

# The Cimarrón Movement: Its Struggles and Achievements

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Once asked Radio Havana Cuba what the situation of the black population on the island was, and they answered that there were no blacks in Cuba, just Cubans: this is total invisibilization and denial. I will evoke the spirit and struggle of our ancestors, and of great Cuban leaders like Major General Antonio Maceo, great politician and intellectual Juan Gualberto Gómez, and the Independent Party of Color's (PIC) leader, Evarist Estenoz in my approach to this subject.

The glorious history and legacy the PIC martyrs left us with are today shaping our path towards the building of political projects for African descendants throughout all the Americas. A group can only really be a people when it knows how to organize itself politically, and use its political organizing to represent itself, make itself visible, and defend its interests. The PIC was able to create a sociopolitical framework, and construct a black political community, but the powers that be did not hesitate to destroy, assassinate and commit a great genocide against our people, and cut off any possibility of it becoming a governing body.

Such is the transcendental history and legacy left to us by the PIC, which is why those in power today invisibilize and minimize the historic role of the PIC as a builder of the Cuban people. We should not confuse 'people' with 'population.' We must see ourselves as a people, and become political subjects interested in wielding power, governing, and participating in the nation in the spirit of the United Nations' proclamation of the International Year for African Descendants, an idea promoted and put forth by Colombia, and supported by other Latin American countries. A fellow 'cimarron,' Pastor Elias Murillo, was in Cuba while serving as an independent expert for the UN Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD). He wrote a very seriously denunciatory report about the human rights situation and racism on the island. This report should serve as support for the continuing struggle towards having the community's true reality revealed.

In Colombia, the National Cimarrón Movement for Afro-Colombian Human Rights was created in 1982. However, its genesis actually began back in 1976, when a group of us

young people who were entering the University of Pereira, where the black population was extremely tiny, established the *Círculo de Estudios de la Problemática de las Comunidades Negras de Colombia* [the Group for the Study of the Problems of Black Communities in Colombia]. At that time, we did not talk about Africanness or Afro-Colombianness. What we did was change our use of the word ‘black’: instead of using it as a noun and name, we used as a descriptive adjective. We called the group ‘Soweto,’ in honor of Nelson Mandela and those who were martyred while fighting against apartheid, choosing this name because we were ridiculed at Pereira with expressions like “negro María Jesús, dame 20 balbú” [a rhyming wordplay about how blacks are perceived as talking]. *Mestizo* people had an accent different from that of Colombia’s black communities, and they would tell us we were “chocolate,” “tires,” or “blood sausage.” We didn’t understand why they wanted to make us feel bad. Our parents and teachers had not taught us the reason behind our racial diversity, must less did we understand our ethnic diversity and Africanness. We did not know the history of black peoples nor about their importance in the construction of Colombia and the world. We also did not know what racism and racial discrimination were, or what the role of our enslaved ancestors in the building of the colony and global capitalist system was, or what the role was of the descendants of those African men and women had been as builders of Colombia.

So, we said to ourselves: we know nothing about ourselves or how to respond to verbal racism. We had to organize ourselves so we could learn on our own, and come to know ourselves. Thus, we began to get together on Saturdays with a list of topics about our history and our Afro-Colombian

reality. We demanded that each of us be rigorous in delivering our presentations: “Keep your head up, look us in the eye; you have to do that again because you were not well prepared.” This is how we began to create a group of educators and rigorous, disciplined, serious research methods. This turned us into leaders, advisors, and promoter of black thought. We began to publish a bulletin with a synthesized summary of our conclusions, which is how we learned to think and write about our reality. We started holding regular commemorative, Afro-Colombian events that honored the great leaders—historical and contemporary—who were involved in the movement against racism and discrimination worldwide. On March 8<sup>th</sup>, we would do things differently, focusing on promoting Afro-Colombian women. We turned May 21<sup>st</sup>, the day slavery but not enslavement was legally abolished in Colombia into a National Day of Afro-Colombianness. On that day we also commemorate the achievements of Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and Mandela, even submitting material to the print and broadcast media.

We actually influenced and generated opinions on Afro-Colombianness. We would send the bulletin to black communities from which emerged new Soweto study groups throughout Colombia that followed the methodology we disseminated from Pereira. We became intellectuals with independent ideas about our own, contemporary cimarronesque attitude. What did we discover in our Soweto study group between 1976 and 1982? The first thing we discovered was that we could no longer go on believing only the European version of our ancestors, or as well other’s interpretations about the difference between black concepts, black people, African descendants, and Afro-Colombians.

When Europeans arrived in Africa to start the business of enslaving our people, they denied their condition as humans. Then they chained us like animals to kidnap us and ship us to America and put an ocean between us and our homeland, to reinvent us in America as economic goods. It is like grabbing a black dog, and instead of calling it José Miguel Gómez, like the person whose statue stands on Avenue G in Havana, calling him black, like the candy sold in Bogotá sweet shops, a popular pancake that is requested in the following manner: “Do me a favor. Sell me a black,” and they bring me a “black.” That is what the Europeans did with our ancestors: they turned them into property that could move called ‘blacks,’ meaning slave and animal. We realized we could not go on using the animalizing language with which Europeans named our ancestors, and decided to end any linguistic relationship invented and imposed by Europeans during the colonialist, slavist and capitalist period.

We then discovered that the concept ‘black’ was not the same as ‘black person’ or ‘black-skinned person.’ There were no black people in the slavist colonies. Instead, there was property with no human or civil rights. Ever since the creation of Roman Law, from which the Europeans got all their ideas, the concept of ‘personhood’ is inherent in the exercise of civil and citizens’ rights.

With blacks, there were also indigenous subjects, also invented by the Europeans as slaves and animals, but next to whites. They were invented by Europeans, but as human beings and people. We discovered that our ancestors had not been brought from Africa as blacks, or as people who were bearers of multiple cultures, languages and technologies. Today, we must rescue their existence as humans and people, just as we must rescue ours. We

do not employ the concept ‘black’ as a name, as we consider it an insult to our humanness. This concept is racist and embodies denial and the invisibilization of the humanness of African men and women. We are black people, have black skin, have African roots, and are male and female members of a community and people. If I want to differentiate myself by the color of my skin, I say I am a black man, not a ‘black.’

We are bearers of Africanness. We did not come from England or Russia or China. The surnames of our ancestors contained the traces of the origin of their cultures and peoples. We discovered they had been kidnapped and torn from the Congo, Angola, Niger, Senegal, from thousands of villages with their own cultures and governments. In their African diversity, they were all part of human civilization. We are directly tied to the heritage of those cultures as descendents of Africans, as African descendants and Colombian African descendants, that is, as Afro-Colombians. Those concepts gave us back our human and cultural identity. No one needs to call us blacks. One’s first right is to have a personal identity, something a mother confers upon one when she chooses one’s name. Europeans used the concept ‘black’ to deny us our personal identity and resorted to utilizing other names and even nicknames for us.

We also discovered the heroic struggle of our ancestors for their freedom. They arrived as prisoners, not slaves. Many ran off to the mountains and countryside, and built their own runaway societies, known as *quilombos* in the Portuguese area, Brazil. They strewed America’s paths with freedom. Where there was slavery, there were cimarrons. Where they were slave exploitation, there was emancipatory struggle. We embraced the concept ‘cimarron’ as synonymous with resistance, rebellious-

ness, and struggle, as synonymous with the dignity and Africanness of men and women who preferred dying in the jungle to living as slaves on plantations and in mines. We feel we are the inheritors of these cimarrons, in order to be able to continue our struggle, but in a totally different, historical context. By joining the cimarrons of days gone by with those of today, we are nurturing a kind of thinking called ‘contemporary cimarronism,’ which contains the ideological essence of the struggle to gain the place we deserve within Colombian society.

Another concept we work with is that of interculturality. The Colombian nation embodies a synthesis of three great roots: African, Indigenous, and Hispanic. From Africanness it derived two great legacies: the Afro-Colombian people (or Colombians of African descent) and Afro-Colombianness, which is a combination of cultural values and contributions from our African ancestors and Afro-Colombians to the building, development and importance of the Colombian nation.

The Afro-Colombian community is made up of African *criollos* (those born in Colombia). These black people contributed to the nation-building process in Colombia—just like Spanish *criollos*, Colombian born of Spaniards. The black *criollo* population is the black population of Colombia: those of the Afro-*mestizo* population are a mixture of African *criollos*, Indians and Spaniards.

We don’t utilize colonial concepts or animalizing nicknames like *zambo* to refer to the mixture of Africans and indigenous peoples. That name was used because it also referred to a black-skinned mouse that lived in the tropical jungles. Other names were *primerón*, *secundón* and *tercerón* (references to how many times removed they were from whiteness), and *tente en el aire* (neither here nor there), *prieto*

(dark), and *salto atrás* (throwback). All these terms were created and used to objectify them. We decided to sharply criticize this colonial language because the words themselves wield the power of those who invented them: those words animalize and destroy. We discovered that the Afro-Colombian population was fully half the population of Colombia, despite the fact we had been taught to say ‘black minority.’ This really stemmed from the implications of ‘legal age’ and a undervaluation of the citizenry that was applied to women, indigenous people, and enslaved Africans.

We also discovered that as part of the population we were an immense majority, the dominant ethnic group—representing all the colors of African miscegenation and blackness—in Colombian society. We also discovered that Afro-Colombianness did not belong exclusively to black people, to Afro-Colombian people, but rather to the whole nation. Each Colombian man and woman, regardless his or her place of origin or skin color, is a bearer of Afro-Colombianness. There is evidence of this in our history, economy, and culture, in everything from what we eat, to how we make love and walk, to politics and religion.

Each Colombian must learn to accept his or her Afro-Colombianness irrespective of his or her very light or dark skin color. This is how we have worked with this concept in our commemorative activities, and managed to make it an iconic symbol of the Colombian nation. What we started as a part of cimarron activities has been recognized by a national law: Afro-Colombian Heritage Month and the National Day of Afro-Colombianness are national holidays filled with mobilization throughout the country.

We must make Afro-Colombianness as a subject and issue part of our curriculum, and give teachers appropriate materials so they

can teach it. The State can implement this, but we have the passion and should produce the knowledge about it, so it can take root in our national consciousness. We then wondered why if there were so many Afro-Colombians in Colombia—more than 18 million—why was it that we lived so badly? Why do we live the way we did a hundred years ago in the jungle? Why is there racism and discrimination?

The answer is because we do not know our history, or have any historical memory, or know our ethnic rights as Colombian African descendants. Our people were disorganized, had no political consciousness, and lived like a minority within the nation. We had to get the word out, and the Cimarrón Movement began this great task in 1982. The Soweto Study Group established the National Cimarrón Movement. There were already Sowetos all throughout the country, so we established the National Cimarrón Movement to promote the dignity, ethnic identity, rights and political empowerment of Afro-Colombians. Sometimes our people laugh when we do this, because they have been taught to believe that those notions belong to white folks. But, children and young people are beginning to accept our ideas, take them seriously, and make sense of the education we are offering them. Cimarrón's mission is to promote ethnic self-organization independent of political parties, things like ethnic education, which includes active education, Afro-Colombian studies in our school system, and the sociopolitical empowerment of our people—all these to promote the elimination of poverty, racism, racial exclusion, and the consequences that slavery brought about in our society, particularly among black and indigenous peoples.

Slavery did not end with the laws that abolished slavery. Enslavement is still affecting us spiritually and materially. Thus, we

must educate our people about what the consequences of enslavement were, about how they affect us today, and about how those consequences entitle us to special rights. The primary goal of Cimarrón is to organize associations concerned with the rights of youth, women, and countryfolk. Organization is a source of power and unity for people. During slavery times, the only ones giving orders were the slave owners and the slaves scurried around. Today, our people behave similarly because they are not organized. We must empower ourselves through social organization.

Our second goal is to reestablish our human rights, enjoy them, and exercise them fully as we should, because we are human. When the abolition laws were promulgated, there was no concomitant acknowledgement of lands, education, rights, citizenship, or social behavior. Our (mis)treatment as blacks continued, and our people kept on thinking like blacks, acting black, living as blacks, working as blacks, and allowing themselves to be discriminated against as blacks. In the realm of politics, the great grandchildren of those who were enslaved empowered the great grandchildren of the slave owners with their votes, and no changes have resulted since then.

We realized we had to fight to reestablish our condition as humans. Another direct objective is to fight against racism and racial discrimination. Yet another is to develop the ideals of women and Afro-Colombian youth. We must put an end to the machismo we inherited from our colonial slavists. Indigenous and European machismo came together here, and combined with that of the African peoples. We must sensitize, organize, teach and mobilize our women, because they are the ones who pass down life, and they should pass down politics and a vocation for political power in our people.

Another great goal is an autonomous political project for Afro-Colombian people: to develop a vocation for political power, governance, and administration; become conscious of the fact that our place is to be on top, to look up at the sun and not down at the ground. Politics equals power and organization. Voting is a tool with which we can fight for our interest in governing. The interests of the Afro-Colombian people and our nation can only be defended via our own political organization. No one is going to do for us what we must do by becoming involved in politics, governance, and creating political alliances—having power.

We are promoting a permanent campaign against racism and discrimination that includes two large mobilization dates: March 21<sup>st</sup> and May 21<sup>st</sup>. This year, we are going to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the massacre perpetrated by the FARC in a jungle *quilombo* town, during which 120 were killed by a bomb they set off in a church. We are not going to forget that. The national “Nelson Mandela” Afro-Colombian leadership school offers many annual programs for the training of women, children and youth. Another of its programs is an ethnic educational program including Afro-Colombian studies in our school system. It is difficult work because the State is not interested, but we are going to have a deep impact on our national culture.

This political training school seeks to create a party from the bottom up—a grassroots approach—so that people feel ownership of it, participate in it, so that the party’s ideals become their own. This is complicated because the traditional leftwing and rightwing parties immediately come out and offer us quotas. We do not want quotas or crumbs. We want political power, for our people to learn to put their votes in our own urns.

Our first achievement was to get included in our new Constitution (1991) acknowledgment as founders of the Colombian nation with special ethnic rights. This serves as a springboard for legislation that produces special mandates on behalf of the Afro population that entail a positive differentiation (affirmative action) for the Afro-Colombian population. These include, for example, that all public policies must have a pro, Afro-Colombian approach, and produce positive indicators, results and impacts.

Above all, this affirmative action policy can be seen in education. Yet, racism and discrimination also began to be recognized and adjudicated as crimes punishable by sentences of 1-3 years in prison, and the indemnification of victims through fines. This is great progress, particularly since even President Uribe says “There is no racism here.” But we have won, and the law was approved. We are now involved in the promulgation of another proposed, pro-Afro-Colombian, affirmative action law, and another law to guarantee equal opportunities to all, and to introduce reparations as well as mechanisms to generate special opportunities, particularly for our youth, in the area of employment and education. We are also promoting a policy for the collective deeding of lands belonging to our communities in the jungle. Thus, cimarron communities have now had titles approved for about six thousand hectares. Now, what to do we do with that land? The State must initiate a large program for ethnic development in these territories, because this jungle land possesses a great biodiversity and abundant water.

What are our strategies for developing the Afro-Colombian population? There are four basic ones. First and foremost, there is education, educational development through ethnic education. We expect this to be qual-

ity educational development, with coverage and leadership for the Afro-Colombian population, and the integration of Afro studies throughout the nation's educational system. This is a fundamental, all-encompassing strategy. Another is organizational development: socially organizing the Afro-Colombian population. Third come economic concerns and their leadership. We are very hard working people, which is why they brought us to America in the first place, but slavery imposed on us psychological and material impediments. We are always working for whites, but must learn to work for ourselves and for the economic development of our people. We are making progress on this front with help from the World Bank, NGOs, and the country's universities.

Our people in Bogotá own over 400 fish restaurants. They arrived as domestics and construction workers. These were the jobs that slaves used to do. They never even realized that fish and special spices were added values, but these people became small business owners that today run some of the biggest ones, including restaurant chains. Our task is to turn our successful food vendors into entrepreneurs with a registered trademark: Afro-Colombian flavor. We must promote a business model and creatively use our extraordinary ability to work to generate income and offer employment to our own people.

The fourth basic strategy is the political empowerment of our people as citizens. Political empowerment is essential because with it we can make decisions to change our reality. If we are in local, regional, or national government, if we learn that with 10,000 or 5,000 people organized with a view to power we actually gain power, then we will no longer be powerless, as we have been until now, or have to hear excuses like we are too few, or fear what whites may say. We must develop an interest in power, which begins with organization: politics equal organization, and organization equals power. Thus, we are involved in the same struggle as our Cuban brethren.

We are seeking alliances through networks of organizations all throughout America, and are learning to utilize political power and govern. This is essential. You may count on the solidarity of the Cimarrón Movement, and my own. From this moment—my first visit to Cuba—and after today's events,\* it will be my mission to tear down the romantic myth of an eternal Cuban revolution that I now understand has failed, and is not feasible, after more than fifty years. It is as decrepit as Fidel Castro, himself, as decrepit as Havana's crumbling buildings, as the cars of Havana.

\* See "Identity and Steadfastness on the Road to Integration" in this issue.