

Tipití: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America

ISSN: 2572-3626 (online)

Volume 3 | Issue 1

Article 1

June 2005

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Cover Page Footnote:

Acknowledgments. In the spirit of sustained collaboration, a number of scholars have shared their manuscripts, ideas, and insights with me over many years, long before their material was published. I have learned much from their works, unpublished and published, and draw extensively from them here. For such collegiality I thank, in particular, Kris Lane, Diego Quiroga, Jean Muteba Rahier and Padre Rafael Savoia. For helping me conceptualize racialized systems of cultural representation in broad frameworks, I am indebted to Arlene Torres and Dianne Pinderhughes. I thank Kris Lane, Diego Quiroga, Jean Rahier, Sibby Whitten, and Michelle Wibbelsman for a constructive reading of this manuscript.

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Recommended Citation

Whitten, Norman E. Jr. (2005). "Emerald Freedom: “With Pride in the Face of the Sun”," *Tipití: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 1.

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Emerald Freedom: “With Pride in the Face of the Sun”

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Esmeraldas, so named for its three-tiered canopied rain forest in northwest Ecuador, became home to self-liberated African and Afro-Hispanic people in the mid 1500s. Different groupings seized their freedom in the north and south of the province after fortuitous shipwrecks, intermarried with indigenous people, became the dominant force in the Emerald Province and resisted all attempts by the Spanish military and the Roman Catholic Church to subdue and subvert them (Cabello Balboa 1945). In 1599 direct descendants of one grouping of the original maroons, 56-year old don Francisco de Arobe and his two sons, don Pedro and don Domingo (ages 22 and 18 respectively), journeyed to Quito to pay homage to the Spanish Court (Lane 2002). Their portraits were painted by an indigenous artist, Andrés Sánchez Gallque, in a magnificent work entitled “Esmeraldas Ambassadors.” Today, a restored version of this painting hangs in the Museo de Américas, Madrid. Historian Kris Lane captures the elegance of these Zambo lords in this manner:

The men’s noses, ears, and lips are studded with strange crescents and balls and tubes of gold. Beneath starched white ruffs flow finely bordered ponchos and capes of brocaded silk, their drape lovingly rendered by the painter: here a foil-like blue, there bronze, now bright orange against velvety black. Only don Francisco’s poncho appears to be woolen, perhaps fashioned from imported Spanish broadcloth. The three are further adorned with matching shell necklaces, and don Francisco holds a supple, black felt hat with a copper trim. Don Domingo holds a more pedestrian sombrero . . . and all three appear to be wearing fitted doublets of contemporary, late-Renaissance European style. These are all but hidden, nestled beneath flowing Chinese overgarments, which are, in turn, cut in a distinctly Andean fashion (2002:xi).

Over four hundred and sixty years have passed since the first moments of *cimarronaje* (marronage) in Esmeraldas, and over four centuries have gone by since the aesthetic moment of magnificent representation of three of the elite of the earliest Afro-indigenous American republic. Through

4 Norman E. Whitten, Jr.

three hundred years of colonial rule that featured European-dominated gold lust, slavery of indigenous and African peoples, and a shift from a Renaissance to Baroque ethos, Afro-Hispanic Esmeraldians endured (Lane 2002). They fought in the wars of liberation and later in the Ecuadorian Liberal Revolution. In the twenty-first century, as in previous centuries, they regard themselves proudly as the true Christians of Ecuador. They manifest some of the most Spanish and the most African music and story telling in the Americas, and they are among the poorest people in contemporary Latin America.

BLACKNESS IN ECUADOR

During the conquest and colonial era the Spanish divided up the people of their vast empire into two republics: that of the Spanish, and that of the *indios*. No place was ever created under colonial rule for black people, *los negros*, nor was a construction of blackness, *lo negro*, recognized. Afro-Latin American people created their own niches, environmental adaptations, ideologies, and cosmologies. Among the core features of blackness in Ecuador, as in Colombia, Venezuela, and elsewhere in Latin



Figure 1. A woman from the Chota-Mira Valley region sells food to travelers en route to San Lorenzo

America and the Caribbean, is the enduring emphasis on *freedom*. One is either free or not. There is no middle ground (Price 1979, Whitten and Torres 1998, Romero and Lane 2002).

Three regions of Ecuador have been characterized as "black" from the colonial era to the present: the Province of Esmeraldas, in the rain-forested and canopied coastal zone of the north; the Chota-Mira River Valley region, which undulates through the low Andean *montaña* slopes, also in the north; and the Catamayo Valley of *el austro* in the south of the country, where Amazonian and Andean piedmont regions are conjoined. The first emerged in bursts of self-liberation in the mid-sixteenth century, just as the colonial Royal High Court (*audiencia*) of Quito was establishing its territory. The other two began with violent enslavement of African people by Europeans in the late sixteenth to early seventeenth century that created two (of many) very different economies within the large and highly diverse Audiencia de Quito: one depended on plantation agriculture, the other on yeoman skills; both were based on the forced labor of enslaved African-descended people and Afro-indigenous-descended people.

In the Chota-Mira Valley region, the Jesuits were the landowners, exploiters of the decimated indigenous population, importers of enslaved Africans, and owners and overseers of the expanding black slave population from their entry in 1586 until their expulsion in 1767. After the expulsion, enslaved people were auctioned to private *hacendados* by crown authorities. In the southern Province of Loja, black slavery was introduced by the latter quarter of the sixteenth century. Household servants, field workers, and itinerant gold miners from Colombia, Spain and Africa were brought to the area by individuals (Whitten and Quiroga 1998:82–83). Fluency of intermarriage and migration in this sector led the various ethnicities there to dissipate into the general population by the late twentieth century. Black people exist in some numbers throughout Ecuador, in large metropolitan areas such as Quito and Guayaquil, and in the small Andean city, Ibarra. In the Amazonian region, Coca has a sizable Afro-Ecuadorian population. Nonetheless, most Ecuadorians erroneously associate all black people with either Esmeraldas or the Chota-Mira Valley (Rahier 1991, 2003), even those born and reared for generations elsewhere.

In 1992, blackness clearly emerged as a national quality spanning coastal, Andean, and Amazonian regions. Its ethnic nationalist expression was called *négritude*, coined initially by the Martinique writer Aimée Césaire. As the movement surged under such cultural rubrics as "the advancement of the black community," and identification of the movement among white and black intellectuals was expressed by the representations *afro-ecuatorianos(as)* (Afro-Ecuadorians) and *afro-latinoamericanos(as)*

6 Norman E. Whitten, Jr.

(Afro-Latin Americans), varied associations between those so identifying and the indigenous movement came into being. By the twenty-first century the most common representations are *lo negro*, and *afro-latinoamericanos*, and less so *négritud* (Spanish of *négritude*, but with other meanings).

As the concept of Afro-Indigenous peoples also became salient in national discourse, the concept of *zambaje* entered the Ecuadorian literary lexicon (Rueda Novoa 2001, 2002; Whitten in press a and b). *Zambo(a)* (sometimes *zambaigo*), long a term of identity and reference in Esmeraldas, and elsewhere in the Americas, signifies freedom and dignity. It refers to the genetic blending of African peoples with indigenous peoples. The epitome of such blending is historically embodied in the painting of the three cosmopolitan ambassadors and lords from Esmeraldas, described at the opening of this article. Significantly, perhaps, in the restoration of the Museo de Américas' painting, the features of *zambaje* described by Kris Lane (2002), were transformed to very black, denying thereby the representation and significance of mixed heritage of the Afro-indigenous *cimarrones*.

To be black in Ecuador is to be stigmatized by racist and racist attributes, regardless of political power, class, or social esteem (Rahier 1999a, 1999b, 2003; Robinson 2002). A prominent black congressman from Esmeraldas, Jaime Hurtado González, founded the political party Democratic Popular Movement (MPD), and twice ran for president of the republic. In 1984, he obtained seven percent of the vote and in 1988 he gained five percent (de la Torre 2002:23–24). In 1998 he and his two body guards were brutally assassinated in front of the legislative palace in Quito. Subsequent and to-date unfounded accusations of his alleged linkages with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) were made and the Ecuadorian military occupied the black areas of the interior of Esmeraldas Province, especially the Ónzole River region. This is a region where Afro-Ecuadorians had recently been granted legal rights to land they had worked since the mid-sixteenth century (Lane 2002). During this occupation an association was made between an unconfirmed accusation of a prominent congressman's involvement with radical Colombian politics, and an Ecuadorian region known for its "blackness" and its "remoteness." In the face of this military action, publicly espoused Blackness, as ideological *négritud*, retreated into local and regional discussion groups (see Whitten 2003a, 2003b).

Many Ecuadorians express displeasure with the existence of black movements of self-assertion and often deny that Afro-Ecuadorians themselves ever asserted cultural constructs of blackness prior to the indigenous movement, which erupted in 1990 with the first Levantamiento

Indígena (Whitten 1996). Black pride, however, has long existed, side by side with self-deprecation (Rahier 2003). Offered below is a poem, written by the late *esmeraldeño* Nelson Estupiñán Bass in 1954—some fifty years ago—to move the reader to a level of cultural appreciation of, and pride in, blackness and enduring freedom in the face of oppression:

Negro, negro renegrado,	Black, black, blackened
negro, hermano del carbón,	black, brother of charcoal,
negro de negros nacido,	black of blacks born,
negro ayer, mañana al hoy.	black yesterday, today and tomorrow.
Algunos creen insultarme	Some believe they insult me
gritándole mi color	mocking my color
más yo mismo lo pregonó	but I myself proclaim it
con orgullo frente al sol:	with pride in the face of the sun:
Negro he sido, negro soy,	Black I have been, black I am,
negro vengo, negro voy,	black I come, black I go,
negro bien negro nací	black real black I was born
negro negro he de vivir,	black black I must live,
y como negro morir.”	and as black must die.
(Estupiñán Bass 1954:50, 53; translation by Norman E. Whitten, Jr., and Arlene Torres).	

There can be no doubt about the affirmation of the identity of blackness in this poem—*negro soy, negro voy*—it is first person, publicly personal, declarative, poetic, and moving.

ESMERALDAS: THE EMERALD PROVINCE

The land of Esmeraldas, and its free Afro-indigenous population, is the primary focus of this essay. But, in addition, Esmeraldas is shown to be a cultural system in a wider political-economic and cultural-ecological matrix that ranges northward into Colombia.

Christianity pervades the cosmology of the *afroesmeraldeños*. Some aficionados of Afro-Americana and other scholars and activists are bothered by the self-assertion of black people in this area that they are true Catholic Christians, people who resisted subversion by the imperialism of the Roman Catholic Church and resisted the ideology and praxis of inquisitorial curates. Esmeraldians nonetheless cooperate with priests, nuns, and brotherhoods who show respect for their beliefs and practices. *Respect* is a key to understanding the resilience of black people of Esmeraldas, as elsewhere. Those who respect people and their customs may move freely in and out of the Afro-Esmeraldian world, but those who seek to

8 Norman E. Whitten, Jr.

deprecate or humiliate their persons and their lifeways may find people there to be uncooperative and unresponsive. Respect and freedom are clearly tied together in the twenty-first century as in the sixteenth through the twentieth. I say this at the outset so that the reader will appreciate the richness of cosmology, and not dismiss Afro-Ecuadorian culture as “assimilated” because of its Christianity.

Cultural Poetics

A predominantly male expression of cultural dynamics is that of the *décima*, a Spanish oral and written literary form common to Afro-Latin American regions of Latin America, and pervasive in Esmeraldas Province (Rahier 1997). Below is an example of part of a *décima* recorded by Juan García (1988), an Afro-Esmeraldian intellectual and activist from San Lorenzo, northern Esmeraldas:

El sol se vistió de luto,	The sun went into mourning,
la tierra se estremeció,	the earth began to shake,
las piedras lloraron sangre	the stones cried tears of blood
cuando Jesús expiró	When Jesus expired
(Rahier 1999a:19; translation by Jean Muteba Rahier)	

The title of this *décima* is “The Passion of Christ.” It falls into the cultural realm of *lo divino* (the divine), a heavenly zone accessible only through women (that contrasts with *lo humano*, the rest of the universe, including earth and hell [Quiroga 2003]). Although only men—usually those who are not literate (García 1988; Rahier 1999a, 1999d)—compose, memorize, pass down through generations, and recite *décimas*, women sing them during hymns of praise, and male singer-leaders of the marimba band utilize them in their sung music. They often constitute the poetic structure of riddles, and are a source of pride, reverence, and secular amusement throughout Esmeraldas, as in other sectors of the Pacific Lowlands of Panama, Colombia, and Ecuador. Any persons interested in literature and poetry, who are fluent in Spanish and have open minds and rich curiosity, should immerse themselves in this form of cultural poetics. It is one of many windows through which the cultural system of Afro-Esmeraldians may be appreciated and understood.

Afro-Esmeraldians are part of Ecuadorian culture, as they have been since the founding of the *Audiencia de Quito* (Phelan 1967, Lane 2002). They constitute a sector of the multicultural republic that increasingly experiences a spirit of interculturality while, at the very same time, witnesses and encounters the rigidity of racist boundaries in thought and

in action (Rahier 2003). Ecuador is clearly multicultural. What follows is an attempt to present salient features of the Afro-Esmeraldian cultural system to indicate features that, in their special configuration, constitute an important and dynamic dimension of multicultural Ecuador.

Cosmovision

Ecuadorian ethnographer Diego Quiroga (2003) explicates very clearly key cosmological concepts that undergird Esmeraldian cultural systems: *lo divino* and *lo humano*, the domains of the divine and the human. *Lo divino* is far away and hard to reach. Indeed, only women can open the portals to *lo divino*, where God, Christ, Mary, saints, virgins, angels, and other powerful and benevolent figures reside. *Lo humano* is right here and right now, and its history extends back through times of terror, strife, and travail. All humans—men, women and children—must live in the here and now with the history of exploitation and resistance, the multiple consequences thereof, and carry on their lives in the face of the kinds of development that produce wealth for the very few, and poverty for the many. Not only people live through their life cycles in the time-space of *lo humano*. Dangerous spirits, called *visiones* (apparitions), such as La Tunda, El Riviel, La Viuda, La Candela, El Hombre sin Cabeza, and *los duendes*, all dwell here too, as do those who have access to them and other forces of evil, such as the witches (*brujas*) and sorcerers (*brujos*) or conjurors (see Whitten 1986, Rahier 1999b, Quiroga 2003).

The evils of contemporary life configure around the Christian figure of the devil (*el diablo*, *el gran demonio*, *el mismísimo*) often perceived to be a white, powerful *hacendado* or politician who binds women and the poor to his will. Living people may make a Faustian deal with *el diablo* for sterile wealth in this life, in exchange for the loss of one's soul and an eternity in hell after death (Quiroga 2003). In reflecting on developmental processes, the accumulation of wealth, and the growth of capital, people of this region sometimes say that "*en Esmeraldas ahora el diablo está en nosotros mismos*" ("now in Esmeraldas the devil lies within ourselves" [Quiroga 2003]). Quiroga writes poetically about these phenomena that provide resources for what he calls "a system of critical thought" in contemporary Ecuador, a system that is used by Afro-Ecuadorian people (and others) in all walks of life to reflect on and express the phenomena of modernization, development and racism that envelope and threaten their lifeways:

In the new millennium there is a clear relationship between the forces and images of the *humano* and the processes of globalization and modernization. Nonetheless, care must be exercised. The spirits and apparitions that now

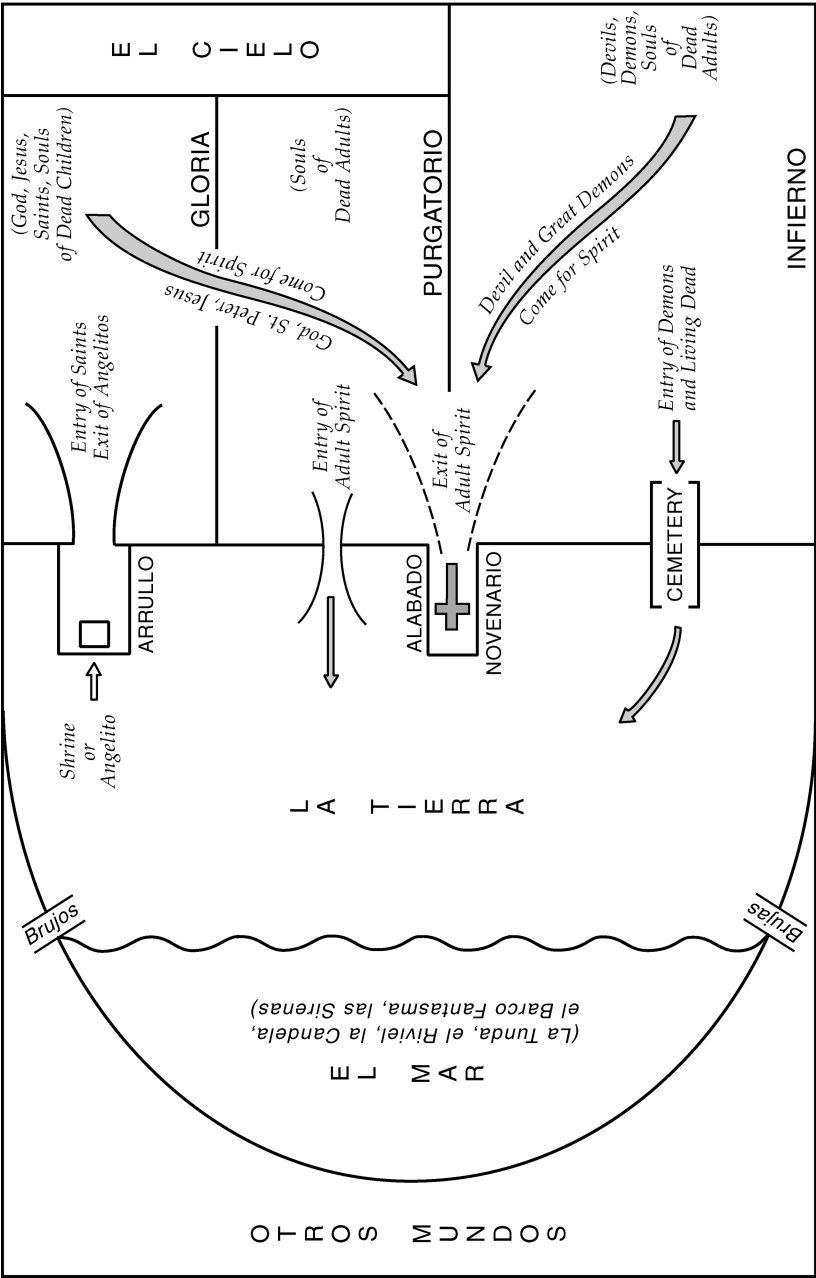


Figure 2.

seem to serve as devices of symbolic mediation have been around for a long time. In an effort to fit a paradigm based on the dichotomies modernity and capitalism, subsistence and accumulation, man and woman, globalization and the local economy, some authors may ignore the social complexity and cultural reflexivity implicit in these multivocalic mythical figures (2003:174).

A diagram of the Afro-Esmeraldian cosmos (see Figure 2) helps us follow the conceptual system that provides an inner set of cultural expressions ranging from daily talk to prize-winning literary virtuosity (e.g., Ortiz 1942; Preciado Bedoya 1961; Estupiñán Bass 1966, 1974). This system constitutes the core of Afro-Esmeraldian culture, setting it off as distinct, and yet binding it to enduring *ecuatorianidad*. It also constitutes a system of the Afro-Americas established in the crucible of conquest and slavery, revolt and self-liberation, which has gone on to become a dynamic if often ignored component of every nation-state in the western hemisphere (Whitten and Torres 1998).

In the Afro-Esmeraldian cosmos (see Whitten 1986:127–132) the divine realm is that of the upper right quadrant that includes heaven (*gloria*) and purgatory (*purgatorio*) in the sky. Otherwise the realm of other worlds, the sea, the land, and hell is of the human realm. To appreciate Afro-Esmeraldian culture in this sector of the lowland black Ecuadorian world, some characteristic ritual systems must be described. They include the secular ritual of the marimba dance of respect (*el baile marimba*), and the sacred rituals of the *arrullo* (song of praise), the *chigualo* (wake for a dead child, which includes the performance of *arrullos*), and the *alabado* and *novenario* (wake and second wake for a deceased adult). The secular ritual features male/female competition over the initiation of rhythms and dance patterns and the behavior of participants. In the public cultural performance of *la tropa* (military troop or troops) that begins the Tuesday or Wednesday before Easter and ends Easter day, this entire cosmovision becomes manifest in sustained ceremony. *La tropa* features both sacred and secular rituals of communal restoration and affirmation of cultural endurance as Christians and, perhaps in some areas, as free Maroons.

The Marimba Dance

Also called the *baile de respeto* (dance of respect), the marimba (xylophone) dance is held in rural and urban areas. In Colombia, and previously in Ecuador, this was called the *currulao* and was and is performed in the Pacific Lowlands from Buenaventura south to Muisne. But today in Ecuador many performers deny that they would use the term *currulao*. Since the mid-1970s the marimba dance has become a provincial

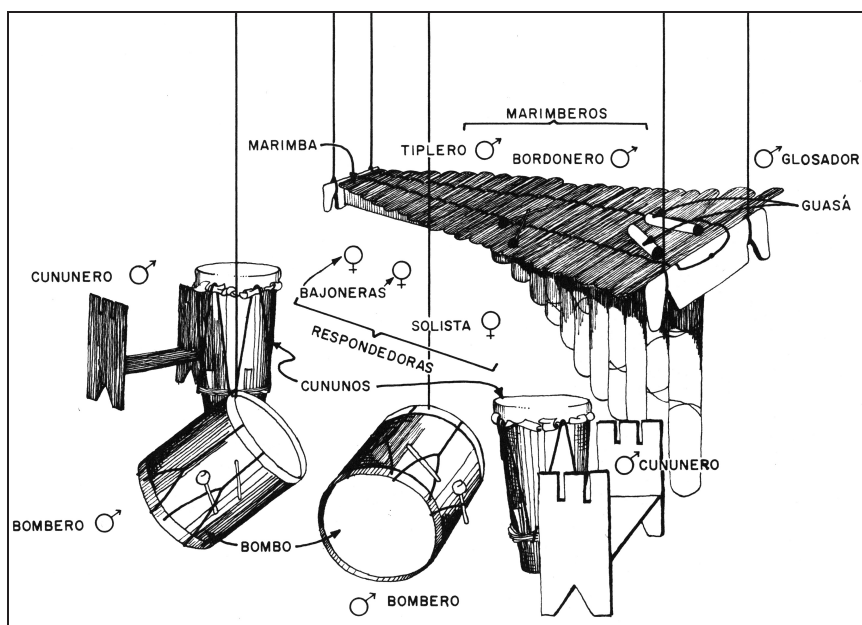


Figure 3. Marimba Ensemble

cultural focal point of modern Esmeraldas, with bands traveling nationally and internationally to festivals and competitions. The bands are usually composed of two male marimba players (*marimberos*), one of whom is a composer and singer (*glosador*), two base-drum (*bombo*) players, who follow the lead of the *glosador*, and two conga drum (*cununo*) players (see Figure 3).

In counterpart to these musicians and percussionists are two (sometimes three) women, called *respondedoras*. They sing in response to the *glosador* and provide another rhythm with their *guasás*, which are bamboo tube shakers with hardwood (palm) nails driven into their bodies, and filled with black beans and maize to give a rainlike sound, *sheeee, sheeee*. Women control the two *cununeros*, who play conga drums. The two *marimberos* and two *bomberos* on one side, and the two women and two conga players (*cununeros*), on the other side, constitute an antagonistic and dynamic musical and percussive dialectic that generates the most African music in the Americas. No saints, deities, demons or tricksters enter the sphere, nor are there possession or trance states, which is why I call it a secular ritual. La Tunda—the body snatching seductress and fear creature of swamp and forest—approaches the house called *casa de la marimba* during the respect dance, but is driven away by the sound of the *bombos*.

Although the marimba dance used to be quite self contained, over



Figure 4. A marimba music ensemble, San Lorenzo

the last quarter century many transformations have occurred, including endeavors to incorporate Afro-Latin American and Afro-Caribbean dance music and rhythms while maintaining the basic repertoire of genres, the most common of which are called the *bambuco*, *caderona*, *agua larga*, *patacoré*, *juga* (*fuga*), *caramba*, and *andarele*. There is now one marimba school in South Quito which was invited to play at the inauguration of the new President of the Republic in the Atahualpa Olympic Stadium on February 20, 2003. As the marimba band played a *bambuco*, commandos parachuted from Air Force planes into the stadium, one of them carrying Miss Ecuador, 2002, as a "passenger." In San Lorenzo, northwest Ecuador, where there is another marimba school, the marimba has become part of some celebrations of the Catholic Mass (de la Torre 2002:119). Sex or gender roles have shed some of their polarity over the past quarter century and one may now find men playing *guasás* and women playing *cununos*. But the structure of gendered musical roles perdures.

Arrullos To Saints and Virgins and the Chigualo For Dead Children

African rhythms also dominate the songs of praise to saints and virgins, and in the *chigualo* where *arrullos* are sung and performed. The

sacred ritual contexts of *arrullo* and *chigualo* are initiated and maintained strictly by women. They decide when and where an event is to be held, and they sing, direct both the *bombero* and *cununero(s)*, and shake maracas. In their songs they open the realm of the divine all the way to heaven, bypassing purgatory. The restless and dangerous spirits of purgatory are kept from the living by the *bombo*, as is the devil, *el Riviel*, *la Tunda*, and the multiplicity of demons that would like to become a more decisive earthly force. In *arrullo* events where death has not occurred, the women open the divine realm to invite saints and virgins to their celebratory activities, and with permission from women men may make petitions to these celestial beings for luck in fishing, farming, or commerce. The most prominent of saints to come through the gates of *lo divino* to visit the living is San Antonio (Saint Anthony), patron saint of fishermen and special consort of powerful women.

When the death of a child occurs a *chigualo* is performed. The godparents of the little corpse assemble to petition the *cantadoras* (singers) to gather and sing, to open the gates of heaven to the deceased *angelito(a)*, and to locate and petition male *bomberos* and *cununeros* to come and perform so that no evil being snatches the corpse. In this context the conga drum is called a *cajita* (little box) and the player is known as *redomblante* (drummer). The coffin for the little child, too, is called a *cajita*. A *chigualo*



Figure 5. Shrine to San Antonio. During the *arrullo* this saint descends into the room with the shrine when bidden to do so by women



Figures 6 and 7. End of the *chigualo*. Inebriated participants take the tiny corpse to the cemetery on the Río Santiago



may be held only with women singers and a *bombero* but it cannot be held without the singers or without the base drum. The *cantadoras* open the portals to *lo divino* and the *bomberos* keep evil beings at bay. It is said that the little angel goes directly to heaven, having died before he or she could "sin," there to live forever with God, Christ, Mary and the saints and virgins. Although the ceremony of the deceased child has been recorded in medieval Spain, the music itself, like that of the marimba dance, is the most distinctively African in the Americas.

The Alabado and the Novenario

The house in which an adult dies is precariously balanced between earth, purgatory, and hell. During the wake following death, called *alabado*, and the second wake about nine days after burial, called *novenario*, men and women from the local community cooperate in all endeavors with incoming dispersed relatives. They express equality in their roles, which are jointly oriented toward maintaining solidarity of a grouping of kinspeople around the newly deceased person, while at the same time rearranging particular kin ties so that no one can trace a relationship through the deceased (Whitten 1968, 1974, 1986; Quiroga 2003). Although much attention is given to kinship by adults in the processes of gathering and communing in this sacred ritual context, relationships of affinity and consanguinity are deliberately blurred. For example, a brother of a deceased man may regard the deceased's wife as his sister during and following the *alabado-novenario*, or formally broken affinal bonds may be recalled in a relinking of "cousins" to one another. Full cooperation between men and women is expressed: a cooperative, egalitarian, male-female set of sex-role relationships is enacted as the living solemnly take a position against the dead.

Since no adult is thought to die without enacting sins during her or his lifetime, it is thought that adult souls go to purgatory. Before departing, however, the soul of the deceased passes in and out of the house through windows and doors left open to facilitate its movements. It lingers in the neighborhood until after the *novenario*. Devils, demons, ghosts, and apparitions come to visit from the common domain of the *humano*. Thanks to the powers of women—as manifest in the lamenting songs—all of whom are *cantadoras* and some of whom are healers (*curanderas*), the realm of the *divino* is open to all, so that saints, virgins, and other divinities are brought from the distant domain to counteract the awful and dangerous powers unleashed by the wandering of sinful souls in the presence of such figures as *el gran demonio*. Women sing of such comings and goings of the soul, of demons, of fear creatures and of divine creatures, even as living

people come and go and join in choruses. Finally, if after nine days people are unsure where the wandering soul of the deceased may be, they enact a ceremony called *la tumba* (the tomb) to dismiss it (Whitten 1986:129-132). A structure (illustrated below in Figure 3) is built in the principal part of the house. Men and women form two rows. Women sing dirges as the soul is forced into the three-step construction that is draped with a black cross, called *la tumba* (the tomb). The soul is then forced out of the tomb and into the *callejón*, and from there out the door of the house into purgatory or hell. As this occurs women sing:

Te vas y me dejas, solito con Dios	You go and leave me, alone with God
<i>Adiós, primo hermano</i>	<i>Goodbye, first cousin</i>
(Whitten 1986:131; translation by Norman E. Whitten, Jr.).	

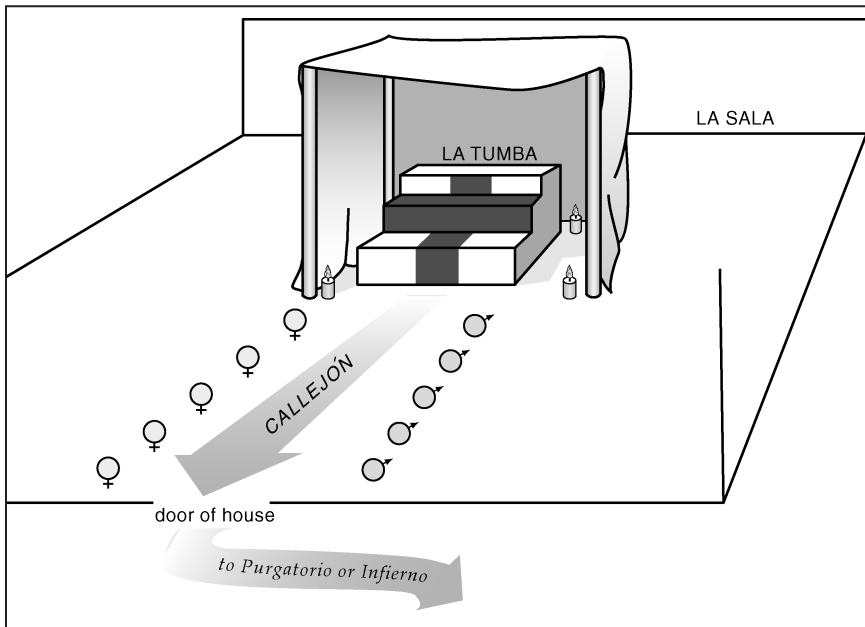


Figure 8. La Tumba

La Tropa

This cultural performance is the most dramatic ceremony held in the Ecuadorian Province of Esmeraldas and in neighboring Colombian Departments of Nariño, Cauca, and Valle. It is a forceful enactment of the

capture, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, that some take to be an extended dramatic metaphor of the formation of an Afro-indigenous maroon settlement and the resurrection of Christ within it. *La tropa* is enacted during the week leading up to Easter day, and ends with a secular parade, sometimes called Belén, on Easter Sunday. *La tropa* brings out-migrants back home from Esmeraldas and especially Guayaquil to small villages such as Güimbí on the Güimbí River and Selva Alegre (Rahier 1999c) on the Santiago River. Community ties are very important to many out-migrants, who spend considerable sums of money, and take up to two or three weeks from their urban lives, to make their way up the coast of Ecuador, and thence upriver by launch or canoe to attend this important and dramatic communal event.

The *La tropa* ceremony begins in the fringes of the community as groups of “soldiers” with shotguns, machetes, spears, and knives run off in directed squads to search for the lost or hidden Christ. But they find only the biblical thief, Barabas. They then march in step on the church. They enter it, march within it, and eventually enact the killing of Christ, his removal from the cross, the reign of the devil on Saturday, the bringing of the forest into the Catholic Church within the black and free village, and perhaps the liberation of the people of the forest and of the true free church from oppression of Crown, Church, and later State (Rahier 1999b). During this ceremony, women sing sacred *alabados* to Christ and to the assembled “sinners.” The *tropa* formation itself, composed strictly of adult men, march in a stylized manner to a drum beat not used in any other ritual. The stylized manner of marching and walking to and from the Church and within the Church has been recorded on film and audio tape since the 1940s (e.g., Savoia n.d.).

After the enactment of Christ’s resurrection on Easter Sunday, women take over the entire ceremony and lead the participants to and fro through main streets, back streets, and house yards to the songs of praise of the *arrullos*, and to national popular music. This street parade, called *Belén* (“Bethlehem,” and also “bedlam”) is led and controlled by women, just as in the *arrullos* and *chigualos*. *Marimberos*, *bomberos*, and *cununeros* participate and again are controlled by women, who dance, sing, and shake *guasás* or maracas. With the beginning of the Belén, the transformation from sacrality and connectivity with the *divino* to secularity and severance from that realm is instantaneous. Life in the realm of the human—with its myriad of dangers—is fully restored in festivity and joy:

Barrio de los negros	Barrio of blacks
de calles oscuras	of dark streets
preñadas de espantos,	bursting with spooks

que llevan, que asustan,	that carry off, that frighten,
que paran los pelos	that make hairs stand [rise]
en noches sin luna	on moonless nights

Barrio encendido,	Inflamed barrio
de noche y de día	by night and by day
infierno moreno,	dark hell,
envuelto en las llamas	enveloped in the flames
de son y alegría	of rhythm and happiness,

(Preciado Bedoya 1961; translation by Marvin Lewis 1983:121–122).

POLITICAL ECONOMY AND CULTURAL ECOLOGY

Esmeraldas as a lowland Afro-Latin American cultural system extends from Muisne, just south of Esmeraldas, through the Departments (states) of Nariño, Cauca, Valle, and Chocó of Colombia into the Darién Province of Panama (West 1952, 1957; Whitten 1986; Rahier 1999a). In general, the cultural dimensions sketched in this essay are characteristic north to the San Juan River, which flows into the Pacific Ocean at Buenaventura, Colombia. From the San Juan north into Panama the cultural system configures somewhat differently (Whitten 1986). Reiterating a point made at the beginning of this essay, Afro-Esmeraldians are among the poorest people in modern, twenty-first century Latin America. Their plight is sketched below.

Political economy, as used here, refers to the distribution of wealth and power. In Esmeraldas a "boom/bust" economy is characteristic of the system to which people have effectively adapted. Simply stated, when there is an external or "global" demand for a specific product such as cacao, ivory nut (*tagua*), bananas, shrimp, or timber, Afro-Esmeraldians enter the capitalist market place as laborers and middlemen and the towns and cities of the regions become loci for crowded habitation and particular sets of social relations and cultural patterns (Whitten 1986:74–94).

Cultural ecology refers to the manner by which people turn their environment to survival strategies. When the inevitable "bust" occurs, capital is withdrawn, commodities lose most of their value, and work-for-pay is not available. Then people continue their lives through subsistence activities focused on swidden horticulture of plantains, taro, rice, maize, and in the coastal zones coconuts, fishing, and some hunting (Acosta Solis 1944; Whitten 1986:57–74). Since the 1970s, Esmeraldas has been beset by escalating and utterly devastating logging activities, many if not most of them illegal, and since the 1990s by an explosion of shrimp farms that have ravished the rich mangrove swamps.



Figure 9. A man treks to his small farm in the forest. These forests are being decimated by legal and especially illegal lumber operations

The Pacific Lowlands of Panama, Colombia, and Ecuador is one of the wettest areas of the world (see West 1957; Taussig 2004). The shifting agriculture of this sector is known as “slash and mulch;” no burning is done. Rainfall is so heavy that although it is part of the neotropics (where Amazonian ecologies are the better known), manioc does not do well and constitutes only a back-up root crop. Maize is common and taro is ubiquitous. Nonetheless, over the centuries, black people have adapted so effectively that this sector of South America in the twentieth and twenty-



Figure 10. A man forages within the mangrove forest. From the 1990s this ecosystem has been in the process of rampant destruction due to the expanding shrimp farms

first century is as densely populated as any other rain-forest region of the neotropics. The point must be underscored that such adaptation and population expansion take place during times of subsistence economic pursuits, as well as during times of participation in the global capitalist expanding economy.

Long part of the scholarship of some historians, literary figures, and anthropologists, the subject of blackness in Ecuador surged into public consciousness in 1992. As Canelos Quichua, Achuar and Shiwiar indigenous people marched from Amazonia to Quito (see, e.g., Whitten, Whitten, and Chango 1997) to successfully claim legal usufruct to their ancestral and contemporary lands, the Afro-Ecuadorian movement surged in its rhetoric of respect and autonomy. Spokesmen and spokeswomen for both movements stressed an end to nation-state nationalist racism, as bound in the concepts of "whitening" (*blanqueamiento*), "blending" or hybridization (*el mestizaje*) and "improving the race" (*mejorar la raza*) of indigenous and black people (see Whitten 2003b). A key phrase in these movements, which are, from time to time somewhat intertwined, came to be known by the trope *rescate de la dignidad nacional* (the rescue of national



Figure 11. The beginning of a new settlement in a mangrove-flanked estuary

dignity). The solemn affirmation of this figure of speech is that the nation (*el nación*) and the country (*el país*) or motherland (*la patria*) of Ecuador cannot claim a dignity so long as the twin humiliations of racism and corruption work to the detriment of its Afro-Ecuadorian and indigenous people.

At an academic and ecclesiastical congress entitled *Compromisos por un Nuevo Ecuador* (Commitments for a New Ecuador), held in Quito during the summer of 1994, black spokeswoman Sonya Catalina Charlá spoke for black people nationally as they existed and exist creatively and dynamically in local and global systems. She told her attentive audience that the historical and contemporary essence of black culture and black organization of Ecuador is deeply embedded within the deep and practical comprehension of two economies. She noted with care that black people in Ecuador were not to be caught on the horns of the modernization-versus-subsistence dilemma. She said that black people know, and scientific studies document, the remarkable economic adaptability of Afro-Ecuadorian cultural systems to both subsistence and market economies. She referred to black culture as *la cultura negra*, which indicates, in part by the emphasis on the definite article "*la*," that "culture" is to be held

as something esteemed, or revered, not something vernacular or common (Whitten and Friedemann 1975; Whitten and Torres 1998; Romero and Lane 2002).

Participants in *la cultura negra* could take care of themselves when they needed to do so, she said, and they could, and would, participate fully in modernization plans and practices if only they were not blocked from doing so by racist barriers. "Black people have survived, and they know how to survive," she affirmed. She mentioned many of the cultural attributes described earlier in this article, and turned to the strengths of black co-parentage (*compadrazgo*), the strength of the black family, and the importance of the black community as structures of endurance, adaptation, creativity, and nurture.

GLOBALIZATION AND DOMINANT FORCES

At this point we cannot move farther in understanding blackness in Ecuador or Esmeraldas as a cultural system without drawing attention to the globalizing political economy in which black people dwell in expanding systems of power beyond their control.

The Clinton administration of the United States, along with the government of Colombia, launched Plan Colombia in July 2000, and moved its Southern Command from Panama to Manta-Manabí, on the central coast of Ecuador, just a four-hour bus trip south from Esmeraldas. From Manta, the Southern Command is coordinated with the United States military establishment of Las Tres Esquinas deep in the rain forest of the Department of Caquetá, Amazonian Colombia. Recently reflecting on current United States policy in Latin America in global perspective, and on the United States and its policies and actions, Henry A. Kissinger wrote:

Plan Colombia bears within it the same fateful momentum which drove America's engagement in Vietnam first to stalemate and then to frustration ... But once the effort goes beyond a certain point, the United States, to avoid the collapse of the local forces in which it has invested such prestige and treasure, will be driven to take the field itself ... Panama, Ecuador, Peru, Venezuela, and Brazil are in the active borderlands of the internal war of Colombia (2001:91).

The Ecuadorian border with Colombia has segments that are held by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the Army of National Liberation (ELN), and by the United Self-Defense System of

Colombia (AUC). Each has its own defined sector. For the most part, it is the extreme right-wing AUC paramilitary organization—the most bloodthirsty and menacing of the three as its atrocities affect black people in Colombia and Ecuador—that holds sway on the northern Esmeraldas border. All three are linked to the cocaine and heroin drug trade within Colombia and between Colombia and other nations, especially the United States. The AUC, in particular, uses Pacific Lowlands territory, ports, and people, for its trade with *el norte*. The Ecuadorian military has broadened and strengthened its activities all along its northern border, and in the entire Province of Esmeraldas.

In many sites such as San Lorenzo and Mataje, northern Esmeraldas, fighters from revolutionary and paramilitary groups enter Ecuador for rest and relaxation. In September, 2001, United States Department of State spokesperson Walter Taylor issued a statement that declared all three of these organizations to be “terrorist” and thereby subject to sanctions from the United States. The AUC fighters are particularly brutal when it comes to dislodging, threatening, and killing indigenous and Afro-Latin American peoples in the Pacific Lowlands of Colombia (Taussig 2003, 2004). The AUC forces have added genocide of Afro-Colombians to their agenda (see Pardo 2002). This system too is moving into Ecuador (and Panama), creating a hazard to black people of Esmeraldas and adjacent Carchi far superseding the possible presence of coca plant growing or paste



Figure 12. A woman grinds sugar cane on a sixteenth-century style *trapiche* in Mataje, near the Colombia border, 1973. In the 1990s Mataje became a central site for Colombian AUC atrocities

production.

The most aggressive and dangerous aggregation of terrorists are the AUC, which controls the entire sector of rain forest—riverine Nariño Province that abuts Esmeraldas and Carchi. While images of horror and death abound, no one from the northwest sector of Esmeraldas—inhabited primarily by Afro-Ecuadorians, Chachi, Epera (Emberá), and Awá indigenous people—can forget the day that the AUC came to the small settlement of Mataje, on the San Juan River that forms the border between Colombia and Ecuador, captured the Teniente Político of the community, ordered all people present to watch as they tied his arms and legs to a tree, so that his head and torso faced the gathering, and cut him in half from head to crotch with a chain saw. By November, 2005, somewhere between six and eight hundred refugee Colombians—all black—had entered the *cantón* (like a county) of San Lorenzo and were being harbored there by local families and the Catholic Church.

Is it any wonder, then, that from slavery (which primarily entered Esmeraldas from Colombia) to the contemporary presence of armed conflict in their territory, the cosmovision of Esmeraldas as a cultural system is so full of the depiction and signification of evil? Although brilliant insights and remarkably effective analyses have been completed and published on this dynamic cultural system (as evidenced by the references in this essay), much more needs to be done. The key to it all is to listen with care to the Afro-Esmeraldian voices, to heed their poetics and their politics, to seek understanding, rather than follow conventions of a search for "Africanisms" and pseudo authenticity (Rahier 1999b:xi-xxi, Whitten and Torres 1998). The authenticity of Afro-Hispanic lifeways is in the real lives of people who are in particular places, set in national and global systems as they are revealed through art, dance, music, speech, cultural performance, drama, poetry, social relations, and in the grinding day-to-day need to survive as one of the poorest people in modern Latin America.

NOTES

Acknowledgments. In the spirit of sustained collaboration, a number of scholars have shared their manuscripts, ideas, and insights with me over many years, long before their material was published. I have learned much from their works, unpublished and published, and draw extensively from them here. For such collegiality I thank, in particular, Kris Lane, Diego Quiroga, Jean Muteba Rahier and Padre Rafael Savoia. For helping me conceptualize racialized systems of cultural representation in broad frameworks, I am indebted to Arlene Torres and Dianne Pinderhughes. I thank Kris Lane, Diego Quiroga, Jean Rahier, Sibby Whitten, and Michelle Wibbelsman for a constructive reading of this manuscript.

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