its applied counterpart.

tended to offend, and are meant to permanently debase the opponent. They are the ultimate verbal vendetta on display.

Interestingly, contestants in applied verbal encounters seem to care equally little as to whether a given insult is intended as factual statement. What seems to matter most is that key verbal attacks be answered with progressively more effective “sounds” in order to choke off the antagonist’s aggression. And as in the ludic version of the game, a principal object is to never lose one’s cool.

Readers may have noticed that I have characterized the two Palenquero types of *vociferación* as (a) ludic insult and (b) applied insult, thereby sidestepping the conventional North-American terminology of “ritual insult” vs. “applied insult”. I have done so because in Palenque, and I suspect also in the United States, both types of insults are ultimately “ritual” acts, as they must each follow a set of finite “ceremonial” rules and stock conventions. Ignoring even one of the basic tenets of this always openly public oral warfare immediately removes it from the domain of *vociferación*. Aware of these conventions, two individuals would, for instance, never engage in applied insulting unless they sensed the presence of an audience. Nor would they insult each other if one of the “opponents” were known to have patently inferior verbal skills.¹⁹

As in other places where snapping occurs, in Palenque a fundamental distinction must thus be drawn between regular personal insults (the kind one can probably witness in any community) and applied personal insults. Both are a form of anger venting. But only the second one is also a theatrical event in which one also *shows off* and eventually hopes to emerge as a winner in the eye of the public. There are at least two further outward signs that the Palenquero community draws a fundamental distinction between regular and applied insults: in applied (but not in regular) insults

- 1) the audience keeps score, primarily with its laughter and other responses; and
- 2) spatial relations and body language are always important aspects of the game (body language typical of *vociferación* is described below).

The following excerpt, recorded in 1991 during a dispute between two middle-aged Palenqueras is fairly typical of the kinds of applied *vociferación* I observed in Palenque. Speaker A is trying to settle a score with speaker B, whose “man” recently spent a night in B’s home.²⁰ The heated dialogue took place on a narrow dirt path that leads from the village to the creek. No one else was in sight, but the two speakers were fully aware of being within earshot of several men, women and children in a nearby backyard. As shown by the text, the initial aggressor A of the dispute clearly failed to settle

19 The highly skilled do not *vociferar* against beginners. This is so in part because in such encounters the verbal flow would be choked off virtually from the start, as the beginner would feel beaten from the outset.

20 The transcription of the original text has been adapted to reflect key dialect features, and to preserve its original flavor (informal, intimate speech).

the score, as she was rebuffed effectively by B who made successful use of a snap with a double meaning (see the bold text in example below).

| <p style="text-align: center;">Palenquero text #1²¹ (Personal applied <i>vociferación</i>)</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">Translation</p> |
|--|---|
| <p>A: ¡Miní aká, muhé, karaho! ¿I bo atrebé pasá akí flende kara mi? [See comment] →</p> <p>¡Trabahá!, ¡amalá kasó ndulo aí! ¡E k'i tan matá ele ri una sola be! [See comment] →</p> | <p>Look here, woman! Shit! And how do you dare to walk in front of my face? [This opening line implicitly states that A is aware of B.'s recent sexual escapade with A's husband; choice of words (karaho ... flende kara mi), tone of voice, and body posture make it clear that this is an opening "challenge" to <i>vociferación</i>]</p> <p>Get ready and hold your pants! I am going to kill her off at once! [This line is addressed as an aside and in loud voice so as to definitely be heard by the hidden audience]</p> |
| <p>B: ¡I bo, ¿k' o kelé? ¡Bo apalesé kumu ... kumu ... <uté no ha comío naa en ma ri tre día>!</p> | <p>And you, what do you want? You look like ... like ... as if you had not eaten anything in more than three days! [= you are too thin, i.e., unattractive!]</p> |
| <p>A: ¡Bo, miná ke flakuchenta! ¡Bo a polé ndrumí ku mailo si nu pogké ele a tené miero ri sindí pulo gueso! [= Palenquero]</p> | <p>Look how scrawny <i>you</i> are! You haven't been able to sleep (= have sex) with your husband because he was afraid he would feel nothing but bones!</p> |

21 Like all other Palenquero texts cited in this paper, this one must be understood in the context of local sexual and other societal practices. It may be helpful to point out, for instance, that until fairly recently, polygamy was *officially* accepted in the village, and that unmarried women were normally not censured for having sexual relations with more than one man.

| | |
|--|--|
| <p>B: ¡Uuuu! ¡Aí kasa mi, hende asé kumé mucho kanne!</p> <p>[See comment] →</p> <p>[See comment] →</p> | <p>1) Uhhh! In my house people eat a lot of meat! (= literal meaning)</p> <p>2) In my house, men are served well sexually (implicit: whereas in yours they are not!).</p> <p>[Audience laughs wildly and considers B the winner. A's attempt to get back at B for "stealing her 'man'" was unsuccessful]</p> <p>[Note that B's reply is perfectly crafted because its second meaning – i.e., "I serve men well sexually" – goes to a place where it hurts her opponent the most (readers will recall that the fight was triggered because B had an affair with A's "man").]²²</p> |
| <p>A: ¡A no!, ¡Karahó! –</p> <p>¡Por eso moná si nu a kum' un tasa masamola ete año!²³</p> <p>[See comment] →</p> | <p>Ah no! Shit! – [= Expression of helplessness, uttered in reaction to the preceding killer snap]</p> <p>That's why your baby has not eaten a cup of "masamorra"²⁴ the entire year!</p> <p>[= Ineffective snap to which the audience does not react]</p> |

In Palenque, applied insults at times resemble what in other areas of the Caribbean has been termed *cursing* (Gregersen 1974: 63), which is public enough to become a 'scandal' (*meli* in Antigua). But *vociferación* and *cursing* are clearly not the same, though they may appropriate similar techniques (louder-than normal voice, special body language, etc.) to make a special point.

In partial summary, Palenquero *vociferación* is always ritual, but what differentiates the applied from strictly ludic type is that the former is for real, while the latter is merely acted out as if it were real. Children and younger adolescents practice mostly the ludic type,²⁵ while the applied version is reserved for teenagers and grown-ups

22 Mitchell-Kernan (1972: 323) rightfully notes in her study on signifying, "it takes some skill to construct messages with multi-level meanings, and it sometimes takes equal expertise to unravel the puzzle presented in all of its many implications". In this Palenquero example, speaker B is clearly rewarded for her unusually clever multi-sided pun, as the audience laughs accordingly.

23 As B sensed that the audience did not consider this final line a successful reply, she opted to simply ignore it. She outwardly signaled her quick success by forcefully spinning her body half-circle and walking off with her back turned to the opponent.

24 A semi-liquid dish that consists of ground corn and other ingredients.

25 Traditionally, Palenquero adolescents acquired their verbal skills as members of *cuadros*, i.e., formal age associations into which one normally enters during puberty (Friedemann/Patiño Rosselli 1983: 50-64, Schwegler 1996a: 68). In such a setting, *vociferación* was always an act *in communis* in

ready to face serious verbal challenges in full view of the public. Both types are key determiners for social (group) ranking, ludic *vociferación* essentially being the training grounds for the more hazardous applied *vociferación* of adult life.

As Table 1 shows, there are far more similarities than differences between North-American insults and Palenquero *vociferación*. Understanding some of these relatively few differences is, however, important for a correct appreciation of the traditions involved. Contrary to North-American practice, in Palenque ritualized ludic insults only occasionally focus the insult on a third person (i.e., the opponent's mama, father, etc.) (Labov 1974: 96).²⁶ Instead, applied and ludic insults are both focused directly on the opponent, whence "you" rather than "yo momma" typically initiates a given line. As regards outer form, Palenquero applied and ludic insults are therefore virtually identical, with context and age usually serving as fairly transparent indicators of the true nature of the game (i.e., ludic vs. applied). The following prototypical examples illustrate how the target of ludic insult in the U.S.A. is normally a relative (most often the mother), whereas in Palenque it is the verbal opponent himself or herself.

United States:

Ludic insult:²⁷ "Your mother is so black, if you bottled her sh'd look like soy sauce" (*Double Snaps* 1995: 145).

Palenque:

Ludic insult: *¡Bo a tené mucho etratehia aí kala sí!*
Lit. 'You have much strategy on your face' =
'You look like you are about ready to "snap"!'

Applied insult: *¡Bo a-tené un boka ri pelo!*
Lit. 'You have a mouth of a dog!' =
'You "bark" a lot but your talk has no bite!'

A further significant difference between the North and South American practice is that in Palenque *vociferación* is never rhymed. As Majors points out in his "History of the Dozens" (*Snaps* 1994: 30), and as Smithermann (1995: 27; see also Majors 1994: 30) more recently reminded us, earlier versions of the game were played in the form of rhymed couplets. Oral history (approx. 1900 to present) of Palenque gives no indication that rhyming was ever considered a positive element of the game, and it is reasonable to assume that *vociferación* has always been rhyme free (it is similarly absent in El Chota). In fact, in Palenque *vociferación* appears to have remained essentially the

which all present participated, some more than others. Understanding the importance of this *collectivity* is essential to grasping the difference between regular personal insults and ritual personal insults.

26 For such a third-person insult in Palenquero *vociferación*, see the PALENQUERO TEXT #4 below, especially the line "Urora a tené oho así, ¡be!".

27 "Ritual signifying" in Labov's terminology.

same as it was a century ago, which stands in sharp contrast to its evolutionary patterns in the United States (see Majors, “History of the Dozens” *Snaps* [1994: 30]).

A further difference is that in Palenque nobody seems to get offended by the spectacle of *vociferación*. Simply considered an intricate part of local culture, it has (not yet) been exposed to the circumscriptions of nearby, more urban societal speech standards. The reasons for the unabashed maintenance of the practice are no doubt multiple. One of these is certainly the historically high geographic and social isolation of the village (Schwegler/Morton 2003). Another is probably the fact that *vociferación* has traditionally been expressed in the local creole, which, being incomprehensible to Spanish speakers, could readily escape the prescriptive scrutiny of the dominant Spanish-speaking society.

3.2 Palenquero *vociferación* further defined

As a rule, applied *vociferación* has a greater propensity for leading to physical confrontation than its ludic counterpart. Fights do occasionally break out in ludic insults, but only when the game unintentionally becomes personal, or, as some Palenqueros might say, too personal, thus losing its character as a “let’s-pretend-it’s-a-fight” game.

In Palenque, *vociferación* can, in theory, be practiced by male as well as female speakers of all ages, though it is usually carried out only within gender lines (adult males do not generally *vociferar* with women). But in practice, ludic *vociferación* is generally reserved for adolescents and pre-adolescents, i.e. set age-groups who may or may not yet have acquired fully proficient verbal skills. *Applied* (personal) *vociferación* is far more common among (adult) women than men. It can be heard on a daily basis, with its characteristically loud dramatization, at the local *loyo* ‘creek’ (< Span. *arroyo*), where women routinely gather to wash cloths and fetch drinking water. In 1995 I overheard the following two interchanges at that creek (“<...>” signals code-switches from Palenquero to Spanish):

| Palenquero text #2 (Applied <i>vociferación</i>) | Translation |
|--|---|
| A: ¡Ombe! ¡Miedda! Katalina a kondá-mi ke kusa sí <ya no sibbe>! | Gee! Shit! Catalina told me that your “thing” (‘pussy’) doesn’t work any more! |
| B: ¡I bo ke e ma ngodda ke un ... ke un ...!; ¿Kumo mailo si polé kumé koncha asina? | And you who are fatter than a ... than a ...! How is your husband going to “eat you” (lit. “eat shell” = engage in oral sex)? |
| A: <¡E ke mi marido ta bien equipao y prefiere> meté-lo bien lendro! [A laughs] | My husband is ‘well-equipped and prefers to put it (= penis) “deep inside” (me)’ [A laughs] |

| | |
|--|--|
| <p>B: ¿¿Caraho! Uté cree eso!? Cómo puee sé si su marío no ha dormío en su casa en má de cinco año>?</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>[See comment] →</i></p> | <p>Geel! Do <i>you</i> believe that!? = How can that be if your husband has not slept in your house in more than five years?</p> <p><i>[The audience breaks out in sustained laughter, signaling that “B” has won the contest]</i></p> |
|--|--|

| <p>Palenquero text #3 (Ludic <i>vociferación</i>)</p> | <p>Translation</p> |
|---|---|
| <p style="text-align: right;"><i>[See comment] →</i></p> <p>A: ¡E Filomena! <¿Uté ya ha porreao aggú biahé>?</p> | <p><i>[“A” addresses Filomena, who is washing clothes while sitting on the bank of Palenque’s nearby creek]</i></p> <p>Eh Filomena! Have you ever washed clothes! = Don’t you know how to wash clothes?</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>[= Opening “challenge”]</i></p> |
| <p>F: <¿Uté tiene la boca muy grande>! ¡I tan nda bo un kachetáa pa bo aterisá aí lendro loyo!</p> | <p>‘You got a big mouth! I am going to kick you so hard that you will land in the creek!’</p> |
| <p>A: ¡Miedda! <¿E arroyo e mehó p’uté porké uté ta sucio como la nagga de una vaca>!</p> | <p>Shit! The creek would be better for you because you are dirty like a cow’s ass!</p> |
| <p>F: ¡No sendá muy sekkita ri aloyo nu pogké korriente tan yebá ma teta sí i bo ku ané!</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>[See comment] →</i></p> | <p>‘Don’t sit too close to the water because the current will wash your (implied: long and dried out) boobs away, and take you along with them!’</p> <p><i>[Several women sitting next to B break out in wild laughter, which they intersperse with “oh miedda” (‘oh shit’), thus effectively acknowledging B.’s killer reply.]</i></p> |

When Palenquera women “fight”, they usually come down on each other with greater biting wit and heights of oratorical fantasy than their male counterparts. Palenqueras are fiercely competitive, so it is only logical that *vociferación* can get personal. It is not uncommon to hear them making insulting remarks about one another’s sexual organs, or to make disparaging remarks about another’s supposed lack of sexual attraction or stamina. Common attacks are for a woman to reveal that another woman is sleeping with her husband, or that she is not feeding her family according to Palenquero standards. The example hereafter is a fairly conventional line, collected in 1992:

¡mahaná si a kumé <pura agua> pogke bo a-sabé kusiná masamorra ri maí nu!
 ‘your kids eat pure water because you don’t even know how to cook corn “masamorra”’

Equally common are overt threats of physical aggression (these are particularly prominent in the ludic type of *vociferación*). Witness the following example, recorded in 1988 during a ludic altercation between a male (“A”, 11 years of age) and female adolescent (“B”, 8 years of age).²⁸ Readers will note that the older speaker wins the contest with his superior verbal skills. In addition to being less creative, the younger practitioner (“B”) has a less than perfect command of Palenquero, as shown by her neglect to articulate correctly certain phonetic patterns, obligatory in Palenquero (cp. the interference in **komplá* < Span. *comprar* ‘to buy’, invariably pronounced *komblá* by proficient speakers of the creole).²⁹

| Palenquero text #4 (Ludic <i>vociferación</i>) | Translation |
|--|--|
| A: ¡Miná! kala ele apesé mok... mokito ku gana piká. [<i>Said with irony</i>]: I a tené mieo i salí piká peyeho suto! | Look! his face looks like a mosqu... like a mosquito who wants to bite. [<i>Said with irony</i>]: I am afraid that it will bite our skin! |
| B: ¡Miná kal’ eli! aparesé ... bo a komplá baka akí ... ³⁰ [<i>See comment</i>] → | Look at his face! It looks like ... you bought a cow here in ... [= <i>Ineffective opening “challenge”</i>] |
| [<i>See comment</i>] → A: ¡Bo, bo i ta aí, bo a tené mucho trateh’ í kala si! | [<i>Said with irony</i>]: Lit. You, you look like you have lots of strategy in your face! = You, you really know how to play this game! |

28 Additional examples of “physical threats” extracted from recordings of *vociferación* include:

- ¡Kuakié rrato i tan meté bo un pataa k’ e tan kaí ayá hundo ku maina ele!
‘Any moment I am going to kick you in the butt so that you will land all the way over there next to your godmother!’
- ¡I tan pegá bo un ... un patá! ‘I am going to kick you in the butt!’
- ¡I tan pegá bo un guen nimalaso, karaho, ... un guen boteyaso i tan ndá-bo pogké naitika bo se bae a buká ayá loyo nu!
‘I am going to hit you so hard, gee!, ... I am going to hit you so hard with a bottle that you will not be able to get anything at all [i.e., not even your daily much-needed water] down there at the creek!’

29 My interpretation (and, therefore, translation) of this passage differs slightly from that offered in Schwegler (1996a: 274).

30 This line constitutes a particularly unsuccessful case of *vociferación*, as the speaker fails in her attempt to complete the routine opening “your face looks like ...”, and then similarly fails at coming up with a comic conclusion to her statement “bo a komplá baka akí”. B’s opponent immediately capitalizes on this weakness by ridiculing her with a sarcastic “you look like you really know how to play this game!”.

| | |
|--|--|
| B: ¡I tam meté bo un galotaso! | I am going to hit you real hard with a stick! |
| A: Yo a- ta nda bo un kachetá ke Efina a tang k' itembení ese ... en ese “komedza” suto. | I will slap you in the face so that Delfina will have to intervene in this ... in our “conversation”. |
| <i>[See comment] →</i> | <i>[B: pulls on her eyelid to imitate the Urora's eye and then snaps this line:]</i> |
| B: ¡Urora [<i>a close relative and friend of A:</i>] a tené oho así!, ¡be! | Urora [<i>a close relative and friend of A:</i>] has an [ugly] eye like this, look! [= <i>third-person snap, formally similar to the “yo mamma” variety</i>] |
| A: Delfina ... Delfina bo e ma flakuchenta ke ... ke el' a- ta buká kanne nu. | Delfina ... Delfina you are so skinny that ... that he [= your man] is not even looking to get your meat [= you are so skinny that he doesn't even want to get into your pants]. |
| B: ¡Miná kal' eli! ³¹ | Look at her [ugly] face! |
| <i>[See comment] →</i> | <i>[Laughter by B alone, indicating helplessness]</i> |
| A: ¿Bo a tan salí r' ese kombedza nu?, ¿no? | Aren't you going to get out of this “conversation”? = Don't you know how to win this verbal fight with a better line than what you just snapped? |
| B: ¡Miná kala eli apalesé hopo baka! | Look, his face looks like a cow's ass! |
| A: ¡Pero miná kal' e monasita aparesé kala aí mono subí aí palo! | But look, the face of this [poor] little girl (= B:) looks like the face of the monkey up there on the tree! |
| B: ¡I tam meté bo un galotaso; aí kabesa i tam matá bo ri una be! | I am going to hit you real hard with a stick! I am going to kill you right there by hitting you in the head! |

31 Again, speaker B fails to come up with a killer line, using instead the rather trite “look at her ugly face!”.

| | |
|--|--|
| [See comment] → | [Said with biting irony]: |
| A: ¡Bo ... bo ... bo a tené mucho tratehia; bo aparé...! | You ... you ... you have so much “strategy” (= skill at <i>vociferación</i>)! |
| Bo aparesé moná Rraú po lo k ta ku tratej i kueppo si. | You look like the daughter of Raul because [literally] you have so much “strategy” in your body (= because you have such excellent body language when engaging in <i>vociferación</i>). |
| [Audience breaks out in loud laughter] | [Note: Raul is a local famous for his ability to speak Palenquero as well as for his snapping skills] |
| [See comment] → | |

As in other instances of ludic *vociferación*, the verbal interchange in TEXT #4 was ultimately played out as a game. But *vociferación* can be much more than simply a verbal fight. When players are at their best, it can turn into a war of words of epic proportions and intense personal involvement. But it always remains a war in which the “mortally wounded” get up quickly, and may well depart from the scene while embracing their formerly “mortal enemy”.

The fact that, as mentioned earlier, *vociferación* can be heard on a daily basis, may lead to the false conclusion that most, or even all, Palenquero adults commonly engage in the activity. In actuality it is exercised with regularity only by a select few, as it requires, among other things, extraordinary verbal skills, creativity, and humor. Many speakers feel that they lack the competence for the game, thereby altogether shying away from a verbal exercise that carries considerable risk (especially public demotion of social status).

Palenqueros frequently insult each other based on perceptions of being “Ribero” (from up-town) vs. “Bajero” (from down-town), or their supposed ability (or lack thereof) to speak the creole. Partly as a result of the truly extraordinary psychological and personal verbal engagement that takes place in *vociferación*, participants in the ritual at times violate the rules of the “game” by trying to settle the score with physical violence (this includes fist-fighting, which in Palenque readily takes on the character of boxing). Monolingual residents of Palenque are at a disadvantage, as they can usually understand a verbal attack in Palenquero but lack active speaking skills to formulate a reply with required ability and stylistic finesse. As in North-American snapping, the verbal art in question rests to a considerable extent on the rapidity of the verbal interchanges (Labov 1974: 116), and the avoidance of even minor hesitation or pausing.

Vociferación does not consist of a set of standard lines that Palenqueros learn by heart. Only the idea of the insult itself, the loud voice, and the accompanying agitated body language are routine. The rest is poetry in the making. And as such, it is not cir-

cumscribed by limitations of time. That is, verbal duels may last as long as it takes to resolve them. In reality, the ludic type tends to last longer than the applied personal one. The reason for this observed fact may be found in the greater verbal skills of adults (the “kill” is achieved more quickly), and the essentially didactic nature of the youngsters’ game (the “insult” is dragged out to get maximum practice, and, at times, to be on center-stage as long as possible). And since children and young adolescents play the game for its entertainment value, there really is no pressing reason not to prolong it.

Whenever I expressed interest in *vociferación* while doing fieldwork in Palenque, pre-adolescents came over to demonstrate their verbal skills for the game. The actors engaged in a performance that featured characteristic intonation: emphatic high pitches, greatly exaggerated (lengthened) stressed vowels (especially word- or phrase-final ones), and a rhythmic, almost sing-song like articulation. The public theatricality of the event was further highlighted by copying that which their adult counterparts do so well when snapping on each other: they added dramatic gesticulations and body posture to maximize the effectiveness of the “show”. They characteristically maintained greater than normal distance from the interlocutor (typically two meters or more). *Vociferación* is, therefore, not an “in-your-face” kind of speech event.

When sensing the potential for a killing “sound”, speakers would usually stick their head forward, gathering forces for the ultimate attack. Turning the back and lowering of the head tended to accompany admittance of defeat, but this was far more common in applied than ludic insults (in ludic insults, the loser often maintains eye-contact with the antagonist but breaks out in laughter, thus acknowledging his or her defeat). Especially among women, staring opponents down, or giving them a one-finger hook to add emphasis when landing a line were also devices commonly used to enhance the performance, and to make moves and stances that had greater-than-normal “killing power”.³² And more often than not, changing the distance between the opponents was employed to punctuate climaxing lines: moving closer to each other generally signaled the match of words was still too close to call but could be decided any time; distancing oneself from the opponent on the other hand generally meant admittance of a nearing defeat. But no matter what the distance between the interlocutors, spatial relations were always an important aspect of the game.

In Palenque, attackers in ritual insults often hurl offenses at each other in an overlapping fashion, that is, well-ordered turn-taking hardly seems to matter. This explains in part why, in the heat of the moment, only a few of the arguments brought forth may actually be evaluated and reacted to by the opponent. Importantly, the audience’s evaluative reactions often dictate to the protagonists against which line he or she must

32 For a small photographic collection of corresponding moves and stances for advanced snapping in the U.S.A., see *Double Snaps* (1995: 159-163).

come out: loud laughter naturally forces an opponent to take notice, and to respond immediately so as to defend reputation and status. It goes without saying that in theatrical events of this sort, timing is often everything: an otherwise effective line thrown in at the wrong time is essentially a line wasted (this is so especially because repetition of lines is *not* generally viewed favorably by the audience).

But in Palenque the audience's role is not just limited to evaluation or refereeing. If the verbal attacks become too simultaneous or overlapping, the audience may resolve the resulting *problem of order* by purposely reacting to certain lines more than others. Spectators may thus directly dictate the patterning of *vociferación*, always making sure that the game of verbal insulting does not become unrestrained, or disruptive, or simply end. The audience thus possesses the authority to stop or constrain a given speaker. If the audience senses that a contestant is not heeding the injunction, he or she will be rebuked. From all this it follows that, as Dollard (1939: 13) already implied in his early study on snapping, the audience truly has a difficult task at hand. On the one hand it does want the snapping to be intense, but on the other hand it must always be concerned that, in order to keep the joking from becoming overly exasperating and extreme, the game do not end up in fistfights that would threaten in-group solidarity.

Another interesting feature of *vociferación* is that it tends to supersede all other types of speech. That is, *vociferación* is never "just" an aside, something that can take place without attracting public attention. Thus in a group setting it will often interrupt the flow of an ongoing discussion; and contrary to general practice, people may join a group without offering verbal or other traditional greetings (raising of head, eye contact with accompanying raising of eyebrows, handshake, etc.). The fact that *vociferación* commands superior status is also seen in that it never requires an apology for interruption, nor any set of signals that would excuse the interrupting behavior. The community, it seems, is never bothered by *vociferación*, as long as it is played by the rules. If anything, Palenqueros welcome it, perhaps because they consider it the ultimate entertainment, the kind of stuff that brings humor and "action" into the routine of daily life. Which verbal risks to take, and which to avoid, can indeed mean the difference between public adulation or complete humiliation. But regardless of the outcome of the confrontation, the net result for all involved is that their place in Palenquero society is reasserted.

Two important points remain to be made about *vociferación* in Palenque. The first concerns the domains in which such gregarious speech can be applied. *Vociferación* is not just limited to "street talk", but can also be found in religious texts, where it is used to address ancestral relatives. From a strictly western perspective, usage of such rough, often accusatory language in religious contexts may be surprising, but, as explained in Schwegler (1996a), in the wider context of Afro-American traditions this is hardly unusual. Palenqueros have long held that their ancestors continue living, visit-

ing them at night on a regular basis. Lumbalú funeral songs in particular occasionally feature lines that address recently-departed ancestors in an accusatory tone reminiscent of *vociferación*. One such instance is found in the lamenting concluding lines to the dirge “Katalina Luango” (Schwegler 1996a: 178), where the singer accuses the defunct of having died prematurely.

| <i>Original text</i> | <i>Translation</i> |
|------------------------------|--|
| je mam'e! | ah mother, ah! |
| <magre, ¿para ke parite>, e? | mother, why did you (even) give birth? oh! |
| ¡<ijo tan degrasio>!, eele. | oh you ungrateful son! |

The other important point has to do with the code in which *vociferación* is framed. Most examples offered above are in creole rather than Spanish. But this is merely the result of my method of data collection, which until recently firmly centered on the Palenquero creole rather than Palenquero Spanish (but see Schwegler/Morton 2003). While it is true that the best Palenquero practitioners of *vociferación* are bilingual, there is also no denying that the younger, predominantly monolingual generations in the former maroon village are equally fond of the practice. In Palenque, Spanish is, therefore, a fully viable medium for *vociferación*. The progressive shift in Palenque to Spanish monolingualism has thus not resulted in a threat to the venerable oratory practice, nor has it changed any of the basic ground rules. Here, as in Puerto Rico, predominantly monolingual children and adolescents continue to engage in full-blown contests of defamation, “a ritual of degradation whose players are aggressively engaged in scoring points against each other, in seeing how far they can go and still retain the superficial consensus of amiability” (Lauria 1964: 61; see also Rivera 2003: 39-40).

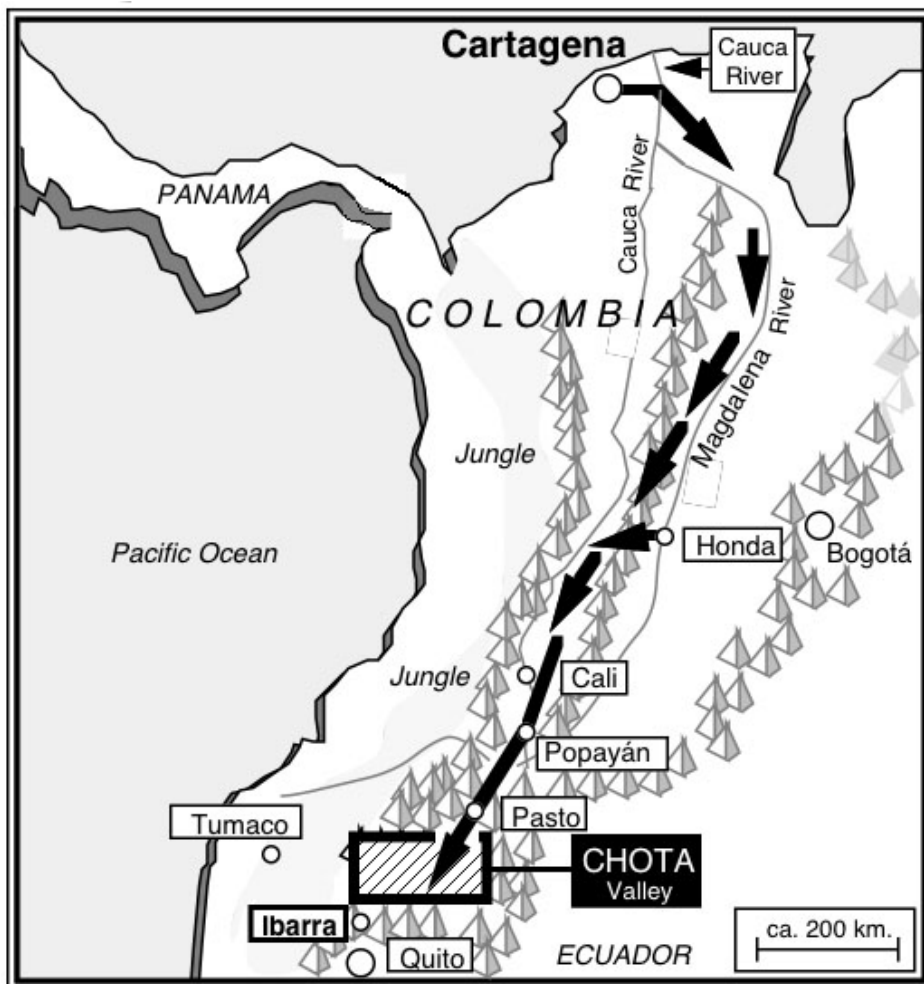
3.3 Snapping (*vacilada*) in *El Chota of Highland Ecuador*

As already mentioned, in the highland village of El Chota – linguistically and socioculturally the most conservative Black community of the Chota Valley – the game of snapping is known as *vacilada*. In the summer of 1993 I traveled to the region in the hopes of discovering possible traces of a former Spanish creole (Schwegler 1996b, 1999), and it was on that occasion that the data presented hereafter were collected. El Chota shares an obvious ethnic link with Palenque (the ancestors of both places were African slaves who reached the Americas via the slaving port of Cartagena [see Map 2]), but beyond that, the similarities are relatively few. Contrary to Colombian Costeños' generally relaxed demeanor and dislike for “excessive formality”, Ecuadorian highlanders tend to be reserved, and, therefore, less openly boisterous.³³ Choteños

33 The routinely relaxed demeanor of “Costeños” has been commented upon by many writers, Montes Giraldo (1995: 94-95) included.

are outwardly more timid and more controlled than Palenqueros, and appear to have embraced the social values of dominant Spanish society more readily (throughout much of their early history, they were under the control of Jesuit priests who operated medium scale sugar plantations in the valley). This explains, in part, why their discourse styles tend to bring out relatively few divergent dialect features, and why their Spanish is much closer to the standard than that of Palenque.

Map 2: Localization of the Chota Valley and principal route by which Black slaves reached this tropical Andean valley during the 16th and 17th centuries



(Map adapted from Schwegler 1996a: 282).

Upon arriving on the central plaza of El Chota in July 1993, I immediately noticed a group of male youngsters (8-15 years of age) who were engaged in ritual insulting. Less reserved than their adult counterparts, these youngsters purposely exhibited their in-group bonding and solidarity through ostentatious consuming of beverages and engaging in symbolic and expressive uses of “low-prestige” Spanish (use of curses, taboo expressions, etc.). Appropriate choice of words, higher-pitched intonation, one-on-one gregarious verbal attacks, threatening gesticulations, and immediate evaluation of lines by the audience were important ingredients in their game, essentially paralleling the kind of verbal and gestural behavior I had witnessed many times in *vociferaciones* during my stays in Palenque. And in El Chota too the parties involved in the fierce “fights” were true to the game, observing above-mentioned basic rules, and showing neither contempt nor disrespect at any point during or after their play. Predominantly manufactured in the heat of the moment, the following is a typical example of a Choteño *vacilada* produced by youngsters (readers will note that Jorjolo [then 13 years of age] is a more skilled player of the game than slightly younger competitor Henri):³⁴

| El Chota text #1 (Ludic <i>vacilada</i>) | Translation |
|--|--|
| H: Jorjolo, ¡molestoso! ¿qué tal, leerís bien? [See comment] → | Jorjolo, you pain-in-the-ass-kind-of-guy! What’s up? Don’t you even know how to read? [= Opening “challenge”] |
| J: Ah sí, ¡burro! | Oh yah, you dumbhead! |
| H: Jorjolo, leerís bien en la escuela, ¡burro! [= no sabes leer bien en la escuela, ¡tonto!] ... | Jorjolo, I bet you don’t have a clue how to read in school, you dumbhead! |

34 For a phonetic transcription of this text, see Schwegler (1996a: 281). The English translation is purposely free so as to approximate the true flavor of the *vacilada*. Readers familiar with standard Spanish will note that Choteño speech exhibits a series of dialect features, most of which are also typical of Ecuadorian highland Spanish. Being monolingual speakers of Spanish, Choteños naturally cannot appropriate code-switching as a means of heightening the effectiveness of certain lines. Except for a few strictly local features (among which pronoun usage), the Spanish of the *vaciladas* is essentially that found in everyday informal in-group speech of the valley.

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>J: Oye, qué [...?...] de las cosas verás. [See comment] →</p> <p>¿No estarás robando de las cosas en mi casa? [...?...]</p> | <p>Listen!, what ... you will see ... these things. [J. is struggling to find an appropriate line]</p> <p>Aren't you stealing things from my house? [...?...]</p> |
| <p>[See comment] →</p> <p>H: ¿Y caso que yo sé robarlo en tu casa? [= ¿Yo no sé robar las cosas en tu casa?] ¡Pendejo! ¡Guagua abusivo! [Said with irony:] Verás leerás bien. ¿No ves lo que te dijo el señor? ... que no sabes leer [y] que yo sé más que vos.</p> | <p>[H snickers, indicating a certain helplessness]</p> <p>Don't you think that I couldn't steal things in your house!? You asshole! You abusive little kid! [Said with irony:] You think you write well! Don't you get what this man said? ... that you don't know how to read, [and] that I know more than you!</p> |
| <p>J: ¡Oye, cabeza de quinde³⁵! No te [...?...] molestando verás. Te voy a agarrar y te voy a sacar la mierda de la ... [del] culo pues. [See comment] →</p> | <p>Listen, you Black little no brainer! Don't ...! [...?...]</p> <p>I am going to grab you, and pull the shit straight out of ... of your asshole!</p> <p>[The audience laughs, signaling that the contest is won unless H can come up with a killer line, which he does not, as can be seen from what follows]</p> |
| <p>H: ¡Este Jorjolo! ¡Molestoso [es] polá. Irás a ichar ... irás a ichar a un perro y no a mí, polá ... [See comment] →</p> | <p>Hey you, Jorjolo! you are really a pain-in-the-ass kinda guy. You can ... you can grab a dog but not me, really.</p> <p>[= H. now also laughs, but the timing of the audience's laughter makes it clear to him that he is the loser]</p> |

As shown by the contrastive Table 1, the similarities between Palenquero *vociferación* and Choteño *vacilada* are many, but there are also differences, some more readily apparent than others. Overall, the Chota tradition is closer to Palenque's *vociferación* than to its north-American counterpart (snapping). For instance, contrary to United States practice, Choteño *vaciladas* are never rhymed (readers will recall that the same holds for *vociferaciones* in Palenque). A further shared pattern between the Chota and Palenque is that there snapping is generally not of the "yo momma" type, but instead focuses directly on the opponent. In the Chota, as in Palenque, the ludic threat of im-

35 Quinde '(black) humming bird'.

minent corporal punishment (“I am going to hit you so hard that ...”) is a common rhetoric device to get the snapping going (for an example, see the CHOTA TEXT #2).

My Chota informants consider *vaciladas* a truly autochthonous speech genre (with a style markedly different from that of other local speech genres).³⁶ Here too practitioners are unaware that their verbal “game” is part of a wider, very rich African-American tradition. Finally, much like their Palenquero counterparts, Choteño youngsters love to give renditions of imitated (make-believe) snapping, assuming and acting out roles of imaginary or real adult speakers. The following example from the Chota is an illustration of this practice. Henry, the speaker of the above passage, impersonates Berta (B), whereas Jorjolo imitates the *vacilada* of the imaginary Norma (N):

| El Chota text #2 (Ludic <i>vacilada</i>) | Translation |
|--|--|
| B: ¡Oye Norma! ¡Te vas a ahogar! ¡Yo te doy una tremenda paliza!, porque aquí los damo. | Listen, Norma! You are going to drown (right here in the nearby river because). I am going to beat you up real bad!, because here we beat up (people) real bad. [= Opening “challenge”] |
| N: ¡Pendeja! ¡Auuuuu! ¡Abusiva! Vos no lavás ni bien ... vos ... plato pa’ que ... pa que vengas a ... a ... hata maltratar a mí, ¡pendejo! | Asshole! Auhhh! You ill-behaved one! You don’t even know how to wash dishes well (i.e., you are not old enough) to mistreat me (like that), asshole! |
| B: ¡Verís! ¡¿ ... Vas a poder vos cargarme a yo?! | You will see! You (think that you) are gonna be strong enough to carry me?! (= you are too weak to beat me up!) |
| N: ¡No podís vos a yo! [...] ¡Pendeja! | You won’t be able to (beat) me,! Asshole! |
| B: Pero yo ... ¡ve, Norma!, yo hablo bien bonito. Y vos ...; esos plato, les sacó brillo! no ... que vos dejás muy [?] ... ¡quemado! ... ¡Dejás esa ropa ... este ... le dejás que se haga hueco! ... ¡Le dejás que se lleve el río! | But I ... Look, Norma!, I speak real well (i.e., like a fully grown-up person, and not like you). And you ...; those dishes, I can really make them shiny! no, ... you leave them ... very [dirty]! (= you have no idea how to be a good housewife!). ... You leave the clothes ... the ... you wash them in such a (rough) way that they have holes in them afterwards! ... You (even) allow them to be swept down the river! ³⁷ |

36 Informal observations by the author in the neighboring towns of Ambuquí, Carpuela, and Pusir seem to confirm my Choteño informants’ claim that *vaciladas* are found nowhere else in the valley.

37 In El Chota, clothes are washed on the banks of the Chota River (about 50-100 meters from town).

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>N: ¡Y vos si quiera le ...; los plato les dejás mantecositos, sin lavarles bien; ¡en vez de le poner jabón en el trapo, pone tierra! ¡Te burro! ¡Eeee ta burra!, ¡Ah, ke toooonta!</p> | <p>And you don't even know how to ...; you leave the plates full of grease, you don't wash them well; instead of putting soap on the rag, you put dirt! You are soooo stupid! you are stupid! Ah, what a dumbhead (you are)!</p> |
|---|--|

Thus far we have concentrated on similarities between Choteño and Palenquero snapping. There are, however, also important differences. Crucial among these is the fact that in the Chota the activity of *vacilar*

- 1) seems to have moved down in the age range, as it is now solely an adolescent and pre-adolescent activity;
- 2) appears to be exclusively of the ludic type (despite my close attention to the phenomenon, I did not witness any applied personal *vaciladas* during my three-week stay in the village);³⁸ and
- 3) is usually carried out in same-sex settings only.

2.4 Snapping in Cartagena (Colombia), the Pacific Lowlands (Colombia, Ecuador) and Cuba

As shown in Map 1, I have had occasion to witness verbal behavior strongly reminiscent of snapping (*vociferación, vacilada*) in at least three other areas of Latin America, notably

- 1) the former slave-trading port of Cartagena,
- 2) the Pacific coastal Lowlands of Colombia, which stretch from Panama all the way down to just north of Guayaquil, Ecuador), and
- 3) Santiago (eastern Cuba).

In areas 1-2 above, the practice is stigmatized; it is invariably associated with uneducated, lower-class Black behavior. All the evidence gathered there *in situ* suggests that women are its primary practitioners, with men participating only to a limited degree. My stay in Santiago de Cuba was too brief to allow any characterization of snapping in that city. However, it may not have been a coincidence that in Santiago I observed women rather than men snapping on each other.³⁹

38 Future field work will have to confirm whether adults indeed shy away with the noted regularity from both applied and ludic *vacilar*. I can, however, confirm already now that if the activity does exist among adults, it must be far less common than in Palenque, where it can readily be observed even by newcomers to the village.

39 In a personal communication the Cuban scholar José Millet recently confirmed the practice of snapping for Santiago, noting that there too it is associated with “lower-class” verbal behavior. The *Diccionario del español de Cuba* (Haensch/Reinhold et al. 2000) hints at the practice on Cuban soil by

Of the areas mentioned, I am most familiar with that of Cartagena, where snapping can be observed with a certain regularity in at least two places: the narrow streets of the city's colonial center, and the popular market called Bazurto. There, dark-skinned female fruit and vegetable vendors may engage in loud verbal battles – both the ludic and applied type – in full view of passing crowds. Group solidarity among participants is a given, and the theatricality of such events can reach levels that bring crowd movement to a temporary halt. Several of these vendors are descendants of Palenqueros who emigrated to the city during the course of this century, but others have no affiliation with the former maroon town. Friedemann/Patiño Rosselli (1983: 56) were the first to report on this gregarious urban *vociferación*, but despite its prominent presence in Cartagena, to date no one has studied it in any depth.

Within this comparative Spanish-Caribbean context, mention should also be made of sporadic published reports of verbal joking interactions whose elements seem to parallel the content, style, and general spirit of *snapping* (U.S.A.), *vociferación* (Palenque), or *vaciladas* (Chota). One such report is found in Lauria's "'Respeto', 'relajo' and inter-personal relations in Puerto Rico", where it is stated that the mutual "relajo" ('joking contest') can become "a full-blown contest defamation, a ritual of degradation whose players are aggressively engaged in scoring points against each other, in seeing how far they can go and still retain the superficial consensus of amiability" (Lauria 1964: 61).⁴⁰

4. Summary and conclusions

In this study we have seen that a major speech event in the vernacular culture of three or more geographically and linguistically diverse Black communities is an exchange of ritualized insults. By examining these practices, here referred to as *snapping* (U.S.A), *vociferación* (Palenque), and *vacilada* (Chota), I have shown that three geographically and linguistically very diverse Black communities share a long list of important verbal characteristics. In all three cases, the verbal game in question is a highly stylized activity that crucially relies on outlandish "spur-of-the-moment" creativity, verbal wit and cunning, and often boorishly rough rhetoric. Wherever the game is played, its rules demand that it be fought in a nonviolent way, thereby allowing the venting of "hostility and suppressed rage within acceptable confines" (Smitherman (1995: 20). One-on-one dueling rather than team-fighting is its characteristic format

defining the term *vacilar* as "intercambiar bromas, burlas, o chistes en una conversación bulliciosa; burlarse de alguien, diciéndole algo en tono de broma o chiste; divertirse a costa de alguien haciéndole creer algo que no es cierto".

40 Casting the net even wider within the extended Caribbean basin, one may also want to look to countries like Guyana, where similar practices appear to be well established (see, for instance, Edwards "'Tantalisin' and 'busin'" [1978]).

everywhere, and this despite the fact that it is by definition a communal game played out in the presence of appreciative onlookers. In the Black sub-culture of the United States, in Palenque, as well as in the Chota, these onlookers hold a key function as secondary participants: they rigorously evaluate and ultimately referee the game, their primary mark of a positive evaluation being sustained laughter. In doing so, they intrinsically set standards of verbal excellence for their vernacular.

No matter where the game is played, conventional lines or standard themes (usually articulated with an elevated voice) trigger the exchange, allowing ample room for elaboration and invention in what is to follow. Equally universal is the theatricality of the event. It is “speech on display” by definition, a ritualized way of projecting one’s personality to others while working up and chopping down the rival. In Palenque, the Chota, and the United States, it is perhaps this conventionalized theatricality (along with, of course, the choice of words) that most readily sets it off as a ritual act. Interestingly, in all three geographic areas considered in this study, there are two different uses of insult. Others have termed these two types “*ritual* sounding” and “*applied* sounding”, respectively. Here I have preferred to call them “*ludic* insulting” and “*applied* insulting” (or sounding), thereby insisting that both varieties are ritual acts. In the United States, the difference between the two is expressed by the way the game is played: the ludic type overwhelmingly consists of verbal attacks (rhymed or not) leveled at a person’s mother or other relatives (attacks are in the third person). The applied type of insult is, in a sense, more personal, as it is focused directly on the addressee (attacks are in the second person). Such a differentiation is not made in Palenque nor in the Chota, where attacks are direct (i.e., in the “you” format), and never rhymed. But beyond this difference of format, the ludic version of the game in the U.S.A., Palenque, and the Chota is much the same, the most important commonalities being perhaps that is a) practiced entirely for its own sake, and b) always hypothetical. *Applied* verbal encounters, on the other hand, are initiated primarily because the parties engaged in the fight have a personal score to settle. Applied insults thus constitute a medium for getting back at someone before an audience. They are a means to an end. Crucially, the true source of the rumpus is rarely mentioned in the insult, as this would move the altercation in the direction of *louding*, i.e., discrediting someone before an audience for something that is presupposed to be factually true (Labov 1974: 85).⁴¹ Instead, in applied insulting, opponents hurl accusations at each other that are not at all intended as factual claims. One of the Palenquero examples cited earlier serves as useful illustration of this technique: there, the insults were triggered by a sexual transgression, but the verbal fight essentially left the matter unmentioned (though not nec-

41 Audiences seem to be entertained far less by *louding* than by ritual insulting. This is perhaps so because *louding* is too personal and (often) too true.

essarily unresolved), concentrating instead on the supposedly scrawny physique of the two contestants.

In this context it is worth keeping in mind that, at least until recently, in the American context verb dueling of this sort has always been a prototypically Black activity, hidden away for centuries in marginalized subculture. In terms of the question of its *African* origins, its manifestation in Palenque may turn out to be particularly revealing, as it yields fresh insights into which peoples of Africa were instrumental in its spread to the Americas. There has long been a widely held mistaken assumption that West Africans alone had a linguistic and social influence on African-American culture in the U.S.A. Holloway/Vass (1993) and others have recently sought, more or less successfully,⁴² to correct the mistake, pointing out that *Central West African* slaves (almost exclusively Bantu) also made significant contributions.⁴³ The Palenquero data are uniquely qualified to enlighten us on this question. This is so because available research suggests that, for reasons not yet fully understood, Bantu (especially Bakongo) slaves were *the* dominant element in the formation of the culture and language of this maroon community (see Schwegler 2006, and relevant references therein).

The working hypothesis that North-American snapping and South American *vociferar* and *vacilar* are related (perhaps via distant pan-[Central]-West-African practices) may have important consequences for reconstructing how the game evolved in the New World. Some scholars seem to assume that North-American snaps were originally always rhymed, and uniformly obscene (Labov 1974: 98), though this is generally stated in an implicit rather than explicit manner. Majors, for instance, writes that the game's style has evolved, and that "[e]arlier versions were played in the form of rhymed couplets" (*Snaps* 1994: 30). The fact that rhyme is altogether absent from *vociferación* as well *vaciladas* indirectly suggest, however, that comedic insulting in the United States may have introduced rhyming as an added convention, as something that could provide an ever greater creative challenge, as well as further rhetoric beauty.

5. Post scriptum

Prof. Fu-Kiau Kia Bunseki, native speaker of Kikongo and expert on Congo culture, informed me in recent personal communication that snapping is indeed a very popular Kongo tradition. There it manifests itself in two basic styles, each of which has a spe-

42 For an informed critical review of Holloway/Vass (1993), see Mufwene (1994).

43 However, as Smitherman (1995: 21) points out, Holloway/Vass (1993: 145) too follow Dalby's (1972: 182) lead and attribute the "yo mamma" phrase to West Africa.

cial name. *Biensa*⁴⁴ is snapping that takes place between relatives (usually elders and their grandchildren), and is highly moralistic in tone. The other type of snapping – one that is closer to “personal applied snapping” – is known as *nsosani*.⁴⁵ According to Bunseki, *nsosani* is “a socially accepted open attack on the opponent”, and one of its main purposes is to make fun of the opponent while providing entertainment for the audience. According to Bunseki, *biensa* and *nsosani* are extraordinarily sophisticated, and only practiced by individuals with truly outstanding verbal skills.

I am, of course, not the first to suspect that the kind of verbal ritualized insulting examined in this article may have its roots in Africa.⁴⁶ But in my view, the question deserves to be addressed afresh, and with a geolinguistically wide (rather than narrow) perspective that is not limited to North America. I hope to address the question of putative African origins in a future study.

44 I am here using Bunseki’s orthographic conventions. In Laman’s *Dictionnaire kikongo-français*, the term is spelt differently, i.e., *byénza* ‘plaisanterie, propos joyeux; jeu, amusement, farce’. KIK. *byénza* is related to KIK. *ta byenza* ‘badiner en paroles’, and KIK. *byénza* (from KIK. *byé*) ‘faire du bruit, cliqueter (de manilles, etc.)’ (Laman 1964: 96). Somewhat surprisingly, Swartenbroeckx’s Kikongo dictionary (1973) – generally a most useful source – does not list the term.

45 *Nsosani* is rendered in Laman’s dictionary as *nzónzani*, *nzónzasani* (from *zónzasana*) ‘querelle intestine; qui se querelle’, which is related to KIK. *nzónza* or *nzónza* ‘paroles, propos, parlant, qui parle; querelle, procès’ and Kik. *nzónzi* (from *zónza* ‘quereller’) ‘querelleur, pers. qui cherche querelle; querelle, conflit; qui est querelleur’ (Laman 1964: 831). The segment *-asana* in KIK. *zónzasana* (*sónsasana*) ‘querelle intestine’ is a suffix of potentiality/mutuality in Kikongo, as in

| | | | | | |
|-------------|------------|---|-----------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|
| <i>sala</i> | ‘to work’ | → | <i>salasana</i> | potential of <i>sala</i> | ‘to help each other’ |
| <i>vova</i> | ‘to speak’ | → | <i>vovasana</i> | potential of <i>vova</i> | ‘to communicate mutually’. |

The original (literal) meaning of *nsosani* (*nzónza* ‘word, verbal dispute’ + *-asana*, with actor suffix *-i*) was thus ‘to dispute verbally with each other’, in other words, ‘to vociferate’ (Bunseki, personal communication; see also *āana* ‘suff. verbal indiquant une action mutuelle, réciproque, qui continue ou peut se reproduire plusieurs fois’ in Laman 1964: 4).

46 As Smitherman (1995: 20) noted, “the origin of the dozens, both the term and the game itself, remains debatable”. Schechter (1970) is among those who traces the dozens to Africa, when he points out that the Ashanti were often involved in verbal contests. Smitherman (1995: 20-21) too seems to believe that the most plausible theory retraces the game to the several cultures of Africa from which Black Americans came, thereby essentially following an idea put forth more than fifty years ago by Melville Herskovits (for references to this and other relevant publications, see Smitherman 1995: 21, nn 8-9).

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| Appendix | | | |
|---|--------|------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Anatomy of <i>snapping</i>, <i>VOCIFERACIÓN</i>, and <i>VACILADAS</i> from a comparative perspective | | | |
| | U.S.A. | PALENQUE (Colombia) | CHOTA (Ecuador) |
| 1. Snapping is given a local label or name (“Signifyin’”, “playing the dozens”, “puttin’ someone in the dozens”, “busting”, “slippin’”, “capping”, “crackin’”, “dissin’”, “joanin’”, “droppin’ lugs”, “soundin’”, “toastin’”, “burstin’”, “screamin’”, “baggin’”, “siggin’”, “cuttin’” etc.). | true | false | true <i>(vacilada, vacilar)</i> |
| 2. Snapping consists of the following two types of insults: a) Ritual (ludic) insults: These are done for their own sake; ritual insults are answered by other ritual insults. b) Applied (personal) insults: These are used for particular purposes in the midst of other verbal encounters; they are answered by denial, excuse, or mitigations (Labov 1974: 100, 106). | true | true | false (?) |
| 3. A (conscious or subconscious) differentiation exists between ritual (ludic) insults and applied (personal) insults. ⁴⁷ | true | true | true |

47 In the U.S., this has traditionally been the difference between “signifying” and “playing the dozens”. As Major notes: “*Signification* refers to talking negatively about somebody through stunning and clever verbal put-downs. This technique is gentler than the dozens and was more often used by children. The real aim of the dozens was to get a dude so mad that he’d cry or get mad enough to fight ... Signifying is more humane. Instead of coming down on somebody’s mother, you come down on them” (Majors 1994: 31). “As the dozens grew more integrated into the culture, the line between signifying and the dozens grew less defined” (Majors 1994: 32).

| | U.S.A. | PALENQUE (Colombia) | CHOTA (Ecuador) |
|---|--------|--|---|
| 4. Ritual insults predominantly focus the insults on a third person (i.e., the opponent's mother, father, uncle, grandmother, aunt, etc. [in order of importance]; Labov 1974: 96). | true | false (<i>vociferación</i> is focused mostly on addressee) | false (focused mostly on addressee) |
| 5. Group members have a well-formed competence to distinguish ritual (ludic) insults from applied (personal) insults. | true | true | true |
| 6. In ritual insults, "Your mama" is the ritualized primary target of offense. ⁴⁸ | true | false | false |
| Snapping has firm rules, including: ⁴⁹ | true | true | true |
| 7. Opponents are not allowed to touch each other (though threatening physical gestures may well be part of the game). | | | |
| 8. Use a referee (the audience). | true | true | true |
| 9. Snap in front of a crowd. | true | true | true |
| 10. Don't spit at opponent. | true | true | true |
| 11. Snapping is a matter of etiquette. True players do not show contempt or disrespect at any point in the game. And neither the winner nor the loser shows contempt once the score has been settled. | true | true | true |
| 12. Snapping is never intended as factual statement (Labov 1974: 105). | true | true | true |
| 13. The punch line is the key part of snapping. | true | true | true |

48 "Ironically, the focus on 'your mother' in so many snaps points to a reverence most contestants share for their mothers. In the dozens, this reverence is used as an emotional weapon." (Introduction to *Snaps* 1994: 22).

49 See "Snapping rules" in *Triple Snaps* (1996: 15).

| | U.S.A. | PALENQUE (Colombia) | CHOTA (Ecuador) |
|---|--------|------------------------|--------------------|
| 14. Snapping has a dual <i>expressive</i> and <i>pragmatic</i> function, i.e., it is used 1) to project the participant's personality onto the scene or to evoke a generally favorable response (Kochman 1968: 28, 34), and 2) to rob status from an opponent through an exercise of verbal power (Kochman 1968: 34). | true | true | true |
| 15. Snapping is an instrument used to manipulate and control people, and to get them to react to the manipulation (Kochman 1968: 2). | true | true | true |
| 16. Snapping is often taken up by an "opponent" not because s/he truly wishes to engage in it, but rather because no response at all would diminish the opponent's (superior social) power and his/her honor (and that of his/her in-group) (Kochman 1968: 32). ⁵⁰ | true | true | true |
| 17. Snapping is started by an initial "sounding remark" (addressed at the opponent) designed "to sound out the other person to see whether he will play the game" (Kochman 1968: 32). | true | true | true |
| 18. Changes in pitch, stress, and sometimes syntax often provide the opening signals for a snapping contest (Abrahams 1962: 211). | true | true | true |
| 19. Initial "sounding remarks" normally begin on a relatively low key, and are built up as the "game" progresses (Kochman 1968: 32). | true | true | true |

⁵⁰ Cp. also: "The function of the 'dozens' or 'sounding' is to borrow status from an opponent through an exercise of verbal power" (Kochman 1969: 34). As such, sounding is similar to the verbal dispute of *cursing*, in which an opponent may feel compelled to come out, particularly if the latter feels the "audience" is moving against him (or her), unless the opponent feels that he or she feels in a position to assert superior "class" status, or reputation for conduct (Gregersen 1974: 47).

| | U.S.A. | PALENQUE (Colombia) | CHOTA (Ecuador) |
|---|-----------|------------------------|--------------------|
| 20. Snapping is practiced most successfully when opponents build on previously uttered lines, thus interconnecting “offensive” arguments (Example: “Fuck you!” – [Retort] “you haven’t even kissed me yet!” (Kochman 1968: 33). | true | true | true |
| 21. Snapping refers to a way of encoding messages or meanings which involves, in most cases, an element of indirections (Mitchell-Kernan 1972: 315). | true | true | true |
| 22. Snapping is a dramatization of oneself to others. It is a fundamentally theatrical event in which one <i>shows off</i> . In personal snapping (applied insult), it may also be a genuine expression of feelings. | true | true | true |
| 23. Applied insult (type B snapping) may be humorous to the public, but is dead serious to the respective opponents. | true | true | -- |
| 24. When a line (“sound”) becomes too ordinary – too possible – it may be interpreted by the opponent as a “personal insult” (Labov 1974: 113). | true | true | true |
| 25. Snapping is not a recent invention (i.e., it has clearly been in use for at least 4-5 generations). ⁵¹ | true | true | true |
| 26. Snapping is felt to be a deep part of Black (local) culture and folklore. ⁵² | true | true | true |
| 27. Snapping has <i>traditionally</i> been used by Blacks only. | true | true | true |
| 28. Snapping is <i>currently</i> used by Blacks only. | no | true | true |

51 “The dozens existed literally in the *Oral* Tradition until the first known written documentation in 1891 ... Clearly, the dozens was widespread in early-twentieth-century Black culture” (Smitherman 1995: 22).

52 “I learned to play the dozens just by being black– it was culture” (Ice-T, in *Snaps* 1994: 16).

| | U.S.A. | PALENQUE (Colombia) | CHOTA (Ecuador) |
|---|--------------------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 29. Practitioners are aware that playing the dozens is part of a rich African-American tradition. | true (?) | false | false |
| 30. Snapping is recognized as a distinct speech genre. | true | true | true |
| 31. Snapping may be rhymed. | true | false | false |
| 32. Snapping can be carried out in more than one linguistic code (code-switching) | true (Black vs. standard English) | true (Spanish/Palenquero) | true (local vs. regional Spanish) |
| 33. In snapping, the words may seem rough but they are not taken literally. | true | true | true |
| 34. In snapping, apparent meaning serves as a key that directs hearers to some shared knowledge, attitudes, and values (Mitchell-Kernan 1972: 326). | yes | yes | yes |
| 35. Obscenity ⁵³ plays an important role in snapping. | true | true | true |
| 36. Snapping is considered decent (despite its generally rough and often vulgar language). ⁵⁴ | true | true | true |
| 37. Some people get offended by the spectacle of snapping. ⁵⁵ | true | false | true |
| 38. Absurdity plays an important role in snapping (Labov 1974: 104). | true | true | true |

53 But note Labov's observation: "Another striking feature of the content of sounds is that obscenity does not play as large a part as one would expect from the character of the original dozens. ... But it can be noted that the content [of many sounds] has departed very far from the original model of uniform sexual insult" (Labov 1974: 97, 98).

54 "I don't think it is indecent, I just think it's funny as hell, and dirty. Dirty doesn't have to be indecent. It's bawdy, it's terrible bawdy, and done with shocking power" (a pastor of a church, practitioner of *playing the dozens*) (*Snaps* 1994: 19).

55 "I know some women get offended by the game" (Ice-T, in Foreword to *Triple Snaps* 1996: 10).

| | U.S.A. | PALENQUE (Colombia) | CHOTA (Ecuador) |
|--|--------|------------------------|------------------------------|
| 39. No matter how emotionally charged the subject matter, the dozens is always located within the realm of play. Players and the audience readily recognize when extra-ludic transgressions occur (Smitherman 1995: 28). | true | true | true |
| 40. Snapping (signifying) is generally delivered with a definite purpose in mind (Mitchell-Kernan 1972). | true | true | true |
| 41. In snapping, the loser's pain is the winner's and the audience's joy. ⁵⁶ | true | true | true |
| 42. Talking fast and smooth and in an elevated tone are key ingredients for letting everyone know that you are neither scared nor vulnerable, and are definitely ready to face the verbal challenge. | true | true | true |
| 43. Snapping can in theory be practiced by anyone. In actuality it is exercised by a select few because it requires extraordinary verbal skills, creativity, humor, deep knowledge of local social customs and traditions. ^{57, 58, 59, 60} | true | true | true |
| 44. Children, adolescents, and young adults tend to engage in snapping far more often than older folks. | true | true | (adults do not seem to snap) |

56 "The real aim of the Dozens was to get a dude so mad that he'd cry or get mad enough to fight ..."
(Majors 1994: 30).

57 "Outsiders would of course be able to recognize ritual propositions P, but without the shared knowledge of members as to whose family was poor, which family was poorest, and which mother was blackest, the outsider could not as readily recognize a personal insult" (Labov 1974: 110).

58 "The bottom line is that there are a lot of people who wish they could do this, but they can't" (Ice-T, in Foreword to *Triple Snaps*, 1996: 12).

59 "To know about sounding in the abstract is not equivalent to being able to use that knowledge in the heat of interchange. The ingenuity and rapidity of sounding, and the great versatility of the contestants, demonstrates the high level of verbal skill in the black community" (Labov 1974: 116).

60 "[A]ll know that the themes treated [in snapping] are in general forbidden, some refuse to play the game and still others are very resentful and defensive at the mere thought of it" (Dollard 1939: 7).

| | U.S.A. | PALENQUE (Colombia) | CHOTA (Ecuador) |
|---|--------|------------------------|--------------------|
| 45. Snapping is acquired by youngsters as an activity in which they first learn a repertoire of standard one-liners (Kochman 1968: 33). | true | true | true |
| 46. Snapping is shunned by some because it is perceived as “dangerous”. ⁶¹ | true | true | (?) |
| 47. Snapping has long been a key determiner of social (group) rank. ⁶² | true | true | true |
| 48. Snapping requires an audience. ⁶³ | true | true | true |
| 49. Snapping is an essentially competitive activity which is evaluated immediately by the audience (Labov 1974: 84, 100). ⁶⁴ | true | true | true |
| 50. To the audience, snapping is ritualized entertainment. | true | true | true |

61 “But if you tried to go to ‘yo mamma’, some folk would tell you quick, “I laugh and kid, but I don’t play” (meaning, ‘I don’t play the dozens’)” (Smitherman 1995: 17).

62 “It can make you a star, make you feel a little esteem if you can be the cat who can outrank everybody” (*Snaps* 1994: 19). – “Because Africans in America play with and on the Word, good talkers become heroes and she-roes” (Smitherman 1995: 15).

63 “One of the most important differences between sounding and other speech events is that most sounds are evaluated overtly and immediately by the audience” (Labov 1974: 98). “The audience C is an essential ingredient here. It is true that one person *can* sound against another without a third person being present, but the presupposition that this is public behavior can easily be heard in the verbal style. Sounds are not uttered in a direct, face-to-face conversational mode. The voice is raised and projected, as if to reach an audience. In a two-person sounding situation, the antagonists treat each other as representing the audience” (Labov 1974: 110). “I used to call a crowd first, because it’s no fun when there are only one or two people watching” (*Snaps* 1994: 16). “There was always an audience while playing the dozens. You had to have it. It’s amazing about that behavior. The same person you *capped on* because other people were present, you would leave alone [as] soon as the audience left. It was no fun when there was no one there to respond” (*Snaps* 1994: 20). Cp. also: “The presence of a group seems to be especially compelling in controlling the game. ... Without the control of the group, ‘sounding’ will frequently lead to a fight” (Kochman 1969: 34). “It is the laughter, applause and the derision of the crowd which stirs the participants to ever renewed attempts to out-do the other in invective” (Dollard 1939: 11).

64 Furthermore, members take very sharp notice of the end result of a sounding context, as noted below. In a sounding session, everything is public – nothing significant happens without drawing comment. The rules and patterning of this particular speech event are therefore open for our inspection.

| | U.S.A. | PALENQUE (Colombia) | CHOTA (Ecuador) |
|--|--------|------------------------|--------------------|
| 51. Members of the audience are almost always (outwardly) clear who the better signifier is (Labov 1974: 100). | true | true | true |
| 52. “Oh shit” (<i>miedda</i> in Palenque), “phony shit!”, “that’s corny/weak/lame”, etc.) and similar evaluative comments are used by the audience to signal the effectiveness of a “sound” in snapping (Labov 1974: 99). | true | true | true |
| 53. Snapping is generally not interrupted by the audience except for evaluative comments. | true | true | true |
| 54. Snapping is practiced with the audience originally acting as a <i>neutral</i> entity (audience does not show predetermined favoritism towards either of the snapping parties); audience’s support rises and ebbs as the ritual fight progresses (momentary success may bring only momentary support!). | true | true | true |
| 55. In a two-person snapping situation, the antagonists treat each other as representing the audience” (Labov 1974: 110). | true | true | true |
| 56. Snapping is played with family or friends (never with a stranger). ^{65, 66, 67, 68, 69} Therefore it is the function of signaling social proximity, and everything that goes along with it (respect, affection, etc.). | true | true | true |

65 “Playing the dozens shows that we care about each other as friends” (*Snaps* 1994: 16, 19).

66 “... this traditional game of insults is virtually unknown outside the African-American community. Born out of a shared experience of pain and prejudice, the verbal repartee of the dozens remains almost a secret language” (*Snaps* 1994: 21).

67 “The dozens has some fairly sophisticated rules. A fundamental one is that players should be known to each other. Or if not familiar associates, they should at least share membership in and knowledge of the Black cultural context” (Smitherman 1995: 26).

68 “It’s a statement of friendship that I don’t think has ever been explained. You can’t play this game with your enemies. ... I can talk crazy and jump all over you when we’re snapping because of the closeness” (Ice-T, in Foreword to *Triple Snaps* 1996: 8).

69 “We talk shit because we are friends” (Ice-T, in Foreword to *Triple Snaps*, 1996: 9).

| | U.S.A. | PALENQUE (Colombia) | CHOTA (Ecuador) |
|---|--------|------------------------|--------------------|
| 57. Snapping is a mental challenge in which the wittiest is typically the winner. | true | true | true |
| 58. “The loser of a snap is the one who either backs down, runs out of snaps, or loses his cool, which occasionally results in a physical fight” (Majors 1994: 28). | true | true | true |
| 59. Snapping is practiced by male as well as female speakers, ⁷⁰ but is predominantly practiced ... | true | true | true |
| 60. within gender lines ⁷¹ | true | false | true |
| 61. same-sex settings only. | | | |
| 62. Snapping is more common among groups of males than females (Sommer 1980: 291; Mitchell-Kernan 1972: 316). | true | false | prob. false |
| Snapping is ... | | | |
| 63. normally carried out within set age groups, | true | true | true |
| 64. but has been moving down in the age range (now primarily an adolescent and pre-adolescent activity). ⁷² | true | false | true |
| 65. Today, adolescents play the dozens for entertainment and comedic value. | true | true | true |
| 66. Snapping has emerged in popular media (Majors 1994: 34). | true | false | false |

70 “I know some women who are among the best snappers out there. Some women can roll with the punches better than men. I know some women who are harder, have dirtier mouths, and will kill you quicker than a man” (Ice-T, in Foreword to *Triple Snaps* 1996: 10). An anonymous writer in *Snaps* contends that “historically the dozens has been a male experience, but increasingly women are playing” (*Snaps* 1994: 166). Whether this was historically indeed so remains to be investigated.

71 Traditionally, males and females only played in same-sex, intimate settings, without outsiders present (Smitherman 1995: 26; see also Dollard 1939: 14, 16). Abrahams (1962: 209) was of the opinion that, in Philadelphia, snapping was practiced almost exclusively in crowds of boys.

72 “There is a general impression that sounding is gradually moving down in the age range—it is now primarily an adolescent and pre-adolescent activity, and not practiced as much by young men twenty to thirty years old; but we have no exact information to support this notion” (Labov 1974: 86).

| | U.S.A. | PALENQUE (Colombia) | CHOTA (Ecuador) |
|--|--------|--|--------------------|
| 67. Snapping is not generally practiced between patently unequal opponents (the highly skilled do not snap against beginners). | true | true | true |
| 68. Snapping simultaneously requires maximum verbal aggression and utmost moderation (self-restraint once the opponent has been “killed off”). ⁷³ | true | true | true |
| 69. The style of snapping has evolved (earlier versions of the game were played in the form of rhymed couplets) ^{74, 75} (Majors 1994: 30). | true | false (was prob. never rhymed) | false |
| 70. Today’s snaps seem less reliant on the standard formulas and stock phrases that characterized earlier snaps (free-stylin’ is more common today) (Smitherman 1995: 32). | true | false | (?) |
| 71. One contemporary form of snapping is the stand-up comedy style that involves verbal dueling and one-line comedic insults (Majors 1994: 30). | true | false | false |
| 72. Snapping is a way to let off steam (Introduction to <i>Double Snaps</i> 1995: 8). | true | true | true |

73 “Snapping is pain ... You have to be at your worst to be the best at this game” (*Snaps* 1994: 19).

74 Example: Don’t talk about my mother ‘cause
you will make me mad.
Don’t forget how many your mother had.
She didn’t have one, she didn’t have two,
She had eight motherfuckers look
just like you (Majors 1994: 30).

75 “Back in the day, those who aimed for the highest level of mastery of the game insisted on a forth criterion: rhyming. If you could construct insults that were creatively exaggerated and were expressed in metaphorical language, on time, and with rhyme, you were in the top ten” (Smitherman 1995: 27). “The rhymed dozens are played apparently predominantly by children; all of my informants on rhyming happened to be from twelve to sixteen years old” (Dollard 1939: 7). Dollard (1939: 14) goes as far as saying that, in the big cities of the American South (1930s), “one thing was clear”, namely that “adults [did] not use the rhymes which are characteristic of adolescents” and that they depended rather on “directly improvised insults and curses” (1939: 14).

| | U.S.A. | PALENQUE (Colombia) | CHOTA (Ecuador) |
|---|--------|---|--------------------|
| 73. Snapping (type A ritual insult) is purely ceremonial, which creates a safety zone (Smitherman 1995: 16). | true | true | true |
| 74. In snapping, the audience often provides a running commentary repeating a really clever line (Smitherman 1995: 16, 19). ⁷⁶ | true | false | false |
| 75. In snapping, the audience keeps score primarily with its laughter and other responses, pushing the verbal duel to ever greater heights of oratorical fantasy. ⁷⁷ | true | true | true |
| 76. Snapping shows up in popular songs (Smitherman 1995: 23). | true | false | false |
| 77. Snapping occasionally shows up in religious (funeral) songs. ⁷⁸ | (?) | true | false |
| 78. Sex is commonly appropriated as a particularly comedic topic. ⁷⁹ | true | true, but less so than in U.S.A. | false (?) |
| 79. An obvious psychological element of snapping is the enjoyment of forbidden themes by the speaker and the crowd (Dollard 1939: 24). | true | true | true |
| 80. The term “kill” (Span. <i>matar</i>) is used to express that one snapper won one over another (cf. <i>he killed him</i>). ⁸⁰ | true | true | true |

76 See also Labov, who observes that “another, more forceful mode of approving sounds is to repeat the striking part of the sound itself” (Labov 1974: 98).

77 “The primary mark of a positive evaluation is laughter” (Labov 1974: 8).

78 As far as I have been able to determine, no source on Afro-American traditions mentions the use of *the dozens* in funeral songs.

79 “Sex themes are by far the most common, and they frequently relate to the female relatives of the challenged person” (Dollard 1939: 7). “Although practically any topic may be signified about, some topics are more likely to make the overall act of signifying more appreciated. Sex is one such topic” (Mitchell-Kernan 1972: 327).

80 “I know some women who ... will kill you quicker than a man” (Ice-T, in Foreword to *Triple Snaps*, 1995: 10). Cp. Palenquero Spanish *ya lo mató*, and Palenquero creole *ya a matá ele*, both meaning ‘s/he beat him/her [at the snapping game]’.

| | U.S.A. | PALENQUE (Colombia) | CHOTA (Ecuador) |
|---|--------|------------------------|--------------------|
| 81. In snapping, the ability with words is valued more highly than physical strength; that is, if a verbal opponent resorts to fighting to answer back a verbal attack, s/he is considered the loser (Kochman 1968: 33). | true | true | true |
| 82. Snapping is often kept in check by the audience, that is, the audience “controls” things so that the “sounding” practitioners will not enter into a (physical) fight (Kochman 1968: 34). | true | true | true |
| 83. Snaps sometimes have “disclaiming or retiring” first lines, with second lines which contradict them. Example: “I hate to talk about your mother, she’s a good old soul. She got a ten-ton pussy and a rubber asshole” (Labov 1974: 86). | true | false | false |
| 84. Snapping is predominantly “manufactured” in the heat of the contest (no heavy reliance on conventional lines) (Labov 1974: 86). This is especially true once signifying has gone past the initial stage of the opening challenge. ⁸¹ | true | true | true |
| 85. A snap is usually answered by another snap: once snapping is initiated, the game is played out to its end before the players switch to a different style or register (Labov 1974: 94). | true | true | true |

81 It should be noted though that “[m]ost sounds are repetitions or re-combinations of elements that have been used before. But it should be clear that sheer memory will not do the trick here, as it will with rhymed dozens. The reply must be appropriate, well-formed, it must build upon a specific model offered” (Labov 1974: 113).

| | U.S.A. | PALENQUE (Colombia) | CHOTA (Ecuador) |
|---|--------------|------------------------|--------------------|
| 86. Snapping is rarely if ever discussed post factum (snapping is <i>not</i> discussed in the abstract; it is only evaluated by the community as it happens). ⁸² | false | true | true |
| 87. Pre-adolescent practitioners – less well versed in the art of snapping – at times copy key sequences of “sounds”, as in: – <i>Your got funky drawers.</i> – <i>Your got funky pants.</i> Such repetition is normally considered ineffective, and artistically undesirable (cf. Labov 1974: 112). | true | true | true |
| 88. Triads (snapping amongst three people) are fairly common in snapping (Labov 1974: 114). | true | false | false |
| 89. The art of snapping rests to a considerable extent in the rapidity of the verbal interchanges (Labov 1974: 116). Put differently: even minor hesitation or pausing by a contestant tends to be interpreted as weakness. | true | true | true |
| 90. Snapping is practiced with an authoritative, projected voice ⁸³ (Labov 1974: 110). | true | true | true |
| 91. The loudness or intensity of the voice itself (rather than simply the meaning of a given phrase) can be a signal that a ritual insult is being initiated (Labov 1974: 110). | true | true | true |
| 92. Snapping is a learned behavior in which one takes pride. | true | true | true |

82 “In general, sounding is an activity very much in the forefront of social consciousness: members talk a great deal about it, try to make up new sounds themselves, and talk about each other’s success” (Labov 1974: 100).

83 It is important to note though that in the U.S.A as well as in Palenque, Cartagena, and the Chota, one does not need a loud voice to win a battle. As is pointed out correctly in the “Mastering the art of playing the dozens” (*Snaps* 1994: 161-167), what is important is that one be aware of what kind of voice one has, and use it to his or her advantage. A soft-spoken person, for instance, should not try to yell as the audience will misinterpret the straining of [the] voice as a sign that [the] opponent is landing his [or her] snaps effectively” (pp. 166-167).

| | U.S.A. | PALENQUE (Colombia) | CHOTA (Ecuador) |
|---|--------|------------------------|--------------------|
| 93. Spatial relations are always an important aspect of the game of snapping. ⁸⁴ | true | true | true |
| 94. Although traditionally restricted to in-group playing, the dozens has crossed over today, allowing for public play in front of outsiders and allowing for play by people who may not be intimately known to one another but who are true to the game (Smitherman 1995: 26). | true | false | (?) |
| 95. Mentioning dead relatives of either speaker is taboo in snapping (Dollard 1939: 5). | true | true | true |
| 96. Outsiders who observe applied (personal) snapping in most cases do not recognize the verbal behavior as something patterned but rather tend to think of it as extraordinarily intense interpersonal quarrelling (Dollard 1939: 7). | true | true | true |
| 97. In snapping, references must be processed metaphorically (Mitchell-Kernan 1972: 326). | yes | yes | yes |

84 “You may get as close as you want to your opponent without making physical contact. ...You can use distance to heighten the effect of a snap. ... When the snap is composed of words alone, closing in on your opponent may enhance the power of the attack” (*Snaps* 1994: 166).