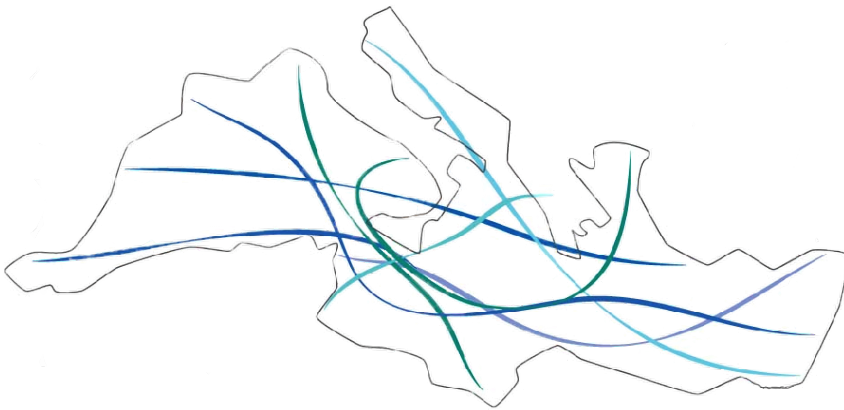


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*North African migration in the  
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## *North African migration in the Colombian Caribbean: political and commercial influence in the city of Barranquilla*

### Abstract

This article will analyse the influence of Arab migration in the Colombian Caribbean and in particular in the city of Barranquilla, a city that at the end of the 19th century constituted the main and only important sea and river port in the country, through which many migrants entered, including the first ones coming from the Mediterranean in North Africa to Colombian soil. Through a qualitative methodology based on secondary sources and corroborated with primary sources, this study will allow us to verify how this important and historical meeting of cultures has exerted a level of influence from the political and commercial point of view in the Colombian Caribbean and in particular in the city of Barranquilla, highlighting their forms of commercialisation, identity adaptation, roles, social ascent and their institutional political positioning. The purpose of this study is to critically unravel what this meeting of cultures has meant for the evolution or regression of the city of Barranquilla, to achieve this it is undoubtedly required to make a tour of the most important aspects of this cultural confluence, delve into its causes and effects. It will surely be enveloping to highlight the influential dynamics in commercial and political matters, their social contexts at the time of this encounter, as well as their significance and value for the country of origin and city of destination.

Keywords: Migration, North African, Colombian Caribbean, political-commercial influence, Barranquilla.

## *La inmigración de norte África en los Caribes colombianos: influencias políticas y comerciales en la ciudad de Barranquilla*

### Resumen

En este artículo se analizará la influencia de la migración árabe en el Caribe colombiano y en particular en la ciudad de Barranquilla, ciudad que a finales del siglo XIX constituía el principal y único puerto marítimo y fluvial importante del país, a través del cual ingresaron muchos migrantes, entre ellos los primeros provenientes del Mediterráneo en el norte de África a suelo colombiano. A través de una metodología cualitativa basada en fuentes secundarias y corroborada con fuentes primarias, este estudio nos permitirá comprobar cómo este importante e histórico encuentro de culturas ha ejercido un nivel de influencia desde el punto de vista político y comercial en el Caribe colombiano y en particular en la ciudad de Barranquilla, destacando sus formas de comercialización, adaptación identitaria, roles, ascenso social y su posicionamiento político institucional. El propósito de este estudio es desentrañar críticamente lo que ha significado este encuentro de culturas para la evolución o retroceso de la ciudad de Barranquilla, para lograrlo se requiere sin duda hacer un recorrido por los aspectos más importantes de esta confluencia cultural, ahondar en sus causas y efectos. Seguramente será envolvente resaltar las dinámicas influyentes en materia comercial y política, sus contextos

sociales en el momento de este encuentro, así como su significado y valor para el país de origen y la ciudad de destino.

Palabras clave: Migración, norteafricanos, Caribe colombiano, influencia político-comercial, Barranquilla.

### *L'immigrazione colombiana nei Caraibi colombiani: influenze politiche e culturali nella città di Barranquilla*

#### Sinossi

L'articolo analizza l'influenza della migrazione araba nei Caraibi colombiani e in particolare nella città di Barranquilla, che alla fine del XIX secolo costituiva il principale e unico porto marittimo e fluviale del Paese, attraverso il quale entrarono numerosi migranti, tra i quali i primi provenienti dal Nord Africa nel territorio colombiano. Attraverso una metodologia qualitativa basata su fonti secondarie e corroborata con fonti primarie, questo studio consentirà di provare come questo importante e storico incontro di culture ha esercitato un'influenza politica e commerciale nei Caraibi colombiani e in particolare a Barranquilla, dando avvio a processi di commercializzazione, adattamento identitario, ascesa sociale e posizionamento politico-istituzionale. Il proposito di questo studio è analizzare criticamente il significato di questo incontro di culture per la evoluzione di Barranquilla. A tale scopo si esamineranno gli aspetti più significativi di questa confluenza culturale, prestando attenzione alle cause e agli effetti e si metteranno in evidenza le dinamiche commerciali e politiche, il contesto sociale al momento dell'incontro, nonché il significato e il valore per il Paese di origine e la città di destinazione.

Parole chiave: Migrazioni, Nordafricani, Caraibi colombiani, influenza politico-commerciale, Barranquilla.

# *North African migration in the Colombian Caribbean: political and commercial influence in the city of Barranquilla*

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## *Introduction*

The phenomenon of migration has been the subject of studies and analysis from different perspectives and theoretical frameworks. Synthetically, in reference to classical theorisations, Smith and Malthus (cited in Gomez Walteros, 2010) considered emigration as something necessary for productive development, in such a way that they argue that it is important to allow the free “mobility of factors”, opposing governments to restrict and penalise the mobility of people because the right to welfare is what they seek. In particular, Smith refers to emigration “as part of the individual's choice in the exercise of his individual liberties”, in the same way other thinkers coincide in their approach “by the motivation of wage differentials”, “by population growth, understood for this case as overpopulation (Malthus)”, “by substitution of economic activities” according to (Marx)<sup>1</sup>, and as a search for welfare (Smith), and as a search of welfare (Marx). and as a search for welfare (Smith, Malthus). In this respect, Malthus adds that, although migration can be beneficial in the short term for welfare, the problems of population explosion in the long term must be taken into account. Similarly, Stuart Mill, who from his perspective sees migration as a

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx was “unconvinced of the free market and argued that the migration of people was largely due to the accumulation of capital and the concentration of rural property in the hands of the new landowners, as well as to economic and political dependence and competitive inferiority vis-à-vis an external power. This is how he puts it in the first volume of Capital when he talks about the expulsion of the Irish from their lands to the United States, in the face of the advance of cattle raising by the English” (Gomez Walteros, 2010).

vital opportunity to expand colonialism, considered that the state should intervene in the migration process and finance it<sup>2</sup>. In the Austrian school we also highlight Hayek's emphasis on the importance of tolerance towards migrants, the diversity that is generated being appropriate for productivity, eliminating border barriers, promoting competition and trade, and the success of population growth. It is also interesting to mention Ravenstein's approach, who focuses on the reasons for the attraction of the host country. Neoclassical theorists base their view on the criterion that international migration and its origins are “economic in nature and its causes are to be sought in the wage differential between countries, reflected in the level of income as well as in the disparities in social welfare”, and that the decision to migrate is based on a “rational choice”, to obtain or expect maximum returns and profits. In this sense, for example, according to Lewis (1954, cited in Gomez Walteros, 2010), workers migrate from the primary to the industrial sector because of wage differentials. This explanation can be extended to the field of international migration. According to “the individual decision approach (Todaro, 1969, cited in Gomez Walteros, 2010) the individual decision to migrate is part of an “economic rationality” choice and Sjaastad (1962, cited in Gomez Walteros, 2010) adds that this “migration constitutes an investment of human capital”. Despite the absence of a single theory on migration, but of a set of theories anchored to the limits and specificities of the macro area in which they are inserted, in recent years the phenomenon of migration has been observed according to new and interesting visions. In this perspective, we find, for example, the most recent analyses that focus on the potential of sport as a means to develop intercultural dialogue and integration of migrants,

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<sup>2</sup> John Stuart Mill (1978) “believed that emigration was an important opportunity to expand the scope of colonialism and advocated state intervention to ensure the proper direction of migratory flows and, therefore, should be committed to their financing. To undertake this task, he outlined a series of formulas, as he saw emigration as a profitable activity for the country as a whole, as well as guaranteeing the colonialist country natural resources and the opportunity to make investments taking advantage of its advantages”. International migration: theories and approaches, a current look (Gomez Walteros, 2010).

thus betting on the creation of more inclusive societies (Fonzo, 2019; D'Angelo, 2019). This synthetic premise represents an interesting basis for the purposes of analysing the case study presented in this essay, since it will often observe the interaction and interconnection of the different items considered by the aforementioned schools of thought, and, simultaneously, it allows us to highlight more precisely the socio-political perspective through which we will approach the evaluation of these items. More specifically, our aim is to provide a reading of the North African migratory flow towards the Colombian Caribbean that goes beyond the numbers and that rather allows us to focus on the historical-political events, the socio-cultural life praxis, and the economic-institutional influence. Clearly, it is a reading from which different aspects of the same phenomenon can be glimpsed, linked by a relationship of complementarity, and which is fully expressed in what is underlined by Mangone (2015, p. 7), who stresses that “migratory flows cannot be avoided, nor can they be enclosed in a material sphere (...) the 'place' becomes the social structure through which people can acquire the necessary strength to overcome the trauma of abandoning their country of origin”. Over the centuries, societies have been characterised by profound transformations stemming from new socio-political and cultural conflicts linked to migration, which therefore become a scenario that requires a clear vision, in which the image of the migrant is a two-way process, in which the social representation of the migrant and immaterial resources are fundamental (Mangone, 2018). Undoubtedly, these types of analysis lead to bilateral evaluations, i.e., on the one hand, a narrative that may reflect national governmental interests, and thus influence the decision of policy makers, but on the other hand, open a significant margin for reflection on the gap between the values and visions of the society of origin and the society of destination, or rather, on the identification of the actions and strategies that the migrant will implement to integrate but simultaneously maintain his or her differential element, in a constant tension between inclusion and linkage with one's own roots. A tension that is condensed in an “incontro, 'disincontro', e scontro” (D'Angelo, 2009), and that flows between hopes, nostalgia, exclusion, integration, for which a multicultural and respectful dialogue of differences remains

fundamental, allowing harmonisation of all the elements - cultural, identity, economic, social etc. - that compose it.

### *1. The North African migratory flow to the Colombian Caribbean: the arrival in Barranquilla*

“The years have passed. I have not returned and I don't think I will ever return to Barranquilla. Nobody around me even knows its name. When they ask me what it is like, I limit myself to saying that it is next to a river, very close to the sea” (Moreno,1987).

Barranquilla, a city located in the continental Caribbean of Colombia, which at the end of the 19th century constituted the main and only important sea and river port in the country, was the reception channel for the first emigrants from the Mediterranean. The construction of a port “without a bay, which nevertheless grew” (Posada Carbó, 1987), increased the relevance of the city of Barranquilla, particularly in terms of commercial movements, since its urban and architectural conditions did not offer the best amenities as a city. Pierre d' Espagnat, traveller, defined Barranquilla as “The true modern South American city, vulgar and too young, concerned only with trade, industries, maritime relations, created by the force of necessity under the economic pressure of the rich country that flows into it” (Posada Carbó, 1987, p 13). Likewise, the French scholar Eliseo Reclus defined the city as “the true commercial capital of the state of Bolivar<sup>3</sup>. to which migrations came to “a natural port that developed on the banks of the most important river artery of Colombia, access to the Caribbean Sea” (Robinson, quoted in Posada Carbó, 1987). It is precisely in this sense that the narration of the Barranquilla writer Palacios is significant:

Barranquilla has always had a rare privilege: that of having not only the love or the consecration of those who were born there, but also of those who came there to pitch their tent. The “barranquillero” is not selfish, he does not look with suspicion and distrust to anyone. The “Mister” was never looked down upon by the

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<sup>3</sup> Reclus refers to the Federal State of Bolivar, which was part of the United States of Colombia and which had been constituted between 1857 and 1885.



people of Barranquilla with disdain and even less with disgust because he had blue eyes and blond hair. The city absorbed and assimilated North Americans, English, Germans, Italians, Spaniards, Venezuelans, Jews, and even the Syrian migration that began to arrive at the beginning of the century, Barranquilla has been benevolent and welcoming. All the foreign colonies have been able to reciprocate such a cordial welcome. (Villalon 2008).

In general, it is considered that after the Spanish colonisation, one of the most important migrations in terms of their migratory flow in Colombia were the “Arabs”. Since the 15th century, the meeting of two cultural worlds between the old continent and what was called the new continent (European and native) led to relations of obedience, enslavement, humiliation and progressive extinction of the indigenous culture (De Josep, 2019); however, in comparison with the European presence, the “Arabs” entered these lands almost in a “timid” or “low profile” manner. They were labelled indistinctly as “Turks” by their passports, but their nationality came from Middle Eastern territories such as Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Jordan, territories that at that time (XVI- XIX) were under the political domination of the Turkish-Ottoman Empire (Wabgou, Carabali, Vargas, 2011). The conquest of Constantinople by the Turks in 1453 marked a path of domination extending to territories in Asia Minor, parts of Eastern Europe and control of power over Syria, Lebanon and Palestine. For more than three centuries approximately without interruptions in the dominant power which, although it was besieged by attempts to overthrow it by France and Egypt with ups and downs of defeats and reconquests, was maintained “from the beginning of the 16th century until the end of the First World War” (Viloria, 2003). Fractures and deterioration of relations generated all these wars, in such a way that it fuelled clashes between Maronite and Druze Christians, deepening discord between these communities, violence, persecution and destruction of villages, which forced many to abandon their territories.

According to other estimates, the massacre cost the lives of some sixteen thousand Christians, of whom eleven thousand died in Lebanon and another five thousand in Syria. The above elements show a chain of events from the 1840s onwards, politically, economically, socially and religiously, that triggered the first wave of

Syrian, Lebanese and Palestinian migration from the 1860s, and then massively from the 1880s onwards (Viloria, 2003).

The state of precariousness and crisis generated by the outrages suffered<sup>4</sup> by “their political manoeuvres to keep the Syrian-Lebanese people in ignorance and illiteracy” (Wabgou, Carabali, Vargas, 2011), constituted one of the main reasons for this migration to the Americas, including also that by 1914, the First World War broke out and the Ottoman Turks forced young men to do military service and take on battle fronts<sup>5</sup>. The arrival of the Arabs to the Colombian territory, had as an entrance the city of Barranquilla, a city that due to its strategic location allowed subsistence advantages to many population groups of the past, due to its conditions in its ecosystems, both coastal and fluvial, typical of the characteristics of the lowlands of the northern Caribbean of Colombia. During the Spanish colonisation, it was not considered of relevant importance as a place like Cartagena and Santa Marta, where the colony established a city. It seems to have been a place of low control by the Spanish colony, which allowed it to be a refuge for many mestizos, mulattos, zambos and indigenous people who survived the extermination and displacement, which is why its origin

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<sup>4</sup> The conflicts in the Middle East have had historical constants (Aguado, Vazques, 2019) and have continued at different times to expel Eastern immigrants: “People do not know what it is to be an immigrant or displaced person until they have experienced it. My parents had no other alternatives. Education in Lebanon was for the privileged and my father was a sheikh and was dedicated to religion. There were few resources and it was difficult to go to university because we were eight siblings. As the war was starting, we only had the alternative of joining the army or emigrating. Since there were no job opportunities, my parents decided to support me; it was hard for them, but they preferred that I not fight in a crazy war. An absurd war that they called religious, when in fact it was political. The French divided Lebanon and in each sector a different religion was practised. Fortunately, in the Bekaa Valley, where we are from, the war did not survive because my father and other priests of different religions united and prevented the arrival of the enemy’, interview with Talel Cassem Karawi, Syrian consul (Karawi, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> “At that time, when a young man was conscripted, his relatives cried for him, as if he were dying. The service had no time limit and was also cruel” (Behaine, 1989, quoted in Viloria, 2003). To avoid conscription of their sons, Arab-Christian families paid the Ottoman authorities in money or in kind, such as olive or cedar wood, which had great commercial value. But when these families could not afford to evade military service, the only way out was emigration, sending their young men on an adventure to America” (Yidi, 2003 interview cited in Viloria, 2003).

was spontaneous, far from the “control” of the Spanish jurisdiction and configured in its own way as a settlement that was mostly of neighbours and legally free people (Villalón, 2008). The independence period favoured pressure from a group of progressive traders, who took on the challenge of overcoming the lags that Colombia was lagging behind other countries in the region in terms of opening up to foreign trade. It was precisely these traders put the authorities of the time in a dilemma regarding the adoption of free export policies, especially for products from agricultural economies, or the creation of an independent industry with a policy of protection against external competition; a fundamental decision was forced to be taken (Fischer, 1997). In this sense, the free trade policies that took place at the beginning of the construction of the republic undoubtedly favoured Barranquilla, opening up international trade in the bay of Sabanilla<sup>6</sup>.

The first wave of immigrants from Syria and Lebanon encountered a population that seemed to have many things in common bringing an influence from Europe, as subjects of the French empire, and although some of the migrants practised the Islamic religion, the vast majority were former Muslim converts or Maronite Catholic Christians, and thus “found it relatively easy to become accustomed to Catholic religious beliefs” (Karawi, 2010, p. 14) in a deeply Catholic country, which was in the midst of the crucial debate on secularisation<sup>7</sup>. At that time Colombia was in search of reaffirmation of its recognition as a republic, but that was as far as it went, because the essence of civilisation was still colonial in its praxis. In any case, the American continent became a destination for this

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<sup>6</sup> “Since 1829, Sabanilla, a fishing village located in a bay barely 10 miles from Barranquilla, had officially opened up to the export trade. In a few years, Sabanilla's exports surpassed those of Cartagena, the traditional port of the Colombian Caribbean, which was already in decline, in contrast to the recent boom of Santa Marta, which was now joined by Sabanilla” (Posada, 1987, p.17).

<sup>7</sup> According to Álvaro Tirado Arciniegas (2021): “The secularisation of the country has been an aspect that was addressed in 1850, which sought the configuration of a secular state, breaking the historical legacy of influence on power by an official religion, which in the Colombian case is Catholicism. This reform, which was called the mid-19th century reform, sought to separate religion from state affairs, but this issue was not resolved; on the other hand, this reform also sought to overcome the colonial condition that still survived in New Granada”.

ethnic group, either by attraction to some countries, or by chance and error<sup>8</sup>, in a period in the world of migration that some have called “the golden century of relevant<sup>9</sup> inter-oceanic migratory movements”. It is worth noting that although there were macro-social factors that give greater importance to the reasons for this migration-immigration in its socio-economic and political aspects, we could also have other understandings of these immigration processes, through other perspectives given the labyrinthine and multidimensional nature of these phenomena. In Colombia, the Arabs arrived in different migratory flows, which can be synthesised in at least three different moments<sup>10</sup> and in different social and political contexts, perhaps motivated by the purpose of better welfare and

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<sup>8</sup> According to Wabgou, Carabali, Vargas (2011, no p.) “Many of these vendors arrived with the intention of “doing the Americas”, that is, working for about six months and then returning to the East with their earnings. Others arrived by chance; that is, they arrived by mistake, since many times, those heading to the United States or Argentina thought they had reached the end of the journey and got off the boat before realising their mistake”.

<sup>9</sup> “The golden century of significant inter-oceanic migratory movements is considered the one between 1814 and 1914. During that time, more than 60 million migrants moved from their places of origin to seek greater opportunities in life” (Karawi, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Fawcett De Posada (1991): “The first arrivals of identified Syrian-Lebanese immigrants date from the 1880s. Among the first to arrive were the Marun brothers from Lebanon, Meluk and Rumie from Damascus and Muvdi from Betjala, generally shopkeepers who advertised their wares in the local press, they were young single men, distributed mainly along the Caribbean coast and cities such as Bogota and Cali. They were mainly engaged in trade (Buhoneros)”. Sadya Karawi (2010): “The first Arabs who arrived in Colombia were Christians or Orthodox who lived in the territory of the Ottoman Empire, economic reasons were the main cause for their emigration”. The second wave occurred roughly between the two world wars. In this period, it is important to mention the economic rise of the Syrian-Lebanese in Colombia. As they settled here, “aid chains” developed to maintain their businesses. These consisted of sending money or a ticket for a family member to travel to Colombia and, at the same time, this relative would take care of the business upon arrival. Those who emigrated by their own means found fellow countrymen living in Colombia, which facilitated their integration and adaptation. Between 1945 and 1950, a new wave of migration began and continues to this day as a result of the complex situation in each of the countries of emigration. In Lebanon, conflicts arose in connection with the Syrian government's invasion. Syria was singled out as a country of the “evil empire”. Palestine, on the other hand, presents a difficult situation for its citizens: they have had to deal with Israel's constant invasion and pressure since the mid-20th century.

better life opportunities, the commercial dynamics being carried out in a port called Sabanilla, defined, in the words of the traveller Professor Issac Holton, “the most insignificant town” he had seen in New Granada (Posada Carbó, 1997, p. 18). Between 1853 and 1857 Barranquilla was to play a crucial role, breaking a kind of blockade of communication with the world that had not been possible during the colonial period. From then on, the city began a struggle to become the most important port for imports and exports. The export of raw materials of all kinds of forestry wealth and plants for the European pharmaceutical industry, perfumery, medicines, alligator skins, cattle skins, medicinal flora and plants and others used for dyeing fabrics began. From the last 30 years of the 19th century, Barranquilla became a port and developed an interesting dynamism of communication and trade with the world. It was in this context of commercial drive that the Arab presence took place, but it should be noted that it was also a context in which there was no institutional regulatory framework to enable rapid integration into the new territory:

The Syrian-Lebanese also had to face at times a particularly hostile environment in some official circles, as in the case of the impediments to entry into the country by the port of Cartagena in 1913 and in the late 1920s the increasing policies of placing restrictions on Syrian-Lebanese immigration, following in part the example of the United States where, through the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, a quota system was established for immigrants of certain origins, including Syrian-Lebanese (Fawcett De Posada & Posada Carbó, 1992, p. 6).

If we would like to return briefly to the theorisations summarised in the preceding section, and restricting our gaze to more specific theories on migration, we dare to consider, with reference to the context surrounding these first Arab emigrants, an approach that may be more widely accepted, namely the “push and pull” theories, which describes factors of expulsion from the place of origin due to the conditions of indignity experienced by migrant populations from a social, economic and political point of view, and factors of attraction due to the advantages that the place of destination may offer in contrast, with the understanding that these circumstances are causal factors that define the dimension and direction of migratory flows (Lacomba, 2001). In fact, with reference to our

case study, if we look at the factors of attraction, at first glance we can invoke mainly economic motivations, since the new continent represented a place of convenience. In this perspective, “many of these newly arrived Syrians, Lebanese and Palestinians arrived in the coastal lands and opened their businesses there. They settled mainly on the northern coast of the country, and then arrived in cities such as Cali and Bogotá, and when they began to earn money, they brought wives from their countries of origin. Only a few of them married Colombian women” (Karawy, 2010, p. 13). However, the limitations of this approach have led to the search for other theoretical and methodological speculations which, in our opinion, are complementary when interpreting migration. In this sense, it is appropriate to take up the multiplicity of conceptual approaches that consider structural aspects from the macro to the micro, individualisation, the family and social networks<sup>11</sup>. In this aspect are inserted factors that from the macro point of view influenced the decision of the Arabs to emigrate that refer us to the socio-political conditions previously mentioned that many families lived in the country of origin linked to the historical constants of political and religious conflicts, but also the support networks established by relatives in the places of destination<sup>12</sup>, finding work options by the families that were already established in Barranquilla and other cities of the country. In addition, the decision to emigrate was most likely supported by age, as many of the emigrants were young and social

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<sup>11</sup> Joan Lacomba (2001, 38). “As Charles Wood describes them, “they have drawn on survey-based methodologies and ethnographic studies and have adopted conceptual approaches that pay as much attention to structural contexts (global, regional and local) as to individual behaviour, family organisation and social networks”.

<sup>12</sup> “Once the immigration process began, the transit of Syrian-Lebanese to Colombia was facilitated by the existence of a network of relatives and friends. Through these ties of fraternity, for example, Elías Saer Kayata found immediate hospitality and work. After his arrival in Barranquilla in 1924, the help of a policeman led him to the warehouse of the Palestinian immigrant Elías Muvdi, who, on his arrival, took him to the Victoria Hotel, “owned by an Arab called Chamie”. The next day, Saer Kayata took the steamer to Calamar, where his relative Bechara Saker was waiting for him and accompanied him on the train to Cartagena. In Cartagena he stayed with the Chagui family, and from there he continued to Cereté, where he stayed for three months with an aunt before opening the store in Ciénaga de Oro” (Fawcett De Posada & Posada Carbó, 1992, p.14).

networks were often established through colony organisations, clubs and cultural<sup>13</sup> centres. In addition to these macro-factors, it is also important to highlight the micro-level variables, which are identified in the condition of an open, receptive and hospitable city, which facilitated access to Caribbean culture. The process of immersion by the Arabs in a new culture, and taking into account their vocation as traders, involves the detachment of some aspects of their own culture in order to enable a level of adaptation and intercultural integration. In this sense, for example, their typical clothing disappeared from the immigrants' wardrobe, or the learning of the language, which was a priority because it allowed them to survive, so much so that the new generations born in the new continent lost the Arabic language, and, unlike previous generations, many married Colombian<sup>14</sup> women. Another important factor was their ability to adapt very quickly to their new environment, often because of their open and generous attitude to share their tastes, in this case for food, and their hospitality. Evidently, the phenomenon of Syrian-Lebanese immigration coincided with a period of booming global economic growth and the opening up of the country's economy during that period, which provided the objective circumstances for the implementation of an "outward" economic development model. At that time, Barranquilla offered advantages and opportunities, since the articulation of its market (initiating the implementation of industrial sectors and transport) allowed the Syrian-Lebanese to develop all their assets and recognised commercial experience, and, as will be discussed in the following section, to integrate into cultural and political life. Indeed, "as in politics, in commerce, industry, agriculture and services, the Syrian-Lebanese found in Colombia the dream of every immigrant: opportunities" (Fawcett De Posada & Posada Carbó, 1992).

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<sup>13</sup> One of the mechanisms of dissemination of their culture and interaction with Colombian culture was the establishment of clubs and organisations, and also through publications" (Yidi, 2012, p.1).

<sup>14</sup> "At least one in six of the Arab parents registered in the Mattar directory in 1945 was married to a Colombian" (Fawcett De Posada & Posada Carbó, 1992, p.14).

## *2. Commercial dynamism, cultural integration and the socio-political rise of migrants.*

Elías Saer Kayata, an emigrant who had survived the tyranny of the Ottoman Empire, on arriving in Colombia and finding a less hostile scenario, with a newly born and albeit imperfect democratic system, acquired a special significance for him, since “we knew that we would be moving away from foreign domination and going to a country where there was ... freedom” It is considered a migratory group that managed to adapt due to their open vocation towards the receiving society of Barranquilla, perhaps because of their love of commerce, which allowed them a wide range of exchanges as they got to know each other. Precisely in reference to this interpenetration, we highlight the mixture of tastes and influences that these migrants have left us in gastronomy<sup>15</sup>, but also in architecture and in the names of buildings and landmarks (cfr. Yidi-Stevenson, 2018). Undoubtedly, when these emigrants arrived, they found a weakly cohesive Colombian society as a result of the tensions inherent in the civil wars of the federal states. However, Barranquilla and a large part of the Caribbean coast offered other conditions that made a more peaceful life possible, precisely because of what the sociologist Orlando Falsh Borda in his cultural interpretation of the Caribbean coast has called the “peaceful ethos” of the Caribbean man<sup>16</sup>. Since then, the Syrian-Lebanese, given their pre-eminent fondness and preference for trade and “their diffuse pattern of territorial settlement” which is made possible according to the accessibility of business, found an ideal place to settle mainly

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<sup>15</sup> An example of an Arab dish that is well known and popular is the quibbes or kibbes, a croquette made of wheat dough mixed with ground meat, stuffed inside with ground meat mixed with ground onion, hot pepper to taste and ground nuts. They are fried, roasted or baked.

<sup>16</sup> Although the civil wars of the 19th century in Colombia have been widely studied from different perspectives, the subject has been practically unexplored in the north of the country. This is mainly due to three reasons: first, because the analysts who initially approached the subject approached it from a sociological point of view or guided by a certain geographical determinism, which led them to suggest the historical existence on the coast of a supposedly peaceful ethos, that was based on the natural condition of the Caribbean man for embracing freedom and being tolerant and anti-violent” (Alvarez, 2014, p.531).



in Barranquilla and expand throughout the rest of the Colombian Caribbean. As a priority, “the Syrian-Lebanese were thus a fundamental driving force in the strengthening of the national market while they participated, and with good success, in the enormous opportunities offered during those years by economic expansion to non-traditional social groups” (Fawcett De Posada-Posada Carbó, 1992, p. 21).

The main commercial interest kept them away from political conflicts in the early days, so much so that “it was even argued that the “portentous secret of the fortunes of Syrians and other foreigners in Colombia” was the security they could enjoy away from the political conflicts that, in turn, decimated the Colombian economy. Indeed, the anecdote of Elías Zureck, who apparently managed to get rich by selling goods to both the government and the insurgents during the Thousand Days War” (Fawcett De Posada & Posada Carbó, 1992, p. 18)

The “prosperity due”<sup>17</sup> was underway, the beginning of a good economic success that was building a social ascent in Barranquilla - as well as in other cities and municipalities of the Caribbean -, they were incorporated into the local elites, facilitated in this by the permeability of these, which did not have more traditional consistency. As they achieved economic success - in particular through their participation in trade organisations such as the Chambers of Commerce - they simultaneously constituted their own spaces of social and cultural representation, such as the “Unión Siria”<sup>18</sup> (Villalón, 2008), which was set up to promote the mutual assistance of its associated members. It is worth noting that their commercial strengthening was consolidated through the

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<sup>17</sup> A phrase by Alfonso Lopez Pumarejo, referring to a kind of bonanza that the country experienced in the 1920s, which sought an expansion of public spending based on the compensation given to Colombia for the surrender or theft of Panama, accompanied by an international loan. In this respect, Alejandro Lopez, in agreement with and inspired by this phrase of Lopez Pumarejo, coined it to his protest against the control exercised by emigrants in national trade and expressed “Everything, everything is foreign in Colombia”.

<sup>18</sup> The Syrian Union was made up of several people, among them the Lebanese Juliam Chams, who married Isabel Eljach, also an immigrant. They had three children, William, Alicia and Olga, born in 1922 and currently the most important poet of the 20th century in Barranquilla, known by the pseudonym of Meira Delmar.

implementation of businesses in many remote places of the national geography, far from the urban centres of power where social position mattered little in the face of seduction and commercial success, but with the clarity that their ascent and social positioning depended in a strange country, on their accumulation and economic success “these immigrants made their economic consolidation the central element to break the social barriers and racial stigmas that weighed on them” (Rhenals, 2018). Thus were established, among others, the Sociedad Siria de Beneficencia de El Banco (1929), the Unión Libanesa de Beneficencia in Barranquilla (1934) and the Unión Libanesa-Siria in Cali (1935)” (Posada Carbó, 1991, p. 15). It is worth noting that their commercial strengthening was consolidated through the implementation of businesses in many remote places of the national geography, far from the urban centres of power where social position mattered little in the face of seduction and commercial success, but with the clarity that their ascent and social positioning depended in a strange country, on their accumulation and economic success “these immigrants made their economic consolidation the central element to break the social barriers and racial stigmas that weighed on them” (Rhenals, 2018).

They established new trade practices through the implementation of sales on credit “they implemented personal credit: they went from house to house and from village to village selling cloths, fabrics, combs, jewelry, mirrors and perfumes”. Commercial relations enabled them to learn our culture and in particular the Spanish language, they were industrious, good savers and austere in their spending, which is why they gained the reputation of being “stingy”<sup>19</sup>, and they consolidated their economic power in Spain. They were consolidating their economic power in the city and the country and were incorporated in different axes of the economy, such as transport, clothing stores, buying and selling, real estate mortgages, loans, industries, in short, their level of commercial influence was connected in different areas of the local and national economy. Such was the power they gained that they began to generate outbreaks of discontent with a kind of economic monopoly that was being exercised by this immigrant population. In this

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<sup>19</sup> Resisting or reluctant to give or spend, but also applies to their status as usurers of interest on loans; moneylenders.

respect, there is some research and writings that provide information on the origins of the fortunes of the Arabs in Colombia and their commercial practices, in an interview with Professor Álvaro Antonio Tirado Arciniegas:

But there is a text-book: “La orientalización del comercio Colombiano (Author book: Zuares Aeser),” which warns how these orientals, so he called them, are becoming the most important land of the main municipalities of Colombia, the author points out that these foreigners entered the trade and broke the structures of trade that existed and where he warns about some dangers for trade, because trade before this competition or novelty was an absolutely elitist trade that despised the majority, it was only a trade for the wealthy, so when the Arabs arrived here we called them “Turks” because of their passports, says the author, the people acquired goods that were only for the exclusive sectors (silk, perfumes, etc.) and the most striking thing is that it was only a trade for the wealthy, so when the Arabs arrived here we called them “Turks” because of their passports, says the author. ) and the most striking thing is that they acquired them on credit, and in this way the capital of these Arab lords grew. These Arab traders, as they consolidate, he warns, are buying up the centres of the municipalities and departmental capitals, an aspect that he sees as a danger.

In the same vein, other literature shares some reflections on the subject and in this case refers to land grabbing, based on the analysis of what was a policy implemented by the Colombian government with the aim of improving the country's economic development and at the same time promoting immigration, the “colonisation of land considered as wasteland by the nation”<sup>20</sup> was stimulated. These lands were granted to nationals and foreigners, an aspect that generated a series of conflicts due to the demands that arose throughout the country “for the titling and appropriation of land and vacant lots by both large entrepreneurs and small settlers” (Rhenals, 2018).

Some Syrian-Lebanese immigrants were involved in land grabbing in this case of rural land, as Rhenals<sup>21</sup> points out, relying on the

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<sup>20</sup> According to the State, these were uncultivated lands, belonging to the nation, suitable for agricultural and/or livestock exploitation.

<sup>21</sup> The Syrian-Lebanese were no strangers to this reality. One of the first forms of land grabbing used by these immigrants was to extend their properties by enclosing the territories near the marshes. According to Orlando Fals Borda, one of the researchers who has most studied the conflicts surrounding the possession and accumulation of land in the Sinú area, the Syrian immigrant Miguel Calume was

measures established by the government in a legal manner, but the access to property was not legal, the author illustrates the different practices and undue strategies that were used to illegally obtain these lands and the use of them. While there was a process of economic ascent that was linked to experienced commercial ability, a vocation for thrift, austerity, support among their family networks, and innovation in business methods, it is also clear that there was a practice of careerism that bordered on illegality in their business dealings.

In the experience of Barranquilla they end up dominating the trade and in the present they continue to dominate it, from the economic and political consolidation of the first and second generation coming for the case of the Lebanese from cities such as: “Zable, Akkar, Tripoli, Batel, Beirut, Jarlein and Miniara; the Palestinians came from Bethlehem and Betjala, as well as the Syrians from Damascus” (Igirio-Gamero, 2008), had a low cultural level with respect to their schooling, were mainly traders engaged in street vending (hawkers), farmers and jewellers, but in general had a command of languages other than Arabic, such as Italian and French, perhaps inherited from the processes of colonisation and protectorate that these countries exercised in those territories. Mostly young people<sup>22</sup> were located in

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involved in this activity. Fals points out that Calume accumulated at least 1,200 hectares of land, as a result of land grabbing on vacant land and land adjacent to the marshes, which was destined for agriculture and livestock farming. In the Sinú province, in addition to Calume, there were Ángel Manzur and Barbara Issac, who were denounced for hoarding and fencing off large tracts of land. The complaint established the formal claim for abuses against the settlers committed by the aforementioned Syrians, since “[...] they have usurped a large amount of land, hills, beaches, marshes, alluvium and palm groves, which they have fenced with wire; some of which were dedicated to natural pastures for livestock and others to agriculture. This led a group of 40 citizens to file a complaint to the Ministry of Industry, declaring themselves directly affected by the illegal land grabbing, and demanding that the rights of national farmers and settlers be protected against the abuse of the Syrian-Lebanese immigrants.

<sup>22</sup> Most of them were young, adventurous, risk-taking bachelors who were fleeing the war, the constant mistreatment and plundering committed by the Ottoman Empire “Turks “17 and the ignorance to which they subjected their population in order to exercise total control over them, as well as to “escape from the bad political, social and economic situation caused by the different wars and conflicts that had taken place in the Middle East” (Vargas, 2007, cited in Gamero, 2008).

the San Roque<sup>23</sup> neighbourhood, the centre of downtown Barranquilla, others spread throughout the rest of the towns of the Caribbean region, mainly, highlighting their incomparable business skills as part of their cultural tradition as traders, they managed to prosper and become the mainstay of commercial development initially with the creation of commercial houses, as well as instruments for the organisation of commercial interests, such as the chambers of commerce<sup>24</sup>.

The vigorous economic boom of Barranquilla at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, which consolidated Barranquilla as the main point of foreign trade, at the same time as it opened the way for industrialisation, invited many of these merchants and small traders of the first and second wave of immigrants to assume a new profile as entrepreneurs, With the new generation of descendants of the immigrants (third wave), many of them already professionals and with their great sense of family ties, they formed “family companies” that allowed them to enter strongly into economic activities, with new ideas and innovations that influenced the business, political and socio-cultural development of Barranquilla and the Colombian Caribbean.

On the other hand, the need to give Barranquilla the appearance of a modern city without equal in the country, as well as its rapid population growth stimulated by its economic growth, gave rise to new urban developments and that is when the offer of the

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<sup>23</sup> The Roqueño neighbourhood, as it is also known, was called the Arriba neighbourhood because it was populated up the Auyama pipe (a pipe fed by the waters of the Magdalena river). Later, in 1849, it was given the name of San Roque, in honour of the patron saint of Montpellier (France), worshipped by the devotees of the Arriba neighbourhood.

<sup>24</sup> With street vending, Arab traders switched from the traditional selling strategy of waiting for the buyer to come to the store to the innovative way of going out door-to-door to offer goods. This new strategy increased sales as well as profits for the Syrian-Lebanese traders, who “had the magic and charm of the snake to sell anything”. It should come as no surprise then that the oldest commercial firm registered in the Barranquilla Chamber of Commerce was that of a Palestinian, Bichara Jassir & Cia. in 1895, while the Syrian Carlos Rumié is listed as one of the founders of the Cartagena Chamber of Commerce (Zambrano, 1995, cited in Vilorio, 2003).

Urbanization of the Prado<sup>25</sup> neighbourhood for the wealthiest population groups of the city arose. This neighbourhood became a symbol of power from 1920 onwards and many wealthy families relocated there, including immigrants who had already accumulated capital<sup>26</sup>. After the great success and prosperity obtained from their incursion in commercial matters and their positioning in the circles of the elites of the time, parallel to the fulfilment of dreams such as having professional children, “from the 30s and 40s, the children of the first immigrants left Loricá and other towns of Córdoba, to advance their university studies in cities such as Bogotá, Medellín, Cartagena or Barranquilla” They decided to go beyond commercial success to become a factor of power, which made it necessary to enter politics “in 1936 Cesar Fayad was elected councillor of Cartagena, in 1941 Abraham Jabib councillor of Loricá 95, in 1962 José Miguel Amín was appointed Governor of Córdoba and in 1963 Jorge Jattin Dumett Mayor of Loricá. In the last 40 years (1963-2003) Loricá has had 13 mayors of Syrian-Lebanese origin, who have governed the municipality for a period of 148 months, which corresponds to 12.3 years and represents a little more than 30% of the time elapsed during the four decades” (Viloria, 2003).

From the 1950s onwards, the strong penetration into politics began, particularly during the period of the National Front<sup>27</sup>, a factor that was taken advantage of by this immigrant population, in such a way that they were promoted until they achieved a powerful

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<sup>25</sup> El Prado was designed in 1921 by the American brothers Karl and Robert Parrish, and was consolidated between 1945-1960 as a modern development of wide avenues, gardens and majestic mansions, whose architectural grandeur and richness was intended for the city's elite.

<sup>26</sup> The rise of the new elite it housed also required endowing it with the symbols of power that represented: the security of the triumph of economic success, social-cultural prestige and the reception of divine blessing, through the preservation of the aristocratic instinct of its own superiority, lineage and exemplarity (Consuegra, 2017).

<sup>27</sup> In Colombian history, the period between 1958 and 1974 is known as the “National Front”, during which, thanks to a grand bargain, the main Colombian political parties alternately divided all state power. The division went beyond a simple presidential alternation, as the political party whose turn it was to govern would be obliged to appoint members of the other party to half of the ministerial cabinet and, in general, to half of the entire state apparatus. This is how Liberals and Conservatives divided power, excluding from power all other political movements that existed at that time in Colombia's history (Mesa García, 2009).

political, economic and social control. Already at the national level, a Liberal leader of Lebanese origin, born in Colombia, stood out, who reached such dignities as “congressman, minister of various portfolios in different governments, ambassador of Colombia in various diplomatic missions and, finally, candidate for the presidency of the republic” (Fawcett De Posada & Posada Carbó, 1992). Gabriel Turbay, a leader of great oratory, considered one of the best of his time and nicknamed “the Turk” by his detractors, marked a path for the political incursion of Syrian-Lebanese descendants in Colombia. Since then, the level of political consolidation has been maintained due to the ties of camaraderie and compromise in this community.

Its commercial and political positioning of course generated some acts of rejection<sup>28</sup> in some of the country's cities, such as the department of Antioquia, where there were more generalised rebounds, in contrast to the Caribbean coast, where, although there have been some expressions of social rejection, these were due more to elites who were dissatisfied with the trajectory and rise that had been occurring in this Arab population.

The political pragmatism resulting from the National Front model, which incorporated the custom of clientelist political management, strengthened them as family political clans, making them very powerful in addition to commerce, the media and local and regional institutional politics, thus establishing true monopolies that exert significant influence over the population:

So they drifted into politics relying mostly on the circumstances offered by the national front, which was very easy, easier than today to reach a collegiate body through votes that were negotiated in the “tugurio”<sup>29</sup>, which coincides with the growth of Barranquilla's slum, they are not the “civilising factor” is what I want to tell you, they did not defend, they are not a civilising dynamic from the point of view of their participation in politics, they bowed to milimetrism, it was easy enough that you were liberal or conservative and you proclaimed yourself and you had posts, attached to milimetrism (Tirado, 2021).

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<sup>28</sup> Del rechazo a la integración, *Revista Semana*, 25 de mayo de 2007. <https://www.semana.com/del-rechazo-integracion/86187-3/>

<sup>29</sup> Small, squalid room, dwelling or establishment

There are many examples of clans of Syrian-Lebanese descent that have exercised political control over Barranquilla since then. In recent decades, for example, economic and political power in the city and the Colombian Caribbean region has been concentrated in a single family of Syrian-Lebanese origin: the Char family with their holding company Olímpica, with a fortune and political representation that today makes them hegemonic in the management of power, progressively configured with methods, according to other “legal and illegal”<sup>30</sup> narratives. The arrival of this Arab family is given by the return of the sons to the city from a municipality in the department of Córdoba<sup>31</sup> called Lorica, after abandoning the goldsmith business, its genesis is part of the second wave of Syrian-Lebanese, which were configuring groups of families from which a third wave that for the case of Barranquilla, To mention some of the most recognised surnames in recent times, there are the Names, the Gerleins, the Char, a generation born in Colombia, who quickly emerged, disputing the spaces of power previously managed by a Europeanised Barranquillera oligarchy. They gained access to positions of power and symbols of the city that gave them inclusion and recognition as Barranquilleros, as in the case of the El Prado neighbourhood, where they acquired properties that gave them social, political and cultural status:

The planners of the Urbanización El Prado took on the project as a social, political and cultural programme. The rise of the new elite that it housed also required it to be endowed with symbols of power that represented: the security of the triumph of economic success, social-cultural prestige and the reception of divine blessing, through the preservation of the aristocratic instinct of its own superiority, lineage and exemplarity. The Church of Nuestra Señora del Carmen, first, and the Church of the Immaculate Conception, a little later, complete, as far as ecclesiastical architecture is concerned, the religious symbolism of the El Prado Urbanisation. A clear demonstration that this modernisation, a selfish materialisation of personal and family self-esteem, did not alienate its beneficiaries from official Catholic religiosity. Rather, it reinforced it through enthusiastic, persevering attendance at the celebration of the liturgy and the calculated practice of charitable assistance (Consuegra, 2017).

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<sup>30</sup> Las dos orillas magazine. Six heavyweights without visas for the USA

<sup>31</sup> Córdoba is a department in the Caribbean region of Colombia.



The new emerging Arabs began to form part of influential and decisive organisations in local power, as in the case of the Barranquilla club (Yidi-Stevenson, 2018), which had a social and political significance because it constituted a centre of power where the mayor of the city, the queen of the Barranquilla carnival<sup>32</sup> and the manager of the city's football team made decisions<sup>33</sup> (Tirado, 2021).

### *Conclusions*

Intercultural integration constitutes the foundations of a great citizenship, one that can cross borders and enable the encounter with the other in their difference, in dialogue, respect and valuation of identities, verbigracia of the strengthening of what diversity means today because it understands that there are no superior cultures, nor worse “is an eminently polyphonic process where the harmony and harmony of the diverse voices is achieved by the continuous contrast with the other and the continuous learning of their opinions and experiences” (Fornet, 1994).

Undoubtedly, cultural integration is a challenge, because it is full of hesitations, of problems that we must accept, because they are processes that require us to take time to understand that these social phenomena allow us mutual enrichment and the construction of conditions of equality.

The presence of Arab immigrants in Barranquilla allowed the exchange of similarities due to the characteristics of an open,

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<sup>32</sup> The 7th of November 2003 went down in history as the date on which for the first time Colombia obtained a declaration of intangible heritage in the country, and as has been the custom, Barranquilla was the pioneer with its Carnival and opened the way for new folkloric and cultural manifestations to also be declared world heritage. The Carnival of Barranquilla, a living heritage for the world. Ministry of Culture of Colombia

<sup>33</sup> In 1924 Micaela Lavalle founded one of the milestones in the history of Colombian football. The history of the Barranquilla team that overcame various adversities before becoming one of the greats of Colombian professional football. Cfr. <https://especiales.semana.com/futbol-profesional-colombiano/junior-de-barranquilla-el-tiburón-asi-se-hizo-grande.html>

cheerful and communicative spirit, but also differences initially marked in language, geography, dress, among others. But there is no doubt that this integration leaves us a pedagogical balance from the commercial and cultural point of view read in such a way as an enrichment and an opportunity for the two nations, in this respect (Baumann, 1999) considers that “Multiculturalism is not the old concept of culture multiplied by the number of existing groups, but a new, and internally plural, implementation of culture applied to oneself and to others”.

However, aware that any process of intercultural integration is not perfect, it is worth noting that in terms of the political rise of this migrant population, it has degenerated into a concentration of political and economic power that exercises dominion/monopoly over the local and even national scene. It is striking how a group of immigrants who were once persecuted, excluded by an empire that expelled them from its territory to the Americas and who today hold power in the Caribbean region and in the case that concerns us in this article, as is the city of Barranquilla, in one way or another, have caused a level of undervaluation of the human.

In this respect we bring to mind the Italian author Donati (2006) when he describes that the aforementioned situation expels the person as a human subject from the factors that explain the social and cultural dynamics and, therefore, it is increasingly difficult to attribute the quality of being human to the social. All these circumstances are generated by the configuration of a hegemonic-cultural system/structure that has made the territory into a machine of exclusion, expulsion and poverty for the vast majority of the population, with poverty rates that exceed 52% in the whole region and 41% in Barranquilla, and a “public” socio-political model controlled by a family clan of Arab origin.

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