

Afro-Venezuelan Cultural Survival: Invoking Ancestral Memory

Mesi Walton
Howard University
mewalton@yahoo.com

Enslaved Africans were taken to Venezuela as part of the transatlantic slave trade, and their descendants constitute a minority population that has been marginalized, discriminated against, and excluded from access to resources and the national identity. This study explores ways in which Afro-Venezuelans resisted oppression and survived by employing their knowledge, skills, and cultural memory. As a case in point, we examine the maintenance of Afro-Venezuelan cultural traditions in Barlovento, an area to which enslaved Africans were imported to work on large cacao estates and whose descendants now constitute the majority ethnic population in the region, with cultural traditions that uniquely identify it. Through the application of spiritual and cultural memory, Barloventinos show resolve within the construct of institutionalized racism by utilizing a form of double consciousness. The Barlovento region represents a strong continuity of Central West African traditions within Venezuelan culture in the variety of music, instrumentation, dance styles, and lingual retentions, which serve as the chief basis for this analysis. This research assesses these various forms of Afro-Venezuelan culture and how they have been used as a form of resistance to invisibilization and institutional racism. Findings are based on historical research and field work conducted between 2010 and 2019.

Keywords: Afro-Venezuelans, invisibilization, double consciousness, institutional racism, Barlovento, cultural survival

Africanos esclavizados fueron llevados a Venezuela como parte de la trata transatlántica y sus descendientes constituyen una población minoritaria que ha sido marginada, discriminada y excluida del acceso a los recursos y de la identidad nacional. Este estudio explora las medidas usadas por los afrovenezolanos para resistir la opresión y sobrevivir al implementar sus conocimientos, habilidades y memoria cultural. Como ejemplo, examinamos el mantenimiento de las tradiciones culturales afrovenezolanas en Barlovento, una zona a la que los africanos esclavizados fueron importados para trabajar en grandes fincas de cacao y cuyos descendientes ahora constituyen la población étnica mayoritaria de la región, con tradiciones culturales que la identifican de manera única. A través de la aplicación de la memoria espiritual y cultural, los barloventinos mostraron su resistencia ante el racismo institucionalizado mediante la utilización de una forma de doble conciencia. La región de Barlovento representa una fuerte continuidad de las tradiciones del África Occidental Central en la variedad de música, instrumentación, estilos de baile y retenciones lingüísticas, los cuales sirven como la base principal para este análisis. Esta investigación evalúa estas diversas formas de cultura

afrovenezolana y su uso como medidas de resistencia a la invisibilización y al racismo institucional. Los hallazgos se basan en la investigación histórica y el trabajo de campo realizado entre 2010 y 2019.

Palabras clave: afrovenezolanos, invisibilización, doble conciencia, racismo institucional, Barlovento, supervivencia cultural

African cultures in the Americas, rather than quaint but superficial folklore, are cultures of resistance based on African philosophical principles that we must rediscover, that persist and reshape themselves as time passes and as changes occur in our communities.

—Jesús “Chucho” García, *Demystifying*

Overview

The population of today's Venezuela includes four main ethnic groups: of the 28.4 million inhabitants, 52% are considered mestizos, 44% white, 3.5% black, and 2.5% indigenous (too 2019). This racial mixture has resulted in a culturally diverse nation with a rich tapestry of languages, foods, dances, and music, reflecting the characteristics of each contributing ethnicity. Historically however, the promotion of this mixture did not—and in many cases still does not—clearly identify and acknowledge the contributions of Afro-Venezuelans. The descendants of enslaved Africans taken to Venezuela continue to constitute a marginalized population that lacks access to competitive education, financial opportunities, media representation, and an overall quality of life that is on par with non-African citizens. Such mainstream social neglect leaves the Afro-Venezuelan people largely bereft of racial, ethnic, and cultural recognition in a country they helped shape.

This study explores ways in which Afro-Venezuelans resisted historical oppression, marginalization, and exclusion from Venezuelan society by using their knowledge, skills and cultural memory. As a case in point, the maintenance of Afro-Venezuelan cultural traditions in Barlovento is the center of the study, an area to which enslaved Africans were imported to work on large cacao estates and whose descendants now constitute the majority ethnic population in the region, with cultural traditions that uniquely identify it.

This scholarship is a contribution to efforts to reverse centuries of disregard and discrimination of Afro-Venezuelans and call attention to ways of resistance within their cultural practices, many of which are now part of the national identity. This article uses two perspectives to frame the elements in Afro-Venezuelan cultural survivals. The first considers them as responses to the institutionalized racism that restricts communities: “Institutionalized racism manifests itself both in material conditions and in access to power. With regard to material conditions, examples include differential access to quality education, sound housing, gainful employment, appropriate medical facilities, and a clean environment. With regard to access to power, examples include differential access to information (including one's own history), resources (including wealth and organizational infra-

structure), and voice (including voting rights, representation in government, and control of the media)” (Jones 2000, 1212). The denial of material access for Afro-Venezuelans is absolutely an issue, however, this article will delve chiefly into how Afro-Venezuelans responded to the obstruction of power in the larger white society.

The second perspective uses the framework of the double consciousness introduced by African American scholar and activist W.E. B. Du Bois, which allows for persons who are traumatized to exist and survive in two different worlds simultaneously: “The diasporic individual often has a double consciousness,” an awareness that migrants, exiles, implants, or mere humans take on (Agnew 2013, 14)—the conflicting duality of a person’s knowledge of who they are, in contrast to how they are perceived by the surrounding society. Stuart Hall (1990) points out that Africans in the diaspora have built and created in order to reject, survive, and fight forces of white domination. Their cultural identity comes not only from their ancestral and home memories but also from the external dominant environment.¹ I will add that Africans of the diaspora have also adjusted and created with the dominating forces in mind, whether it be in the spirit of rejection, mocking, or adoption. This process of adapting to new ways of life while remaining secure in one’s cultural identity reflects a successful implementation of the double consciousness. Through the application of spiritual² and cultural memory, the “Barloventenos,” residents of Barlovento, fought institutionalized racism by adopting a form of double consciousness.

Beginning in the early 1500’s, the majority of Africans taken to Venezuela were transported from both West and Central West Africa during the transatlantic slave trade. After arriving in Venezuela, a process of creolization took place within the culture of Africans, pre-Columbian indigenous Venezuelans, and Europeans, contributing to an inevitably new paradigm of cultural constructs. In turn, various studies in search of the cultural origins of the African descendants of Venezuela continue to evolve and new cultural artifacts are continually discovered. Many of the African origins can be found in the Barlovento region of Venezuela, and serve as the chief basis for this study and analysis.

Africans brought much knowledge with them, evidenced in their agricultural practices spread throughout the Americas, from making instruments, creating tools to work the land, and ascribing solar/lunar cycles to cultivating, among others. Furthermore, the application of natural and spiritual knowledge from the African and indigenous people was very powerful in the creation, maintenance, and protection of the *cumbes* or maroon³ towns and survival of the people. Africans brought seeds and plants to be used for cultivation and spiritual purposes. Also accompanying them were elements of cultural memory, such as rhythms, dances, spiritual ideologies, and knowledge of nature and societal systems. Their knowledge, skills, and cultures were replicated, transformed, and fused with European and indigenous cultures in the new lands. Their expertise regarding the earth was used for food, medicine, and protection, while cultural traditions provided respite, rejuvenation, spiritual ritual, and

¹ Stuart Hall (1990) discusses the two ways of thinking about “cultural identity.”

² Spiritual is inclusive of ancestors, both familial and nonfamilial, as well as the world of deities, gods and saints.

³“The word “*maroon*” is an English corruption of the Spanish word “*cimarrón*” meaning “wild, not tame” and was originally applied to livestock that had escaped from a farm to run free in the woods (Lockley 2015, 1).

resistance. When items from Africa were in short supply or nonexistent, new materials were found, new communities were formed, and old knowledge was applied to a new environment to express themselves, escape mental and physical captivity and survive.

My findings are based on historical research and field work conducted between 2010 and 2019. Semistructured interviews were conducted with cultural practitioners and researchers and were recorded via field notes, and photographic and video documentation.⁴ Research also included analysis of museum holdings, community and cultural meetings, and musical performances where field and participant observations were made.

Africans in Venezuela

During the transatlantic slave trade, the first group of Africans was taken to Venezuela in the early 1500s either directly or from islands and other parts of the Americas (Andrews 2004, 13). Records show that Africans were taken there from the Kongo Kingdom (present-day Republic of Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo and Angola), Nigeria, Benin, Togo, Gambia, and Senegal (García 2008, 941). In 1619 one hundred and forty enslaved Africans from Guinea and Angola were dropped off at La Guaira by a Portuguese ship (García 2012, 148). Some of the major ports in Venezuela at the time were La Guaira (north central), Caracas (north central), Maracaibo (west), Puerto Cabello (north central), Cabo de la Vela (west) and Coro (west) (Pollak-Eltz 2000, 40). The surrounding areas of each of these ports host a population of African descendants with an array of cultural traditions similar to and distinct from those found in Barlovento.

Of the ports listed above, the closest to Barlovento are La Guaira and Caracas, which supplied the majority of Barlovento's enslaved workforce. The straight-line distance from Caracas to a town in Barlovento is about 99 kms (62 mi). Regarding the archives on two towns in the Barlovento region, "Castillo Lara (1981) reports that there were 462 slaves in the towns of Curiepe and Capaya in 1781. . . . The average distribution of slaves to farmer was 15.4" (Díaz-Campos and Clements 2005, 49), with an average of thirty enslaved Africans per plantation (Klein 1986, 86). Some estimates of the geographical distribution of captured Africans during the slave trade suggest that Venezuela received 121,000 Africans (Díaz-Campos and Clements 2005, 41). Of the 121,000 Africans, a substantial number was sold to planters in the Barlovento region, where much of the cacao was planted. "In 1789, slavery in Venezuela was still an expanding institution. In the thriving cacao plantation zone, the workforce at that time was made up of predominately emancipated Africans (198,000 [46%]), with 64,000 (15%) slaves, compared to about 168,000 (39%) whites" (Klein 1986, 220). Another researcher reports that immediately afterwards, in 1790, there was an increase in enslaved Africans taken to the Barlovento region "brought from Angola, the Congo, and the northern region of the Gulf of Guinea" (Ramos Guédez 2001, 159).

In a personal interview writer and activist Luis Perdomo explained the importance of the Barlovento region for African descendants, as the men and women enslaved in large numbers from

⁴ Interviews were conducted under the protocols of the Howard University IRB requirements.

the Kongo⁵ were taken there for agricultural work, mostly in the cultivation of cocoa. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the towns of Curiepe, Cúpira, Tacarigua, Panaquire, Mamporal, El Guapo, and Río Chico were established, which make up the modern Barlovento region. Barlovento became an essential and highly populated region during the slave trade in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, though its initial growth began in the seventeenth. After slavery was abolished in 1854, Africans working in Barlovento settled near their workplaces and formed their own communities. Since then, Barlovento has been home to many generations of Afro-Venezuelans.

Invisibilization of Afro-Venezuelans

Once Afro-Venezuelans were released from slavery in 1854, multiple restrictions prevented them from being treated as equals in society. The Venezuelan constitution of 1830 excluded Africans and their descendants as citizens declaring “that a citizen must ‘know how to read and write’ and ‘be owners of property’” (García 2008, 947). Additionally, only those who were free, owned property, and had a profession that earned no less than one hundred pesos annually were allowed to vote. This edict excluded the enslaved and a disproportionate number of free blacks from controlling their destinies and that of their offspring (García 2008, 947).

Exclusionary elite ideologies were anchored in the positivist science of that time: “Purportedly based on an exhaustive knowledge of biology and physical anthropology, the first theories supporting racial discrimination arose along this trend” (Herrera Salas 2007, 102). Essayist and honored intellectual Arturo Uslar Pietri maintained that Indians and Africans and their mixtures were people incapable of contributing positively to modernity (cited in García 2008, 948). This ideology has persisted, and racial discrimination permeated the policies toward, attitudes regarding, and treatment of Afro-Venezuelan citizens.

The presence of Africans historically has not been a point of pride for white elites who led initiatives to “whiten” the population in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Their goal was to erase any African traces within the national demographics in order to resemble a European nation: “In analyzing the country’s ills, Venezuelan leaders and their positivist ideologues pointed to the existence of a population ‘battered’ by the constant mix of whites, Indians, and blacks. This was one of the motives that led the nineteenth-century ruler Antonio Guzmán Blanco to promote large scale European immigration ‘for the improvement of the race’” (Herrera Salas 2007, 102).

In the 1961 constitution, African descendants are listed as part of the triple ethnicity: whites, Africans, and indigenous people in the famous motto, “we are all equal” (García 2008, 949). This promotion of “we are all the same” allows for the “institutional absence of recognition of the Afro-Venezuelan communities” (García 2008, 950). As a whole, such deeds de-escalate the urgency of the

⁵ When spelled with a “K,” Kongo refers to the Kongo Kingdom during the slave trade. The land is comprised of modern-day Democratic Republic of the Congo and northern Angola. Many of the citations from other authors use Congo when they are referring to Kongo Kingdom. This can be clarified by the time period being referenced: references spelled with a “C” refer to modern-day Congo lands.

inclusion of Afro-Venezuelans in the social, historic, and cultural fabric of the nation.⁶ “The official estimate of those with ‘pure’ Afro-Venezuelan ancestry is 10 to 12 percent of the total population (i.e., about 1.8 million to 2 million). Sixty percent of all Venezuelans, however, claim some African blood” (Guss and Waxer 2020). In the latest census of 2014, the section titled Ethnic Self-Identity shows that .07% of citizens selected “Afrodescendiente”—African descendant—and 2.9% selected “negro”—Black—while a large majority selected “moreno”—brown or colored—at 51.6% (Instituto Nacional 2014, 29).⁷

For generations, Afro-Venezuelans have sought recognition as a group along with the eradication of the alienation and invisibilization led by the dominant Eurocentric culture. The issue of the African-descendant population being ignored for so long in political and academic spaces has been of concern: “In effect, the tenuous political presence or access of this population to political instances, as well as the lack of exhaustive data on their economic situation and the ‘invisibility of the black problem’ and their conditions of discrimination suffered, are striking” (Hopenhayn and Bello 2001, 22). Although some claim that under the presidency of Hugo Chávez, “in Venezuela today [2007] there is no practice of institutionalized racism, as it existed in the southern United States before the civil rights movements” (Ishibashi 2007, 3), racism is less defined in Venezuela and concealed within classism, permeating society on various levels: “It is very rare to see a person with an African phenotype among professionals such as doctors, judges and diplomats, or marketing and public relations managers, or even secretaries or receptionists in offices of large private companies” (Ishibashi 2007, 27).

The systematic rejection of African descendants has long been at play in dismissing their work in the building and defending of the country as well as their contributions to the national culture in music, language, food, social life, etc. Despite the indelible traces of African influences throughout society, in the report of the National Census of Population and Living compiled in 2014 by the Venezuelan National Institute of Statistics, Africans are not included in the Geo-Political section (Instituto Nacional de Estadística 2014, 3). A paragraph mentions the presence and migrations of Amerindians thousands of years before the arrival of Europeans. However, no recognition is given to the African men, women, and children who were taken to build the towns and raise the crops that would allow the Europeans to build wealth and establish the country as a viable part of ongoing trade and empire.

Afro-Venezuelan organizations work to make institutional changes to be recognized and included in the cultural, social, legal, educational, agricultural, and environmental sectors of the nation (Ministerio para la Comunicación y la Información, MINCI, 2005). The Network of Afro Venezuelan Organizations has been a key player in the widespread changes in the 1999 constitution across policies

⁶ For a detailed analysis of official attempts to dilute the African factor as a form of institutionalized racism, see Wright 1990.

⁷ The definition of each ethnic group is included in the pages of the census report. “Moreno” is listed as: “Morena/Moreno: Any person whose phenotypical characteristics are less marked or pronounced than the person defined as Black. It is a term that in some contexts can be used to soften the discriminatory implications of being a black person” (Instituto Nacional de Estadística 2014, 65, my translation).

that would begin to close the gap in access for Afro-Venezuelans. Since then, the government has acknowledged the long-term racial discrimination against Afro-Venezuelans and adopted and implemented plans to recognize Afro-Venezuelans in education, social mobility, public policies. In addition, Venezuela's Ministry of Public Policy Monitoring lists several strategic objectives of which one reads: "Overcome poverty and fully attend to the Afro population of the country, in a situation of high poverty and maximum social exclusion" (Ministerio del Poder Popular 2016, 43–44). This is a long-term goal to eradicate ideologies, attitudes, laws, and restrictions that have been built over centuries, and many changes have been implemented from government offices and ministries such as the creation of the National Council for the Development of Afro-Descendant Communities of Venezuela (CONADECAFRO), hosting the International Congress of African Descendants, the creation of The Presidential Commission for the Prevention and Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination in 2005 along with local and national acknowledgement and support Afro-Venezuelans. In the last two decades, several initiatives have emerged with the objectives to diminish racism and class divisions, such as the inclusion of indigenous and African history in the school curriculum.

From the insistence of organizations such as The Network of Afro-Venezuelan Organizations, the 2011 census was an attempt to implement a collective term of identity which was "afro descendiente," or African descendant, as a change from the popular terms of "negro," or black, and "moreno," brown. As stated in the report: "For the first time in the history of the census in Venezuela, an attempt was made to make visible the resident population in the country that recognizes itself as Afro-descendant" (Instituto Nacional de Estadística 2014, 3). Since the adoption of the 1999 constitution, Afro-Venezuelans and their culture have increasingly been recognized and promoted by the government, though the interviewees I contacted personally emphatically stated that there is much more to be done for their communities.

Barlovento: A Profile of the Research Location

The Barlovento region lies along the northeast coast of Venezuela and contains several towns and former cumbes of tight-knit communities of Afro-Venezuelans. Though African-derived pockets of traditions are found throughout different sectors of the country, Barlovento is popularly recognized as the heart of Afro-Venezuelan culture, in part due to its easy access to the capital of Venezuela, Caracas, and in part because the region has retained the widest range of African musical traditions. It boasts a strong continuity of Afro-Venezuelan culture in the variety of music, instrumentation, dance styles, lingual retentions, and more. The area provides all necessary provisions to feed and house inhabitants from its hot tropical climate, which is ideal for the cultivation of trees and crops such as tubers, squash, fruit trees, and grains. Subsistence and cocoa farming have transitioned from a family occupation to collective community enterprises. Other main forms of employment outside of farming are fishing, teaching, and food sales.

Venezuela had some of the largest and most active maroon communities in Latin America, established in the mountains and rural areas. Uprisings were noted in the sixteenth century and continued through the eighteenth century, resulting in the formation of dozens of communities of

Africans fleeing enslavement. According to writer Pedro José de Olavarriaga, “Colonial Venezuela was populated throughout its territory by a significant number of black maroons, who by the year 1721, reached the figure of twenty thousand” (qtd. in Ramos Guédez 2001, 32–33). Barlovento is counted as one of the regions with the highest concentration of cumbes, many of which are still inhabited by descendants today.⁸

Maroonage was enacted through “maroon confrontation,” or physical revolt, and “legal maroonage,” in which enslaved men and women could obtain their freedom through acts of the law (García 2008, 944). Other ways in which enslaved men and women obtained their freedom were through manumission (age based) and wills. Although slavery continued to grow in Venezuela in the eighteenth century, then, populations of free Blacks, or Afro-Venezuelans, existed. They were a mixture of maroons and those who were legally freed from their masters or bought their freedom. Both forms of maroonage are clear ways of rejecting a life of bondage and servitude. African cultural carryovers were a source of self-determination and self-empowerment, which are key for maroonage. Two towns in Barlovento are significant in their preservation of African-based cultural traditions.

San José de Barlovento

Upon entering San José, you come upon a rotunda holding a towering monument of a cocoa pod, which inspires the locals to say to newcomers, “Welcome to cocoa land!” Though their ancestors were forced to cultivate cocoa here, Afro-Venezuelans now have collective farming initiatives that allow them to be self-sufficient in owning the land and crops.⁹ When I visited a cocoa farm in San José, the agriculturalists lived up to all of the standards set by the government: revitalization of traditions, tourism, collective work, and the production of goods from the land.

Curiepe, Brión

According to Luisa Madriz, an educator and community organizer from Curiepe, hers is the only town in Venezuela founded by free blacks.¹⁰ Local Afro-Venezuelan historian Jesús “Chucho” García states that black men, originally from the Congo, escaped from Curaçao and arrived as converted Christians to Venezuela in 1721 (García 2012, 151). They found Curiepe to be an ideal territory for the new community, because it was near a river of clean water and had fertile land and

⁸ Noted cumbes of Barlovento: Cumbe de Ocoyta, Cumbe de Taguaza, Birongo, Ganga, Cupo Salmerón, Cumbo, Corozal, Aremitas, La Libertad, San José de Chuspita, Morocopo, Guayabal, and several listed simply as Cumbe, (Ramos Guédez 2001, 34–38).

⁹ These cooperatives were formed in part due to government support beginning in 1999. New laws and initiatives were devised, beginning with the Special Law of Cooperative Associations, followed by the creation of the About Face! Mission (Misión ¡Vuelvan Caras!) in the spring of 2004. Participants received “classes in technology, management, history and cooperative values.” According to the government, alumni created more than 10,000 new cooperatives, almost a third of them involved in agriculture. In September of 2007, the program changed its name to “Che Guevara Mission,” where the focus was on Endogenous Development. The mission states: “Endogenous Development aims at incorporating those Venezuelans who had so far been excluded from the educational, economic and social system, by building productive networks, with easy access to technology and knowledge. It is through Endogenous Development that organized communities are given power to develop the potentials of every region, in the areas of agriculture, industry and tourism” (Howard 2008).

¹⁰ Personal communication, September 16, 2018.

forests to feed and protect the inhabitants. One of the men, José del Rosario Blanco, became the founder of Curiepe and applied what García calls legal maroonage. He used the Law of the Indians that allowed enslaved Africans to obtain their freedom through various mechanisms and won his freedom by serving in the Spanish army.

Today at the entrance to Curiepe is a massive sculpture of African drums that Curiepe is known for—the *mina*, *curbata*, and *culo e'puya* (Figure 1). The town's heritage is displayed in murals, a museum, and a cultural activities center. According to García, many of the traditions practiced throughout Barlovento came from here. Historically, Curiepe is one of the most visited towns that Barloventenos and other Venezuelans flock to for Afro-Venezuelan cultural festivities.



Figure 1. Author & Manuel Salcedo at the entrance of Curiepe¹¹

Barlovento: Afro-Venezuelan Cultural Practices and Nature

When asked what the key elements of Barlovento's culture are, interviewees passionately responded by describing the customs of their families and community members. Many Barloventenos also discussed their connection to the land as key to their daily functions. Sixto Hernández, a councilman and musician from San José de Barlovento, explained how the people are very connected to nature through cultivation, following the moon, praying, and understanding the uses of plants.¹² He

¹¹ All photographs are from the author's personal collection.

¹² Sixto Hernández, interviewed by the author, August 2008.

remembers that his grandmother had a cocoa farm and produced subsistence crops to provide for her family and others. Like his grandmother, he has a *conuco* (garden) behind his house where he cultivates a number of trees, plants, and roots that produce edible crops. Hernández shared that he often seeks the guidance of his elders on when to pick, cut, or plant a particular fruit or vegetable. In this way, farming is an example of not only having a reciprocal relationship with the universe, but also of maintaining a cultural continuum between Africa and Barlovento in their traditions.

Since the colonial era in Venezuela, Africans have kept this *conuco*, or small plot of land, for cultivating their own produce: “In most cases, each enslaved nuclear family had its own *conuco*, or garden, and they often used the products of these crops to improve their diet or to sell” (Pollak-Eltz 2000, 104). This was a way for the plantation owners to lessen their responsibility for feeding their captives, but it also gave the enslaved a form of independence and enhanced the continuity of their culture. In explaining the *conuco*, Luis Perdomo, the Afro-Venezuelan activist and journalist, explains the societal and historical roots of Barlovento’s connection to the environment:

The *conuco* is an agricultural unit of Barlovento where bananas and vegetables are planted. . . . Another important contribution is all of the knowledge that the Africans and their descendants had; once the cocoa plantations were established, they would strategically search for places where there was water, where the lands were rich for cultivation, and then cocoa is seen as a crop that preserves the entire ecological system, because above the cocoa you need to have trees so that they can shelter the plantation or the hacienda and of course the series of trees and mountains helps to conserve the rivers, the waters, temperature, oxygen. So, there we have a great contribution aside from the economic contribution that cocoa has given us today, so to speak of cocoa is to speak essentially of Barlovento and to speak of Barlovento is to speak of Africa and its descendants. Cocoa is viewed as a culture, not just as an agricultural crop, because . . . as Chucho García says, cocoa was what generated all of the culture that we are, our dances, our talk, our way of dancing, of walking, here in San José and Barlovento . . . we walk almost as if we were dancing, we dance with a lot of *son*, with a lot of rhythm. (Perdomo 2018).¹³

Luis explains here the linkage between the ecological systems and the culture of the people. He also alludes to the strategic planning needed to establish the cumbes that are sprinkled throughout Barlovento. As an enslaved African or a maroon living in the forest or mountains, having the space and knowledge to grow food for one’s family was key for survival and resistance in an oppressive state. Thus, the *conuco* for both the enslaved and the free has historically been a space of independence and empowerment where language, technique, foods, and various traditions could be passed on from generation to generation.

In many African and Amerindian populations, the use of drums to call rain are long-practiced traditions, and in Venezuela it is a part of the Velorio de Cruz de Mayo, or Cross of May Vigil. In the

¹³ Luis Perdomo, interviewed by author, August 2008. All translations of oral materials are by the author.

town of La Sabana, Alexis “Felipito” Laya informed me about the ritual singing and drumming in the Cruz de Mayo celebration that connects agriculture to African, European, and indigenous traditions.¹⁴

The celebration comes from Europe, and in Venezuela it is personalized when “the drums begin to be played to call down the rain for the harvest and to give thanks.”¹⁵ Thus, the carrying forth of rituals to entice or enhance acts of nature for agricultural abundance reiterates the notion that Afro-Venezuelans intentionally carry on a connection to the gods, the universe, and nature.

The San Juan Festival

The Christian festival of San Juan Bautista, or Saint John the Baptist, was introduced to the Americas by Europeans during colonialism. The festival has a historical connection to the summer solstice, which for Europeans was related to the fertility of the earth (Pollak-Eltz 2000, 91), and before it was taken to the New World, non-Christian elements were common parts of celebrations.¹⁶ Historians have posited a direct connection to Africa: “The reason for choosing Saint John as the patron saint of blacks is the fact that in West Africa blacks celebrate numerous festivals around the Summer Solstice with songs and dances in masks” (Pollak-Eltz 2000, 91). The Church was more amenable to allowing Africans to include their own music, singing, and dancing practices during the Catholic celebrations in Venezuela, where the celebration has taken in a syncretic form that combines European and African cultures in one of the most important celebrations of the year. During the colonial era and under the auspices of the Catholic celebration this celebration was the only time that enslaved Africans were allowed to mix with residents of the cumbes, who would converge on the towns to meet with family members and comrades. Plantation owners were less vigilant during the holidays, and often the enslaved would execute insurrections or hold secret meetings to plan escapes and revolts.

¹⁴ “The symbol of the Christian cross coincides with some of the indigenous beliefs in which it is ‘the sacred wood’ that represents the tree of life, flowers and fruits. For this reason, within the rituals performed in honor of the cross, appreciation is expressed and requests are made regarding the need for rain for the fields; an homage to nature is paid and welcome given to the hope of good harvests” (Hernández and Ardizzone 2005, 31).

¹⁵ Alexis “Felipito” Laya, interviewed by the author, August 2018.

¹⁶ Since the fifth century the church was encouraged to allow pagan celebrations to accompany the San Juan holiday and its connection to the summer solstice. “This openness resulted in not merely one of the most widely diffused holidays, but also one of the most syncretic. Dominated by rituals of fire and water, typical San Juan celebrations also included divination, fertility rites, matchmaking, harvest ceremonies, and even carnivalesque inversion” (Guss 2000, 27).



Figure 2. San Juan Bautista festival in Curiepe, circa 2010.

Furthering the ongoing discussion on the importance of the saints for Afro-Venezuelans, this observation is anchored in the fact that spirituality is an integral concept in the lives of Africans worldwide. Its importance can be seen from the transfer of the Ifá spiritual practice of West Africa to the Americas in the form of *santería* in Cuba and *candomblé* in Brazil. This spiritual continuum is also present in Venezuela, however, with carryovers mainly from Central West Africa. African spirituality employs music, singing, prayer, dancing, and divination as a conductor between the world of the living and the spirit world, means through which the spirit or soul of ancestors, deities, or gods can be evoked: “Percussion, voice and body are three inseparable elements for understanding Sub-Saharan African spirituality” (García and Duysens 1999, 19). Some of the spiritual practices involve a figurine, or a person dressed as another being. Practices may also include food as an offering to the spirit world of ancestors, gods, deities, and the Earth. Catholic priests were frequently confused and frustrated by the practices that Africans observed. In the eighteenth century, Bishop Mariano Martí observed the African population in Curiepe and said that “the blacks had fetishes ‘figures, fruits, and other ridicule’” (qtd. in Pollak-Eltz 2000, 86).

Fetishes actually are an element that links the Afro-Venezuelan celebration of San Juan Bautista back to the Kongo. The Bakamba and Babembe peoples of the Kongo Kingdom have a guardian spirit called *nkisi*. A *nkisi* is a power figure filled with ancient medicinal propertues (García

and Duysens 1999, 16). If a dispute arises, or an individual is in need, community members consult the nkisi in the same way that San Juan is consulted in Venezuela. Both San Juan and nkisi are represented in the form of a figurine. To maintain the figurine of Saint John, the community selects a caregiver every year, just as in Central West Africa, a specific healer/priest cares for the nkisi. Furthermore, according to Chucho García “the term *malembe* means nkisi,” which comes from the Congolese Republic, and the term *malembe* is sung during the San Juan festivities in Curiepe and La Sabana (García and Duysens 1999, 16). García further expounds on the connections: “Take, for example, the word *malembe*, which in the Kikongo language means sweetly, slowly, but in Congo, it also refers to a traditional song among the Babembe” (García 1990, 84). “So the Congos who lived in Curiepe 300 years ago introduced the songs dedicated to Malembe” (García and Duysens 1999, 16).

Although the figure of nkisi does not exist in present-day Venezuela, it seems that the idea has been transferred to the practice of San Juan by Afro-Venezuelans (García and Duysens 1999, 16): “This nkisi is a small wooden figure with the image of a man, with his hanging phallus between his legs. In Curiepe there is the image of San Juan Congo, one of the few images of San Juan that we have obtained with a phallus on the coasts of Venezuela. The phallus is a characteristic of the Congolese images, which we believe was reproduced in the image of Saint John the Congo” (García 1990 84). San Juan Congo is claimed by many to be the original saint, as opposed to San Juan Bautista, and a tradition was created of celebrating of San Juan Congo near the old chapel the Saturday following San Juan Bautista’s festival. This would be the more private, less touristy celebration that has “become, as people said, ‘our festival,’ the one of the village,” or the “real one” (Guss 2000, 261). Guss adds: “The *velorio* to San Juan Congo . . . permitted the village to complete the cycle of historical recuperation” (262). When I asked if the saints were viewed with any trace of an African connection, Ms. Aidé Duarte from San José shared her point of view:

Well, I see the saints . . . in this way as Africans.... Saint John the Baptist was the saint that the enslaved Africans took to that came here from the *cumbes* in Curiepe, and they waited 365 days a year for Saint John the Baptist’s day for them to be free, and they go out and celebrate.... That is what the enslaved Africans did, those that filled up all of the maroon towns here in Barlovento, so that was a day for all of the enslaved to celebrate, that they waited all year for because they worked from sun up to sun down from Sunday to Sunday, and they waited for that exact day to be free to go out and enjoy and dance which was San Juan Congo, which is a black saint that is in the Curiepe community, but Saint John the Baptist was imposed by the Spanish, the bosses, the landowners which is the one celebrated in the church, understand that.¹⁷

Hence, on the plantations and in the *cumbes* of Barlovento, the day was very important for Africans, as it represented a time of freedom, expression, and fellowship. The original San Juan Congo figurine was made of wood and covered in plaster but disappeared in 1870 (Guss 2000, 261). The current figurine closely resembles that of San Juan Bautista with skin color of a light peach hue. However,

¹⁷ Aidé Duarte, interviewed by the author, August 2018.

most locals say that the San Juan Congo figurine is recognizably darker than the San Juan counterpart (Figure 3).¹⁸



Figure 3. A photo of San Juan Congo on the left and San Juan Bautista on the right.

The linkages between the word *malembe*, its meaning, the symbol of the *nkisi* and the saint all center around the spiritual practices carried from the Kongo to Venezuela. The word *malembe* lives on as a representation of the spiritual transfer to the present-day Christian homage to San Juan and, in Curiepe, San Juan Congo. This ongoing employment of ancestral memory aligns with the application of the double consciousness. As is evident in many African enslaved societies in the colonial world, the imposed Christian practices mask the African spiritual practices observed in figurines, prayer, healing, burials, lingual retentions, and more.

Returning to the process of the celebration, the figurine of San Juan is taken from his home, to the morning mass at church, then danced through the streets during the festival as the principal participant in the festivities. He is usually affixed on wooden planks and carried by four or more men

¹⁸ The question of the color and blond hair of the San Juan Congo figurine is presented by David M. Guss: “the issues of blackness signified by San Juan Congo were much more profound than simple pigmentation. For the blackness he represented was that of poverty and oppression. It was the economic and social marginalization that had defined the African condition since the arrival of the first slaves in the early 1500s. And indeed, while San Juan Congo might not have appeared black, he was certainly poor” (Guss 2000, 264).

who lift and sway the figurine to the rhythms and songs. The new clothing made for the saint's birthday, the adornments, and the mounting of the saint are all performed in his honor so that he will enjoy his festival days among the townspeople. San Juan "was not only the oracle whom Barloventeños consulted on matters affecting their lives and future, but also the saint who performed miracles and understood them, attending them in their difficulties, sorrows, illnesses, and death" (Brandt 2007, 464). It is a reciprocal relationship, then, with acts of recognizing, praising, and thanking the saint for all his help throughout the year on his birthday.

The San Juan Bautista festival generally takes place over three days and is filled with music, song, and dance. Each town boasts its own unique form of cultural expressions passed down through generations. During the festival you will find circles of people singing call and response songs, gathered around a group of drummers and waiting their turn to dance with a partner. Possibly due to the lack of quick and easy transit between towns before the roads were built, many different styles developed out of one or two foundational ones. These styles have changed over the decades depending on the type of drum, movement, song, and saint that comes out on its respective day. This and the mixture of African ethnic groups is what gives Venezuela such a rich variety of unique instrument, rhythm, song, and dance styles.

Drums

The drum is the most quintessential instrument of African descendants in the Americas and is played in most of the traditional music of Barlovento. During enslavement, the music of the Africans and their descendants was both a form of recreation as well as resistance, as it was used to communicate, organize, and execute revolts and resurrections. It has been observed that, in contrast to the European style of drumming, African drumming mimics the sounds of nature, including the human voice, and is used as a form of communication (León 2007, 24). Ester Ugueto, an Afro-Venezuelan dancer and instructor, expounds on why drums were an important form of communication: "Remember . . . they gathered black people from all areas of Africa and took them and mixed them. So, to be able to interpret what they wanted to say, they had to do it with the sound of the drums."¹⁹ To continue the tradition of communicating through the sound of the drums, new materials had to be found to create instruments that would look and sound identical, or at least similar, to the ones used at home.

The drum is an instrument that communicates with humans and the spirit world, thus allowing Afro-Venezuelans to secretly connect. The vibration and sound coming through the drum empowers groups near and far and reaffirms their cultural practices while also serving as a healing agent on a physical and psychological level. As articulated by Bartolomé Duysens: "we might state that – the drum – [sic] dance provides a space in which to resist politically the white hegemony imposed by the nation-state" (García and Duysens 1999, 56). The drums symbolize power and empowerment, and

¹⁹ Ester Ugueto, interviewed by author, November 2008.

the practice of drumming within the observance of Catholic practices is a form of resistance and a maintenance of beliefs.

The music of a marginalized group is often appropriated for the pleasure of the dominant society. There is evidence of this in Venezuela through the treatment of drum music. The word drum in Spanish is *tambor*, and many of the Afro-Venezuelan rhythms begin with the title “*tambor de*,” or “drum from” followed by whichever town it hails from. However, among the general population from cities, who possibly have little connection to or understanding of Afro-Venezuelan culture, the title for any of the rhythms has been simplified to *tambor*. One may view this as recognition of Afro-Venezuelan culture, but on the other hand, it signals an ignorance of the full significance of the cultural celebration, by not naming the rhythm which would signify the cultural diversity of the drums along with the origin and purpose of the rhythm. Nonetheless, these drum rhythms can prompt almost any Venezuelan to begin moving their hips and feet, which is indicative of its influence in the larger society, even though the culture has not been recognized as deserving merit. This further demonstrates Venezuela’s insistence on invisibility where no recognition is attached to the carriers of a national cultural contribution.

Throughout the Barlovento region are eight different types of instruments of African origin: *Mina/cumaco*, *curbata*, *redondo*, *tambora/fulía*, *furruco*, *quitiplás*, *guarura* and *carángano*. This may be the region with the largest variety of Afro-Venezuelan instruments in the country. Again, connecting to the land, artists from Barlovento explained the methodology and importance behind the process of collecting the materials for the drums and other instruments. There is a particular time within the moon’s phases to cut the wood for drums and the bamboo for the *quitiplás* instrument. This time period is referred to as the waning phase, which is within six or seven days of the decline of the moon. Jesús Duarte, a musician and educator, explains that the waning moon is their harvest moon, and their connection to the wood is an aspect of the magic-religious part of their culture that their ancestors used as prayer in conjunction with cutting the wood.²⁰

Mina, Cumaco and Curbata Drums

Chucho García states that both the *mina* and *curbata* drums are from the *Mina* civilization of Benin (García n.d., 55). The *mina* is a long drum made from the avocado tree and deer skin connected by with pegs on the skin not unlike many Nigerian drums. The instrument is perched on an upright angle to be played.

In the Vargas State of Venezuela, which neighbors the Barlovento region, the town José de La Sabana, is home to many African drum music traditions. Their drum rhythms are marked by the *cumacos*, which are large drums made with the skin on one end of a single piece of hollowed-out tree trunk. *Cumacos* are as tall as six feet, whereas the *curbata* drum is about three feet tall and played alongside the *cumaco* and *mina*. The *cumaco* drum is said to have been derived from the *mina* drum,

²⁰ Jesús Duarte, interviewed by the author, August 2018.

which is about the same size, but the animal skin is usually nailed into the wood on the outside and the drum is played on the ground.

Culo e'puya

The *tambores redondos*, or round drums, are also called *culo e'puya* drums and often consist of a set of three cylindrical drums. The drums are usually “identified by gender” and include the categorization of: “hembra (female), cruzado (hermaphroditic), and macho (male), in order of size from smallest to largest” (Brandt 2007, 467). The skins on the hembra and macho are usually made with sloth skin and the cruzado with deer skin. In some towns the names of these drums are *cruzao* or *cruzado*, *pujao*, and *corrío*. This nomenclature and origin are further expounded on by García: “Morphologically their sense *ngoma*, *nguan ngoma* and their *mwana ngoma* - signifying the mother, father and child drum - are identical to the *tambores redondos*: the *cruzao*, *pujao* and the *corrío*. The difference lies in the mode of execution: in Africa they are played with two sticks, in Venezuela only with one” (García and Duysens 1999, 58). “Ngoma” means drum in the Kongo region where García conducted research on Africa traditions related to Venezuela. These drums have been linked to the Bambamba and Mangbele people of the Congo by García and Juan Liscano (García and Duysens 1999, 58). Lastly, Brandt suggests that the name *redondo* is not a reflection of the round shape of the drum, but the circle that is formed by spectators and dancers who engage in circular motions of the dance.

Quitiplás

Quitiplás, a set of bamboo instruments, are cut into footlong pieces and played by hitting the hollowed log set on the ground. Similar instruments have been found in Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (T. Hernández and Ardizzone 2005, 119). “In the Badouma tribe in Gabon of Congo, Africa, some tubes similar to the Quitiplás are accompanied with maracas and sanzas, as well as in Nigeria where they are played in pairs” (Mendoza 2000, 37). Also, in the Caribbean, bamboo has been used for various musical instruments such as the Trinidadian “tambou bamboo” (Guss and Waxer 2020). Since Trinidad is an island adjacent to the north coast of Venezuela, the instrument may have been carried during or after the slave trade from one place to another. In *Barlovento: Nuestro Patrimonio Cultural* García theorizes that these instruments were [re]created in Curiepe and adopted by other towns in Barlovento (n.d., 57).

Tambores de parranda and the Furruco

As explained by Jesús Duarte, the *tambores de parranda* (processional drums) bring life to parades and December celebrations and are more widely played throughout the country. In areas of Barlovento the *furruco*, a friction drum, accompanies parades and sounds like the low roar of a lion. The drum is carved from the avocado tree and has a stick in the middle of the membrane on the top of the skin. According to the *Atlas de tradiciones venezolanas* the furruco is an instrument derived from the *zambomba española* or Spanish hand drum (T. Hernández and Ardizzone 2005, 149). However, Chucho García

asserts that the instrument originates from the *kinfuiti* drum of the Congo and is used to communicate with the world of the ancestors (n.d., 54).²¹

Tamboritas de fulía

The group of three small fulía drums is dedicated to the tradition of making promises to the saint. The *Atlas de tradiciones venezolanas* lists the tamboritas de fulía as “descendants of distant African drums” (T. Hernández and Ardizzone 2005, 165). They are used during the celebration of the Cross of May, wakes, and vigils and are also partnered with the maracas, a plate (*platillo*), and the singing of décimas by soloists and choral response (133).

The fact that these drums have been recreated for centuries in the same or similar manner as those in Africa speaks to the importance of cultural continuity for survival. The physical and mental pursuit of liberation requires many strategies and tools, and these instruments serve as a means to communicate with members of the community and the spirit world. The implementation of specific rhythms has transitioned into new sounds created by each generation, yet the empowerment from the ancestral rhythms remains a constant, as evidenced in the African diaspora through fusions such as hip hop, reggae, and jazz.

Dance

The circle is a consistent component that stems from Congolese cultures and is now observed in Afro-Venezuelan dances in the hip motion, foot pattern, dance enclave, and partner interactions. In these dances the circling, twisting, and switching of the hips for the men and women is a core element and has been traced to many traditional Congolese dances. The same emphasis on hip movements is found throughout African diasporan dance styles such as soca, samba, and salsa, which all originated in ports and towns where enslaved Congolese people were taken. In most Afro-Venezuelan communities in Barlovento and La Sabana, dances for San Juan are performed inside a circle and with varying circular motions.

During the San Juan Festival in La Sabana, following the processional from the church and after the verses of malembe have been sung, there is a transition to the faster rhythm when dancing may commence. A circle is created to surround the dancing partners, while the cumaco and curbata drums direct the dance. This rhythm is executed under three distinct rhythms: *el cangué*, *el mazisón*, and *el mono y perra*. As discussed by Ester Ugueto, the rhythms are played in this sequence throughout the day.

El cangué is the slow rhythm. This rhythm is not for dancing. It is the greeting to Saint John the Baptist. The mazisón is the dance for warming up. It has a rhythm of *saco pasado*, which means it doesn't have a rhythm. In fact, one of the songs says, “dance the mazisón, it doesn't have *son* (rhythm).” And in the mono y perra, it is the part

²¹ The kinfuiti has been described as a key instrument also in Cuban ritual music, “played by applying internal friction” (Juang and Morrisette 2008, 327).

where you show off your skills. And you show your partner (or you invite him or her) to share your dance and in other cases it is used to demonstrate love. (2008 interview)

Ester also specified that dance partners are not necessarily husband and wife. Anyone can grab a partner of the opposite sex to dance with them in the circle. I have observed cousins, neighbors, and complete strangers dancing together. This is a time to dance freely, and it is understood between couples that it is a time to share with the community, exalt the saint, and honor tradition.

Besides the San Juan festival, Barlovento preserves other celebrations and dance styles. The *quichimba*, as described by Jesús Duarte, is a salon dance from the colonial era that combines nature and culture as a form of amusement performed by Afro-Venezuelans that was historically a space for mocking the Europeans. There were seven different verses of song that directed the dancers, but now only three survive. It begins with the men and women in two facing lines in the “Comadre Juana” (Close Friend Juana) verse as the dancers complete every move the singer calls out. The double consciousness is at play here as the dancers mimic the formality of the dances of the Europeans then break away into the playful and energetic hopping as found in the freedom of African cultural dances. In the “La Rana” (frog) verse the happiness of childhood is demonstrated as dancers hop like frogs. The third stanza, “Aguacero,” (hard rainfall) demonstrates the connection between the male farmers and the women, where the woman would cover the man from the rain. To dance like the European and mock their demeanor represents the disruption of European power by weakening their importance while at the same time diminishing the gravity of the situation. Being able to secretly laugh at one’s oppressor enacts the double consciousness of the collective.

Also from Barlovento is a theatrical dance called *carambulé* and *sambarambulé*, which depicts the tale of a man dancing and singing with a group of townspeople. In San José, *carambulé* features a man with coal spread over his face who is bitten by a large snake and dies (García n.d., 42). However, in the *sambarambulé*, as it is called in Curiepe, an *hechicero/hechicera*—witch doctor, or in Kikongo, *nganga*, healer—from Curiepe brings herbs and an elixir for him to drink (García n.d., 42). He soon recovers and everyone celebrates. This addition of the healer displays a continuation of Afro-Venezuelans connection to natural healing, the land, and to the power of prayer within healing. All of the varieties of dances in the Barlovento region have some form of communication or message, and many of them reflect a connection to nature or the spirit world.

The wide variety of dances and what they communicate display the strong ancestral connection for Barloventeños. The ancestors of today’s generation formed the dances from their cultural memory while creating new fusions from their current circumstances and ambitions. From the circular patterns in the formation and movement of the dances to the connection to power and nature and the inclusion of the healer in theatrical dance, they all convey messages not plainly obvious. Dance in itself can be self-affirming, freeing, and communicative, and these are all components of the movements in Barlovento.

Songs

When devotees ask for help from a saint, they offer something in exchange, and on the saint's day, they carry out their promise, which may include singing, dancing, playing instruments, making an outfit or adornments for the saint, calling the saint into their homes, and praying to the saint. Repetition in the music and singing can be interpreted as a strategy "to communicate with deities, or forces and powers raised to the level of deities" (León 2007, 4). The call and response form of singing in Afro-Venezuelan communities is a collective way to honor and thank the saint, as also observed in many African and African diasporic cultures.

The lyrics of the songs for San Juan depict the saint as a human being, a friend, and a spiritual entity. Worshipers establish a personal connection with the saint, as is reflected in the nicknames for him such as, "el borracho" (the drunkard). A line from a typical song sung to the rhythm of the mina drum is: "San Juan Guaricongo, cabeza pelá, quítate la gorra, pa' verte bailar" (Shaven-headed San Juan Guaricongo, take your cap off, and let us see you dance) (Vasallos del Sol 2008). The saint is told to take his hat off so that he can dance, exactly like the men who normally remove their hats to enter the circle and dance with a woman. The informal tone of speaking to the saint as a friend is present in the use of "te," or the informal "you." As there is no formality in the song's expression, San Juan is treated as a member of the community, as a friend.

According to Sixto Hernández, a refrain of the San Juan songs in San José is: "Malembe, malembe, malembe no más, si San Juan supiera que hoy es su día, malembe malembe, malembe no más" (Malembe, malembe malembe no more, if San Juan knew that today is his day, malembe, malembe, malembe no more) (2018). This refrain insinuates that the saint would want to party if he knew this was his day, and the malembe, or the slow section of the celebration, would be cut short to move to the faster rhythms for dancing.

The term *cangué* or *gangue* is a possible alteration of *nganga*. In the Kongo, *nganga* is a word from the Kikongo language that means healer or priest and could be a linguistic carryover from a spiritual system that is now part of the newly fused one in Venezuela. *Gangué* is the slow call that directly follows the church mass. The song begins: "Ay gangueee levanta Juan, hoy es tu día Juan." If *gangue* does signify a healer/priest, then the song says, "Oh priest get Juan up, today is your day Juan." The song continues: "Si San Juan supiera cuando era su día, del cielo baja dando su alegría" (If San Juan knew when his day was, he would come from heaven giving his happiness).

One specific expression heard throughout Barlovento is a call of *olole*, which serves as the introduction to various songs and informs participants on how to respond. According to Ramos Guédez, this expression can be linked to several uses in Central West African languages: in KiMbundu it means a sound, or whisper; in LiLuba it means to remove a charm or spell from someone (2001, 187). The fact that this expression is ubiquitous in Barlovento's songs speaks to the strength and necessity of its transfer to the new religious practices and communication among African descendants. Collective singing in Barlovento allows Afro-Venezuelans to connect to each other and the spirit world in conjunction with dance and music. The deliberate use of African terms along with dedicated singing

reinforces the African spirituality now infused into the adoration of Catholic saints. This form of connecting with the spirit world again is one of resistance and empowerment where one does not follow the directives but uses ancestral memory and ontology for self-preservation.

Language

Although there is no fully creole or African-based language spoken in Barlovento, many African words have been a part of the region's vocabulary for many centuries. Scholars such as Chucho García have conducted research on more specific linguistic connections:

In the Republic of the Congo, *bilonga* is a medicine bundle. In Venezuela it refers to herbal medicine and is the name of a community known for its healers. *Nganga*, which in the Republic of the Congo designates healer, is also the name of a Venezuelan community near Bilonga, also known for its healers. *Cafunga* in the Republic of the Congo is a style of food preparation involving wrapping in banana leaves especially *chikuanga*, balls of cassava flour, steamed in the leaves. In Venezuela *cafunga* is a dessert of ripe bananas, coconut, brown sugar, and cloves, baked in banana leaves. (García 2004, 17)

Without much change, these words related to food and healing have survived for many centuries and preserve direct connections to Africa.

Luisa Madriz of Curiepe recalls a lingual memory of her grandmother: "She talked about the Loangos and the Congos, she would say, 'that is a black Congo' and . . . my grandmother would say when [other people's] language wasn't correct, 'he or she is speaking Loango.'"²² Her memory, spanning some decades back, affirms the Bantu and Central West Africa connection simply from two words, *Congo* and *Loango*. Additionally, *Loango* here is used to refer to someone who does not speak proper Spanish, as would be the case for newly arrived, enslaved peoples. This word also highlights the relics of African language that were discernable in Venezuelan speech.

Sixto Hernández cites a phrase that elders in Barlovento would say in difficult times, "Malabí, Maticú, Lambí." As explained in the glossary of Juan Pablo Sojo's book, *Nochebuena negra*, a woman elder from 1918 shared that they would utter such phrases "in moments of danger, like storms, tremors in the ground, when the dogs howled, when suddenly a bird died in the corral" (Sojo 1972, 201). The manner by which a local population expresses itself in a verbal and linguistic paradigm is a main ingredient of culture, and African-based words and phrases persist and are imbedded in the daily speech of Barloventenos and Venezuelans at large.

Central West African languages are heavily represented in Barlovento's linguistic retentions and inform on concepts or terms that were essential for their societies. Africans found that there were specific things that the European language could not express, thus requiring the insertion of certain

²² Luisa Madriz, interviewed by the author, August 2018.

terms into the Spanish language. These terms further enforce the necessity of the double consciousness to remain connected to one's culture, community and spirituality.

Conclusions

The objective of this study is to provide a comprehensive understanding of Afro-Venezuelan cultural elements that are manifested in Venezuela today and their application towards resistance in an oppressive society. For centuries, Eurocentric scholars described African cultures as meaningless representations of uncivilized peoples. In particular, they labeled the music a noisy racket, the dancing as frenzied jumping, and the languages a mumbo-jumbo of sounds. However, over the past five decades, other researchers have begun to deconstruct and question this Eurocentric assumption of the simplicity and the dismissal of African cultures. This study builds on the archival and anecdotal works that delve into the complexities of African cultures of the Diaspora.

The system of slavery was perpetually aimed at breaking the enslaved Africans to a state of surrender and powerlessness. When in a state of captivity, one's power lies in a delicate imbalance and being connected to one's culture is a form of maintaining the power over mind, spirit, and body. Remembering and recreating rituals within the imposed religion and living conditions served as the reinforcement of Afro-Venezuelans' spirituality, identity, and power, thereby disrupting the aim of debilitation. Venezuela's Barlovento region stands out as a model of "ancestral memory and continuity" based on the clear preservation of many African traditions. Though the larger and dominant society shunned their presence, Afro-Venezuelans created their own microcosmic society that served as their way of resisting discrimination, while reinforcing their cultural identity.

The reciprocal relationship between self and the outer world of nature and spirit observed in Barlovento is based on the ontology of many African groups, including those of Central West Africa. This relationship is maintained through music, singing and dancing, which are forms of praying, healing, and exalting. This ontological view is the impetus for the agency of Barloventenos who remain mentally, spiritually, and physically free through their cultural reproductions. Contrary to what capitalism and appropriation have historically done to African-derived music, the cultural productions of Afro-Venezuelans are not purposed only for public performance, but serve as a form of identification and survival.

Only in 1999 were Afro-Venezuelans finally included in the constitution along with indigenous populations. The policies that followed included access to education, health care, and housing for all citizens, now inclusive of Afro-Venezuelans who have advocated for full governmental support, yet the future will depend on the next generation's actions and whether they will continue the quest for recognition and full inclusion in the country. Alongside their ongoing battle for inclusion, and amidst ongoing political and economic strife, the Afro-Venezuelan activists whom I have met are all closely connected to their cultural traditions, which serve as their anchor and propel them forward to do the work of reclamation they feel called to do.

Throughout the colonized lands of the Americas, African music, dance, and spirituality were applied to the new realities and used in mental and physical quests for liberation. Newly blended cultural practices were created on the plantations and in the secret spaces of Africans in the diaspora. These creations can be viewed as ways through which Africans protested imposed limitations and rejected what was forced upon them as humans, while at the same time finding a form of entertainment and release. The celebrations, creolized languages, foods, and songs in Venezuela share much in common with many communities of African descendants of the diaspora as cultural survivals and forms of resistance.

Mesi Walton teaches Spanish language and culture at Howard University. She recently completed her PhD in Afro-Latin Studies in the Department of African Studies at Howard University. Her research centers around populations of African ancestry in the diaspora and examines how African culture influences identity, resistance, and survival. Her latest work explores dance, music, and spirituality in Venezuela and Colombia. She also organizes cultural exchange tours throughout Latin America for youth and adults.

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