
MAROON STRUGGLE IN COLOMBIA

Gabino Hernandez Palomino

Translated from Spanish by Héctor Antonio Corporán

The struggle for freedom was an historical constant among Black people; the history of the Colombian national struggle for freedom drew inspiration from Black people's efforts to gain liberty. To meet their objective, African slaves enacted different forms of resistance, such as going on hunger strikes, jumping overboard from slave ships on the voyage to the Americas, committing suicide and infanticide, poisoning Spaniards, running away from plantations and into the forests and directly confronting colonists.

The word "maroon" applied to rebel slaves denotes being wild, autonomous, independent. The Maroon struggle created the first free community of Black people in South America in 1713: Palenque de San Basilio in the province of Bolívar, Colombia.

Palenque de San Basilio is the result of a most remarkable insurrectionary movement of slaves in Colombia. Under the leadership of Benkos Bioho, ex-monarch of an African state, 37 men and women banded together to form a liberation movement. Successful raids on plantations for food and supplies contributed to the growth of their Maroon army. To safeguard their *palenque*, or palisaded village, Maroons developed strategies for defending against attack, communicating, keeping watch, obtaining provisions and wearing down the enemy.

In one of the many battles against the Spanish army, the Maroons took as hostage Francisco de Campos, second-in-command of the expedition. This act forced the Spanish authorities to seek an "amicable settlement." In a Charter of Pardon ratified in 1713, the King of Spain granted the Maroons their absolute liberty and the ownership of a specific territory. Here they created a culture, an economy and a social structure.

Their language continues to be spoken to this day.

The Maroons' struggle for freedom pointed the way for Colombia in its struggle to gain independence from the Spaniards. Neither the Indian revolt against landowners towards the end of the 18th century, nor the independence movement led by Simón Bolívar, can be understood without knowing the history of Palenque de San Basilio.

Today Palenque de San Basilio has approximately 5,000 inhabitants. Most men raise cattle and cultivate the land; women market sweets, *bollos* (a tamale-like snack with cornmeal filling), and products harvested by the men such as cassava, corn, rice, yams, plantains and other fruits and vegetables.

The community's formal educational system consists of a secondary school and an elementary school that operates without a government budget. Its health needs are addressed by a small center managed by a medical aide and visited once a week by a doctor.

At present, Palenque de San Basilio is experiencing a crisis. Its standard of living is deteriorating, and Palenqueros lack sufficient land for cultivation. Many of the programs implemented by government and non-government organizations aim at resolving only immediate needs, or they are the result of inadequate plans which the community accepts without real understanding of the projects' goals and objectives. A poor understanding of our cultural values leads outside agencies to violate our cultural principles.

To us land represents hope, the way of the future and therefore, the way we can continue to exist. To lose the land which is our means of support and subsistence is to remain in slavery. The lack of land for cultivation shuts out the possibility of development and accelerates the migration of young people to cities like Cartagena, Barranquilla, Riohacha and the neighboring country of Venezuela. In these places Palenqueros seek new horizons but because of their low educational level and economic conditions there, they end up being incorporated into the large belts of poverty that exist in these cities. In the last ten years a group of young people has seen the need

Gabino Hernandez Palomino is western region coordinator for Asociación Cimarrón (an organization concerned with Afro-Colombian issues) in Colombia. He holds a law degree from the Universidad Libre in Cali. He is the author of "Black People's Participation in the Formation of Colombian Society," published by Heraldo magazine in Barranquilla and he writes regularly for Palenque, the official publication of Asociación Cimarrón in Medellín.



José Valdez Simanca and Graciela Salgado Valdez play the *yamaró* and the *pechiche*, the two drums that are typical of most Palenquero musical styles. Photo by Lorenzo Miranda Torres

to develop community goals. These include: socio-economic development; ethno-education (which has been taking place for the last three years); recovery of our land, culture and history; recognition of Palenque de San Basilio as a municipality; and acknowledgement of Palenque de San Basilio as an important part of mankind's historic cultural heritage.

Despite the difficulties noted, we continue to resist by preserving many of the cultural traditions of our ancestors. We speak a language derived in part from the Bantu languages of Africa, and we also speak Spanish. We are bilingual. Our own language, in addition to being a means of communication, keeps alive the memory of our ancestors.

Many older religious rites are preserved, such as the *lumbalú*, which is performed at wakes

as an expression of the new life awaiting the deceased. During the *lumbalú* performance, much use is made of historical musical instruments like the *pechiche* and the *llamador* (or *yamaró*), drums that can serve as signaling devices to send messages about recent events. These instruments were once used by the Maroons to alert the population about the presence of the Spanish army. The music and dance preserve many African elements.

Cuagros are social organizations characteristic of independent palenques (Maroon communities) in Colombia. One of their activities is to teach members the art of self-defense against outsiders or members of another *cuagro*. In this connection it is interesting to note that a number of great palenque boxers have achieved national and international renown. Maroon methods of combat were used to confront the Spaniards, and they guaranteed that a person was well-trained and permanently ready for combat. The increasing acculturation of many Palenqueros has brought the *cuagros* and other cultural elements to the verge of extinction.

The *cuagros* have been transformed into what are known today as *juntas*, organizations whose members are Palenqueros drawn from Palenque de San Basilio itself, neighboring towns and large regional cities. *Juntas* have some of the same characteristics as *cuagros*, and each one functions independently of any central governing body. Palenquero cultural values form a fundamental basis both for our culture and for the many contributions made by Palenqueros towards the development of what could be called "Colombian culture."

Palenqueros and the other Black communities of Colombia denounce quincentenary commemorations of the so-called "Discovery of America." From the unloading of the first Black men and women as slaves until today we have been victims of human rights violations and objects of racial and social discrimination that force us to live in conditions of extreme poverty.

Finally, understanding the objectives of the Festival of American Folklife, we believe this great event should be made an effective tool for reflection. It should be a way of carrying out programs about 500 years of *self-discovery* and should have as its horizon the preservation and strengthening of the practices of traditional cultures in the Americas.