

May 20-21, 2016

Black Suan Blues

(Sung to the tune of Deep River Blues, sort of)

[Recording](#)

*Willie went down, to his new town
To see how folks was gettin' round
Now he's got them black Suan blues.*

*He jumped in, to everythin'
De campo folks loved his silly grin
But he's got them black Suan blues.*

*He's writin' reports, and getting' retorts
His bed's gotta be about two feet short*

*All scrunched in a knot, back's feelin' taught
The loads' a lotta more than he wants to got*

An he's got them black Suan blues.

*De time movin slow, gettin sumpin' to show
Pro-Edu-Paz group he wants to grow
While he's got them black Suan blues.*

*Startin' to rain, muddied de plain
Rivers risin' again and again
An he's got them black Suan blues.*

*Ain't no time, to clean dat grime
De way he eats de pigs calls a crime*

*Day's runnin out, still castin' about
Dreamin of a bottle a ale or stout*

*Cause he's got them black Suan blues.
Yeh, Willie's got them black Suan blues.
Sayin' we all got dem black Suan blues.*

I dash these little songs and poems off pretty quickly, recognizing they will and ought to remain in the deep vaults of best forgotten amateur music. The tune, called Deep River Blues, is a popular fairly simple melody that I play on guitar and sing. I only know one lyric from it, and I don't know it correctly - "My old gal, she's a pal, they say she smells like a water fowl. Now I've got them deep river blues." The rest I just make up according to the situation.

I was given a "gaita" several months back. Gaita is played primarily in Bolivar in a traditional music form also called gaita. It's kind of a flutophone made of wood, a mouthpiece of clay or composite and a small tube through with you blow. There are an indeterminate number of holes at a seemingly random location for notes. As such, the notes aren't all there and some aren't there at all. Nearly all flutiphones have six or more holes. Six is the minimum you need to produce a major scale. My gaita, like the one illustrated here, has five holes. That leaves some notes out, though use of half and quarter holes can compensate.



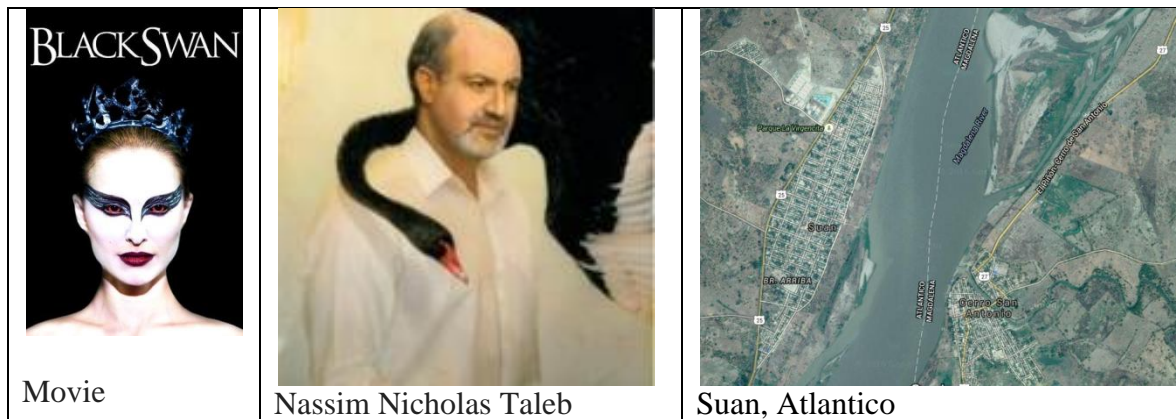
There are some very good gaita players. Normally you need two musicians, one playing the hembra (female) gaita that is smaller and has more notes (though not all of them). The "macho" gaita is bigger with only two or three holes. It only hits a few notes, but is there to accompany the hembra. The macho player only needs one hand, so the other hand is freed up for playing the maracas. Alas I digress.

I talked Will Osolinsky, a member of my group of ten Peace Corps Response volunteers, into letting me visit his town of Suan. I had been very impressed with what I heard about the level of

municipal organization and leadership and wanted to see it for myself. As a regional planner I am always looking for factors that contribute to successful towns.

Will and I were both in Barranquilla from mandatory immunizations. I was immunized for Hepatitis A, Hepatitis B and Influenza. We took Uber (my first one) out to the bus station, or kind of run-down neighborhood from which maxi-vans were leaving as the filled. From there we were riding in a packed van to Suan from Barranquilla. It was incredibly uncomfortable with no room for our legs. I could only move enough to hold a harmonica, so I improvised harmonica and lyrics for the Black Suan Blues to the confusion of the other passengers. Actually on the bus I was cramming in more words calling it the Pro-Edu-Paz Black Suan Blues. Pro Edu Paz is a Fundación that Will's socios are creating to support community development. I left in one lyric about ProEduPaz rather than trying to get it in every verse. Harmonica isn't a common instrument in Colombia, but I always have one in my pack and sometimes pull it out. It puts me on the tail-end of cultural creativity. I need to learn a few vallenatos. That would open doors.

"Black Swan" has a couple references. A movie came out in 2010 about a production of Swan Lake with the title Black Swan. I haven't seen it nor know much about it. A dance group in Aracataca did a very humorous take on Swan Lake in their big production for the Reina de Carnival festival, but that was certainly not a psychological thriller.



Another reference in econometrics is a "Black Swan" being an event that is rare and impossible to predict, such as a sudden dive in the stock market. Nassim Nicholas Taleb wrote a best seller book and coined the term. I have made a few attempts to read a sequel called Antifragile, but it's a difficult slog through light text and complex math. In Antifragile Taleb expounds on fat tails, the outliers in what we thought was a standard-normal probability curve. I think some version of that book is online for free. www.fooledbyrandomness.com I'm guessing most readers skim over the complex numerical arguments, but I can't.

I suppose you could call a successful small town in coastal Colombia a black swan, but that would be cynical. I think there are factors that help to predict positive outcomes as well as disasters. I'm not ready to give up on LMS statistics.

Suan is a very impressive small town. I hope that Will is documenting what they have done to succeed given their limited resources. Everyone would benefit from the lessons learned.

One lesson Will demonstrated in several ways is the power of public investment. Suan was fortunate some years back to miss a flood that decked several neighboring towns. They received significant reconstruction funding, and with not very much to reconstruct, used the funds to construct affordable housing, a significant academic center and public infrastructure. During my one evening in Suan we briefly attended an adult education course which I think was an introduction to political science. The class was well attended and the lecture was engaging.



I think one factor is what Richard Florida calls the Creative Economy. If a small town can hold on to their "cultural creatives" I think they have a better chance of nurturing-internal or attracting external-public and private investment. Creative people aren't just engaged in art, painting, writing, dance and music. They may be engaged in computer programming, restaurants, entrepreneurship of many forms.

We slipped out of the lecture at the University and walked to a cultural presentation celebrating "afro-decendentes". It was an impressive show with several dance groups, folk musicians, popular music and ending with a break-dance competition. I have posted four videos from the cultural performance that you can reach through the links below.

Social interaction, like theater, has a front stage, back stage, off stage and audience. The set was new and terrific with great visibility for all attending. The audience was engaged and respectful. They attended without drinking, loud motorcycles, and loud conversations. People listened, watched, cheered, sang along with the performers.





[Video!](#)



[Video!](#)



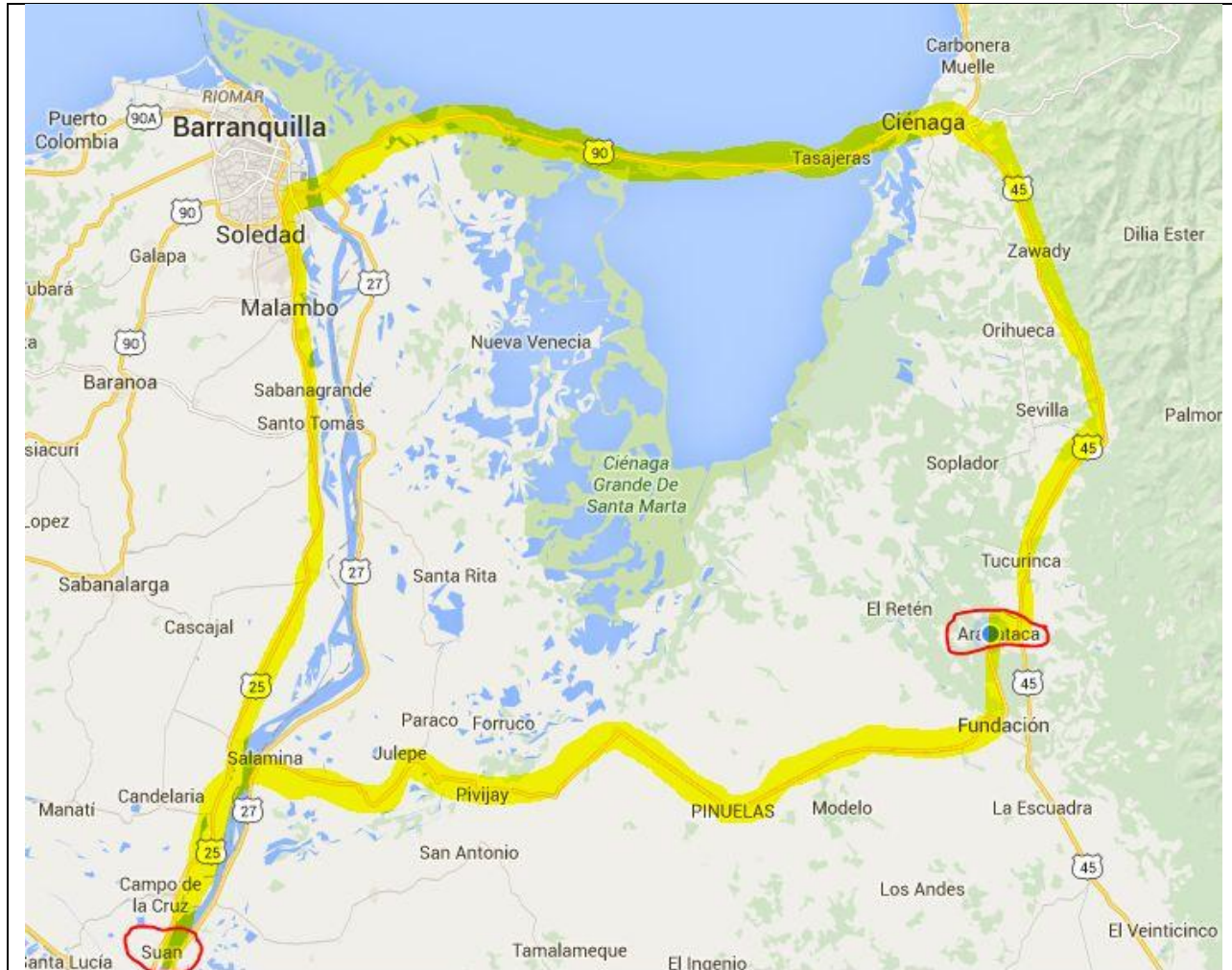
[Video!](#)



[Video!](#)

Another factor is basic public services such as electricity, water, sewer and solid waste management. Fail at those and you have a tough time holding onto your middle class. The rich can buy what they need and the poor are stuck, but the middle class want basic services delivered by the municipality. It isn't just about smelly sewage, through that is important. Creative people need services for their businesses to succeed. Suan has work to do to get water and sewer working for everyone, to reduce electrical blackouts and smooth out some rough roads, but it looks like they are working on all fronts.

Returning Home on the Back Roads



The next day Will and I headed to Aracataca. The normal route would be to travel north to Barranquilla then catch a bus east and then south to Aracataca. It's a long way around, but the roads are relatively good and buses are frequent.

The back route is a much straighter shot to a port just north of Suana, across the Magdalena River to Salamina, then straight east through Pivijay to Fundación before a short jog north to Aracataca. The back route is less traveled and the road is of mixed quality from paved and flat to a series of deep, muddy potholes.

So, after taking the local bus a short distance we jumped off at the small port leading to the river crossing. The river crossing has a few steps. We bought tickets, and waited at a small, tarp covered restaurant. People accumulated as various buses dropped the by the port. There isn't any town here. We climbed aboard one of the two "Johnsons" or motor canoes. The canoes filled and departed together for a short trip along an oxbow lake that used to be part of the Magdalena, but is now cut off by sediment. The lake ends at an embankment, so everyone gets out, walks to the other side of the embankment and climbs in another Johnson to cross the big river. Rainfall

has been heavy, so the river is running pretty fast and is loaded with debris. There is a very heavy presence of lily pads which float down in large clusters. These look like the invasive species that has choked many waterways in Asia (ironically called “Germany” in Bangladesh).



The Johnsons arrive on the other side of the river at a much more developed docking facility in the small town of Salamina. They then fill with people making the return crossing. At the bottom of the ramp are a series of floats and at the top and small food concession. There is an impressive waterfront promenade which on this day was hot, humid and devoid of people. A number of motorcycles and three wheeled moto-taxis waited to take people onward to small towns including Pivijay. One or two buses make this run each day, and it didn't sound like there would be any buses for the rest of the day. Will and I strolled about the town, visiting the church and taking in the vistas. It was pretty quiet.



Floats



Ramp



Fast Food Stall



Promenade



Catholic Church Altar

I wanted to take the back route partly for the canoe crossing, which was great. The moto-taxi ride was also great fun. The road is in terrible condition, so drivers zigzag left and right to avoid the biggest potholes. At one point our drive left the road entirely, preferring an unpaved back road that was a little smoother than the paved road and a bit more direct. We passed through a lot of cattle country with little farms and villages. The trip to Pivijay was pretty long, but by some bit

of luck we arrived just as the last bus was leaving for Fundación. That didn't leave time for taking pictures, but I'd like to do the trip again sometime.



Long bridge outside of Pivijay



Another moto-taxi ahead of us



Farms, mud, ruts, holes, fun



Rain has transformed barren fields to green



Looking over the drivers shoulder



Fundación Market