

Bullerengue as a Tool for Afro-Colombian Self-Determination¹

El bullerengue como herramienta para la autodeterminación afro-colombiana

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ABSTRACT

This article demonstrates that the Colombian town of María la Baja uses the dance, music, and song of *bullerengue* as a powerful tool to combat institutionalized racism. The community moved to teach and promote a dance traditionally performed by the elder population among the younger residents in an effort to maintain the custom and instill cultural and historical pride. Connected to a historic maroonage network, the people of María la Baja fought to reaffirm their identity through appropriately ethnocentered cultural knowledge and practices. *Bullerengue* has become a channel for community empowerment in conjunction with ethnoeducation and ancestral knowledge. By emphasizing their unique history, rich customs, and traditions, residents of María la Baja illustrate that a people can change otherizing narratives through self-determination.

Keywords: identity; culture; ethnoeducation; self-determination; community initiative; African diaspora.

RESUMEN

Este artículo muestra que el pueblo colombiano de María la Baja utiliza la danza, la música y el canto del bullerengue como poderosa herramienta para luchar contra el racismo institucionalizado. La comunidad propuso enseñar y promover este baile tradicionalmente realizado por la población mayor entre los jóvenes en un esfuerzo por mantener la práctica e inculcar orgullo cultural e histórico. Conectado a una red histórica de cimarronaje, el pueblo de María la Baja ha luchado por reafirmar su identidad mediante conocimientos y prácticas culturales apropiados y etnocéntricos. El bullerengue se convirtió en un canal para el empoderamiento comunitario en conjunto con la etnoeducación y el conocimiento ancestral. Al enfatizar su historia única y sus ricas costumbres y tradiciones, los residentes de María la Baja muestran que, a través de la autodeterminación, un pueblo puede transformar narrativas que lo relegan a ser "el Otro".

Palabras clave identidad; cultura; etnoeducación; auto determinación; iniciativa comunitaria; diáspora africana.

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The sun was at its peak on a hot, dry August morning at the Institución Educativa Técnica Agropecuaria de Desarrollo Rural (Agricultural Technical Ethnoeducational Institute of Rural Development) primary school in the town of María la Baja in the state of Bolívar, Colombia. The energy was high as the students were all outside of their classrooms to participate in the school entrepreneurship fair. Each class presented products for sale based on the projects they completed in the community—vegetables, natural hair cream, jewelry, drinks, art, and more. It was time for the featured performance of the day, and everyone gathered under makeshift shade to secure their space to watch.

Two drummers were seated, and the dancers made a semicircle behind them facing the crowd. One drum, *el tambor alegre*, was held at an angle and reached past the drummer's knees with the head of the drum facing the sky. The other drum, *el llamador*, was held in a sideways position on the drummer's lap, and he would play that drum with a hand slap to the top of the wood and with his other hand, keep the tempo of the rhythms. An older child, the lead singer held the microphone and began to sing slowly with her eyes closed:

Regar regaaaar, agua pa verla correr.
regaaaar regaar, agua pa verla correeeer
Una nube está en el cielo, parece que va a llover

Pour, pouur water and watch it flow
Pouur, pouur water and watch it floow
A cloud's in the sky, looks like it's going to rain.³

In the middle of the last line, the dancers enthusiastically shouted, “¡¡Oyeloooo!!” and began clapping and swaying to the *bullerengue sentao* rhythm of the two drums. Simultaneously, the youngest dancers entered the semicircle (participants were between 7 and 16 years old). The girls wore a top and skirt the color of mint green with pink flowers. The ruffled collar was worn just below the shoulders, and the length of the skirt was below the ankles. The boys wore short-sleeved shirts of the same print and pink pants to match the color of the flowers. Everyone had bare feet. A young dancing girl held a fistful of her skirt on each hip and circled her hips as she did a two-step to the rhythm. She had a slight lean to her shoulders and smiled at her partner while maintaining the hip rotation and step. The dancing boy did the same two-step moving one foot next to the other while circling behind the girl, as she made her own circles. The boy held a wide-brimmed straw hat in his hand and moved it back and forth behind and in front of him intermittently holding it up and around the girl but never touching her. All the other children clapped and sang responses to the song, “Regar, regar, agua pa verla correr”.

This was one of many presentations that the group *Corporación Chumbun Gale Compae*⁴ had made since its formation almost 30 years ago in 1995 and through several cycles of children. Carrying much of the local heritage in its name, the group was formed to carry on the lineage of *bullerengue* in the town of María la Baja

³ My translations throughout unless otherwise noted.

⁴ Jan Carlos Muñoz explained that “*Chumbun* is the neighborhood where the group was born; *Gale* is the reference to the colonial era where the Spanish galleons came and transported merchandise, transported slaves and where they took the gold and many minerals that they took from the Americas; and *Compae* is the reference to a traditional daily greeting between two neighbors, or two compadres who live very close or when they went to the bush they would say ‘Queubo Compa que le vaya bien en el campo’... The first was always *Compae*, as something familiar and respectful.”

“*Chumbun* es el barrio donde nació el grupo, *Gale* es la referencia a la época colonial donde venían los españoles Galeones y transportaban mercancía, transportaban los esclavos y donde se llevaron el oro y muchos minerales que sacaron de las Américas y *Compae* es la referencia a un saludo tradicional y muy cotidiano entre dos vecinos, o dos compadres que viven muy cerca o que cuando iban al monte decían ‘Queubo Compa que le vaya bien en el campo’... lo primero siempre era el *Compae*, como algo familiar y de respeto.”

and to share this cultural tradition with the world. The dance, music, and song of *bullerengue* was born in the maroon town of Palenque de San Basilio and traveled to María la Baja by way of a maroon network.⁵ Stemming from Bantu origins, in Palenque de San Basilio, the *bullerengue* is performed in conjunction with mourning during Lumbalú rituals. This is the *sentao* style of *bullerengue* used to express “all of the feelings and collective pain when a Palenque resident, male or female, dies” (Valdez Torres).

The next tallest girl began entering the circle and the smallest girl exited. She moved her hands in a downward opening motion to the rhythm and circled her breasts. Following the first pairing, each consecutive pair entered the circle individually as boy and girl and met in the middle to dance together. They gazed at each other, smiled a little, and interacted as adults would. The children clearly knew what they were doing as there was no adult intervention or instruction as to who was to dance next, how to enter, or where to move. Each couple circled each other during their dance, and when the drummer of the *tambor alegre* played a drum roll, the dancing couple moved quickly to salute the drum, do one or two small squats, then moved back to the middle of the circle in sync to complete their steps. The 20 or so children clapped to the rhythm and gave encouraging shouts and comments to their dance mates in the middle of the circle, exuding confidence, and agency in a way that, according to several interview participants from the town, was not present 30 and 40 years ago.

The *bullerengue* dance group was featured at this student entrepreneurship fair at a primary school in María la Baja, as were student projects, including hair products they made with local agrarian materials, produce that they cultivated in the school vegetable garden, typical meals of fish and coconut rice, adornments, desserts, and more. The fair demonstrated the research done within the ethnoeducation curriculum to highlight the rich materials, knowledge, and skills in the town and its people. The creation of the curriculum stemmed from the work of Afro-Colombian students and professionals within a framework of Pan-Africanism and Afroepistemology, as they looked across the globe for curricular models in other Black communities.

It was not always customary to see children dancing *bullerengue* as this dance is traditionally performed by the senior adult population. However, as part of efforts to create a stronger lineage of cultural knowledge, community members created a Children’s *Bullerengue* Festival which consequently required more children’s groups. These efforts are now seeing very positive results as the youth recognize the importance. As stated by group member Brittany Sofía Marimon Caro, “when we say that it is a culture, this is very true, and it means that we carry it in our blood as the Afro-Colombians we are. It is part of our culture and also of our being; it gives us life, peace, happiness, among other things that help us to experience ourselves and express ourselves both socially and personally.”⁶ This cultural foundation that Marimon Caro speaks about through *bullerengue* is a key entry point into the ethnoeducation curriculum of the town, centering the history and culture of the people. Thirty years before, Law 70 was passed, giving Afro-Colombians and indigenous Colombians rights to their land and a right to a culturally appropriate education. Ethnoeducation was a by-product of this critical law, putting in place the opportunity for a major shift from a solely Eurocentric and invisibilizing pedagogy and curriculum to

⁵ Marjoleine Kars explains: “The term “maroons” refers to people who escaped slavery to create independent groups and communities on the outskirts of slave societies.” According to Daniel O. Sayers, “At its basic level, marronage can be understood as the willful self-extrication of individuals or groups from conditions of enslavement, on short-term (*petit marronage*) and permanent bases (*grand marronage*)” (136). The networks formed to communicate, share resources, and protect the various maroon enclaves as well as the enslaved.

⁶ “cuando decimos que es una cultura es muy cierto, y quiere decir que nosotros mismo lo llevamos en la sangre como Afrocolombianos que somos, es parte de la cultura nuestra y también de nuestro ser, nos da vida, paz, felicidad entre otras cosas que nos ayudan a experimentarnos y expresarnos tanto en el ámbito social como en el personal.”

one inclusive and celebratory of African and Indigenous peoples throughout the country. Today, children dance the *bullerengue* as a form of reclaiming a positive association with their African heritage and their community, turning the idea of Black as ugly and bad to Black as beautiful and prideful.

I had the opportunity to meet with and interview two adult groups and one children's *bullerengue* group. From each interview, I learned about the variety of styles in *Bullerengue* and the generational roots of the members. During their interviews, it was shared that they would hear the songs from their grandmothers while they cooked or called out to a friend. Both a young girl and an older woman shared that they were encouraged to begin singing *bullerengue* and were overcome with fear of singing in front of their peers and community members. They did not feel they could match the prowess of their exemplars, but a grandmother and a mother believed in them and pushed them to move past their fears. They are now the lead singers in their groups. Marimon Caro, the lead singer for the performance at the entrepreneurship fair, exuded a lot of confidence and answered many of my questions for the group. She stated: "The *Bullerengue* is an inheritance, it is as if it were a legacy that my grandfather passed on to my father and my father passed on to me, and it is something that I also want to pass on to my children and that they pass on to their children and so on."⁷ This sentiment is shared by many of the other children who grew up with *bullerengue* performers in their family. They have been encouraged to learn the songs, rhythms, and dances and to perform in representation of their community heritage.

This community is a model for how a group can pull from its African and palenque roots to turn around negative perceptions of Blackness that had taken over. Condescending attitudes had been manifested in various ways, including the stigmatization of natural hairstyles, discrimination against marrying dark-skinned individuals, disregard for community elders, and a broad rejection of Africanity and Blackness.⁸ It is important to consider the theoretical framework used in the discussion of the community work, the issues that plagued the community, and weave in the voices of youth and adults in their experiences with *bullerengue* and being community members, and discuss ethnoeducation and the role of *bullerengue* as a tool for self-determination.

Self-determination refers to maintaining or gaining the power and sovereignty to determine one's own path in accordance with one's own values and way of life. I was introduced to the Pan-African idea of self-determination through the seven principles of the African American holiday Kwanzaa, as one of the seven guiding principles of life for self, family, community, and nation/race. The second principle Kujichagulia, defined as "self-determination" states: "To define ourselves, name ourselves, create for ourselves, and speak for ourselves" (Angaza 17). This essay demonstrates *bullerengue*'s role in a community's recovery from a negative self-perspective.

María la Baja, A Maroon Settlement

Colombia has a large population of African descendants whose ancestors were brought during the trans-Atlantic slave trade. According to Michael Birenbaum Quintero, Colombia has "the largest African descended population of any Spanish-speaking country in the world, and the third largest in the hemisphere" (4). Bringing

⁷ "En mi caso, el bullerengue es una descendencia, es como si fuera una herencia que le pasó mi abuelo a mi papá y mi papá a mí, y es algo que yo también se lo quiero pasar a mis hijos y que ellos se lo pasen a sus hijos y así."

⁸ The terms Black, Afro-Colombian, and African descendant are used in this article to reflect the terms used by the community members to identify themselves. The terms are also used in demonstrating the correlation of the formerly used term *negro* 'Black' to the more recently used term *afrodescendiente* 'African descendant.'

knowledge, languages, and traditions from West and Central West Africa, the African contributions to Colombia's history and development are fundamental. Furthermore, African retentions and re-creations have been used to sustain African lives through maroonage, sustenance, and other forms of survival.

In Colombia's Caribbean or Atlantic coast lies the Montes de María, a mountain range that was the site of heavy maroonage outside Cartagena. One of the most well-known maroon towns, or *palenques*, as they were labeled in Colombia, is Palenque de San Basilio, known to be one of the first surviving maroon towns of the Americas and one that has retained much of the African heritage from centuries before. Outside of this palenque was a network of other palenques, establishing the area as a space of African liberation in the Montes de María region. María la Baja is a part of this maroon settlement region. Maroonage is a physical demonstration of self-determination in the sense of gaining power in space, land, and freedom from bondage. The values and cultural knowledge remain an ancestral guide for the people of María la Baja.

María la Baja is a town composed of people who primarily identify as Black or African descendant. According to a local educator, Deisy Vanegas Batista, "María la Baja is a 90% Afro-descendant community". The townspeople are aware of the racial and ethnic mixing of European and indigenous blood in their ancestry, yet, from my many interviews and discussions with the townspeople, it is clear that they largely identify as *negro* or *afrodescendiente* and are committed to maintaining and instilling pride in their African culture. It has not consistently been this way as the elder population did not grow up learning their history or being celebrated by the country as Black. This is a new phenomenon among the middle-aged and younger generations that now have a positive identity with being of African descent.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This work represents a portion of an ethnographic study conducted by the author as a Fulbright Scholar between 2021 and 2022. The work occurred in the Montes de María region of the Atlantic of Colombia and was titled, "Ancestral Identity—Afro-Colombian Cultural Traditions of the Atlantic Coast." The study focused on how Afro-Colombian culture influenced the identity of the members of the three communities of María la Baja, Palenque de San Basilio, and San Onofre.

Drawing from many conceptual traditions, this essay employs three framing ideas. The first is Afroepistemology, which Chucho García characterized as "a rupture in the knowledge that has been formed about us, which is now being questioned because it hid our contributions to the global village, not only in the Americas but in the world"⁹ (74). According to the *Cambridge English Dictionary*, epistemology is "the study of how we know things" ("Epistemology"). Thus, the prefix Afro in the term Afroepistemology indicates that the study centers on the philosophy and cultural traditions of African descendants worldwide. This essay shows that members of the María la Baja community have shifted their perspective on viewing themselves as inferior to their white counterparts. This change is in response to their historical exclusion from representations in imagery, culture, history, beauty standards, and more, in overt and covert efforts to uphold whiteness as the norm. The application of Afroepistemology presents an additional instrument to counter the internalization of Western

⁹ "una ruptura con ese conocimiento estructurado sobre nosotros, ya que es un conocimiento cuestionado que ocultó el potencial de nuestras contribuciones a la aldea planetaria, no sólo a las Américas, sino a toda la humanidad."

ideologies, goals, and philosophies that have historically perpetuated the long-term domination of African and indigenous groups. Afroepistemology brings in other forms of thinking and framing of who Afro-Colombians are, their African heritage, their Colombian adaptations, and their resilience as a people to have held on to who they are.

This brings us to the second framing idea of “(re)membering” as posited by Cynthia B. Dillard who discusses the idea as “an act of resistance, given the continuous ways that Black people and our presence in the diaspora are rendered invisible within structures of capitalistic, patriarchal, anti-Black structures of domination” (xv). Dillard’s idea of “(re)membering” clearly encompasses the active work in María la Baja as a form of resistance to the unceasing attacks on Black and Brown lives. Dillard explains the term:

Marshaling the prefix (re-) in parentheses is my way of (re)minding all of us that Black people have inherently and always existed as brilliant holders of knowledge, culture, and humanity. Thus, (re)membering is not an initial or original (re)cognition of Blackness: it is used to (re)mind us all of what Black people have always known about ourselves in contexts that consistently act otherwise. (xv)

Afroepistemology and “(re)membering” both speak to the necessity of re-creating a worldview for the community of María la Baja. These concepts are key components of enacting a mindset of self-determination both for the individual and the collective. This was essentially done through education and the promotion of cultural production.

The third framing concept of self-determination is tied to having control and agency over one’s own life and community. *Encyclopedia Britannica* defines self-determination as a political philosophy, “the process by which a group of people, usually possessing a certain degree of national consciousness, form their own state and choose their own government” and cites the United Nations Charter of 1945, which clarifies that “a state is said to have the right of self-determination in the sense of having the right to choose freely its political, economic, social, and cultural systems” (“Self-determination”). In this context, my focus diverges from the *Britannica*-defined goal of state independence, steering instead toward a goal emphasizing autonomy and educational and cultural agency within the political framework.

Maulana Karenga drew from African life principles to formulate the basic tenets of Kwanzaa and expounds on the concept of self-determination within this framework:

Kujichagulia (self-determination) advances the fundamental principle of the right and responsibility of our people and all peoples to determine their own destiny and daily lives in dignity and freedom, practice their own culture, control and benefit from their own human and natural resources, pursue their aspirations and interests with due respect for the interests of others and the well-being of the world, and rise in righteous resistance to those who would deny them.

Karenga posits that control over natural resources and the determination of one’s own destiny are fundamental objectives. The pervasive acts of violence aimed at controlling land, the biased educational curriculum, political power, and injustice in Colombia and María la Baja necessitated a movement toward self-determination for the people—a reclamation of their power. The María la Baja community, being descendants of maroons, has an ancestral legacy that is fundamentally anchored in the principle of self-determination, thus

requiring a “(re)membering” of their power and place. This struggle is aimed at reclaiming the power to own and control their ancestral land, to educate their children with an inclusive curriculum, to have a say in local and national government, and to be seen as important members of the nation as African descendants.

How do the *bullerengue* and ethnoeducation demonstrate self-determination for a community? According to the Right to Self-determination of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Executive Overview by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), self-determination applies to “ancestral lands and territories, natural resources, cultures, ways of life and forms of political organization and representation, and other rights” (Organization of American States). African descendants in the Americas share these same goals and have aligned with indigenous peoples in seeking human rights for centuries. The concept of self-determination as outlined by Karenga is that “this is to be done, not in isolation, but in community and in the midst of struggle for justice, freedom and good in the world.”

This definition of self-determination for the individual and the community is prevalent in María la Baja through ethnoeducation. The *bullerengue* serves as a launching pad for the teachings of self-love, historical and cultural knowledge, and respect for community traditions and values.

Colombia Today and Then

Before delving further into the town’s history and issues, it is important to frame this plight with a larger picture of Colombia and its treatment of African descendants. According to the Administrative Department of National Statistics or the DANE, in 2018 the population of people who identify as Black, Afro-Colombian, Raizal or Palenquero was 9.34% of the national population.¹⁰ Most Afro-Colombians live on the Pacific and Atlantic coasts of the country in towns founded in maroonage or on lands where their ancestors were taken to work. Many moved to the metropolitan cities of Cartagena, Medellín, Cali, and Bogotá for work or school, or due to forced internal exile. Many Afro-Colombians who migrated by choice for work and school faced overt and covert racism due to racial codes. They were denied jobs and access to institutions. They were ridiculed for their way of speaking—especially residents of the *palenques* who have their own language. As a result, people did as much as they could to disguise their differences in order to gain access to educational, economic, and social opportunities. Research published in 1976 conducted by Thomas J. Price on Blacks and mulattoes on the Caribbean coast, chiefly around Cartagena, speaks to the ideology of the time:

Blacks and mulattoes do their best to appear whiter, and they energetically seek to conceal or deemphasize their Negroid origins; white aesthetic standards of appearance are automatically valid for all. If however, becoming whiter is viewed as the best means of escape from the curse of blackness, what chance for acceptance does the great mass of Negroids have? (cited in Rout 245-246)

This demonstrates that almost 50 years ago, in one of the most historically important port cities of the Americas—a site where thousands of Africans were forcibly taken to labor—their descendants remained unwelcome and unaccepted as integral components of the nation's identity. Nonetheless, one cannot change

¹⁰ “Grupos étnicos-Información técnica.” <https://www.dane.gov.co/index.php/estadisticas-por-tema/demografia-y-poblacion/grupos-etnicos/informacion-tecnica>. Accessed 8 April 2023.

their color, race, or origin, and discriminatory practices remain a barrier to Black Colombians. Following closely on the heels of Price's research, a new generation of young Afro-Colombians from the Montes de María emerged and committed to take on the challenge of changing this negative stereotype and narrative, as will be discussed in the next section.

The second wave of migrants consists of those who were forcibly exiled from their lands, mainly in departments of the Pacific coast but also in the Atlantic, who fled due to violence. Afro-Colombian and indigenous people have been traumatized by decades of conflict in their ancestral lands on both coasts. The violence in this conflict involves many factions and parties thus complicating its intent but essentially it boils down to the fight for money and control connected to land, drugs, and commerce.¹¹ As a result, families find themselves thrown into the streets of towns and cities where they have no home or source of income and are in a place where they are the excluded minority. This ongoing fight for inclusion and access affects the psyche and travels back to the hometowns of those who face discrimination by the dominant culture, resulting in one's inclination to disassociate from their home and identity of Blackness and to change their hair, speech, activities, associations, and connections to home.

Miladis Vanegas Batista, an ethnoeducational teacher, administrator, and cultural advisor from María la Baja, shares how being associated with Blackness was viewed negatively in her youth: "We were stigmatized because of our skin color, and our hair, with expressions such as: 'bad hair,' 'black,' 'thick-lipped,' 'flat-nosed.' With that kind of expression, you felt that what you were was bad... Even my mother used to say, 'that Black thing' when she wanted to offend us."¹² She also shared that as a teacher she realized that their books did not include the contributions of Africans in Colombia and further invisibilized Afro-Colombians from the history of the country and world. They did not discuss the leaders and were never the heroes and that is the work they have been doing to transform the schools through the curriculum.

The deeply rooted racism and oppression of the African and indigenous populations directly affected the people and their mentality, including that of the youngest members of society. Ethno-educator and sister of Miladis, Deisy Vanegas Batista states, "we were shown that Blacks were the bad guys... and our generation never wanted to identify themselves as Afro, and that's why our ancestors always said that we had to seek out whitening. That if someone married a Black person it was sad, ugly."¹³ Fast-forwarding to the current day, Deisy and other educators in the town report that the students had been in a space of shame and denial of anything connected to being dark or being called Black. Furthermore, they had lost respect for their elders: "These generations hold older adults in little value, but in the past, if an older adult looked at us, we were silent. We respected them because the word of that adult was to be respected."¹⁴ Deisy speaks on behalf of her colleagues that their aim is to foster a sense of pride in both their ancestry and community.

¹¹ These issues are well documented on a US university website. See a thorough explanation in *"Territory is Everything": Afro-Colombian Communities, Human Rights and Illegal Land Grabs*, 27 March 2020. In 2009, the Colombian Constitutional Court found a pattern and practice of forced displacement and land grabbing in all the Afro-Colombian portions of Colombia related to palm oil cultivation and mega-projects. <https://hrlr.law.columbia.edu/hrlr-online/territory-is-everything-afro-colombian-communities-human-rights-and-illegal-land-grabs/>. Accessed 1 April 2023.

¹² "Nos estigmatizaban por nuestro color de piel, nuestro pelo, con expresiones como 'pelo malo', 'negra', 'bembona'. 'ñata'. Con ese tipo de expresiones uno se sentía que lo que uno era, era malo... Incluso mi mamá decía, 'la negra esa' cuando quería ofendernos."

¹³ "nos mostraban a los negros como los malos... Nuestras generaciones nunca se quisieron identificar como afros y de ahí viene que nuestros ancestros siempre decían que había que buscar el blanqueamiento. Que si alguien se casaba con una persona negra eso era triste, feo."

¹⁴ "Estas generaciones tienen poco valor hacia ese adulto mayor, que anteriormente si un adulto mayor nos miraba, nosotros hacíamos silencio. Nosotros respetábamos porque ya ese adulto, esa palabra de ese adulto era respetable."

Ethnoeducation

In recognition of the issues plaguing the community due to racism, María la Baja began to pull from its palenque network of collective memory. In the early 1980s in the nearby town of Palenque de San Basilio, the beginning of a project was underway:¹⁵

A group of people from Palenque de San Basilio—teachers, and professionals of various disciplines—had a great concern: to avoid the gradual loss of identity that was clearly evident in the deterioration and denial of linguistic, cultural, and historical models which prevented us from maintaining the status of libertarian and self-managing people, which had been built and defended for over four centuries as a fundamental element of resistance against slavery and as a condition of identity and human development. (Guerrero García 5)¹⁶

Historian Alfonso Cassiani of Palenque de San Basilio heritage discusses this movement in the Atlantic started by Afro-Colombian high school and college students who wanted to change the constant racism, discrimination, and exclusion they felt in the cities of Cartagena and Barranquilla (577). They began to organize groups around political, cultural, religious, and agricultural activities throughout the Caribbean (Cassiani 577-578). As shared with me by a member of this movement, Dorina Hernández Palomino, who in 2022, became the first *palenque*-born citizen to be elected as a congresswoman, they were a young group inspired by Black activism in the United States. Cassiani specifies that the Movimiento Cimarrón was “inspired by the US examples of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X among others. . . , the African situation, . . . and the apartheid that plagued South Africa” (578).¹⁷ Their meetings involved all types of members of the Afro-Colombian community, and study circles were the mechanisms for awareness-raising and organizational strengthening (Cassiani 578). The groups read books and followed the movement of Black leaders in the diaspora, taking their cue to create change in their communities and the country.

As a continuation of this momentum, in the 1990s, other towns in the Montes de María maroon network began to implement changes as described by Miladis Vanegas Batista:

When the grassroots organizations began, in this case PCN (Process of Black Communities) in San Basilio de Palenque but later included María la Baja, San Onofre Sucre, and the organization began to have workshops in the communities, with the schools, the teachers, community leaders, and cultural agents, that’s where a so-to-speak revolution began to initiate and implement an education that encompasses ethnoeducation and interculturality. (Personal interview)¹⁸

¹⁵ “During the Afro-Colombian social movement, more specifically from the ethnoeducative experience in San Basilio de Palenque, in the 80’s this methodological guide was introduced as an experiment, where this process of methodology construction was developed” (Rodríguez Manotas and Hernández Cassiani 127).

¹⁶ “Desde el comienzo de los ochenta, en el Palenque de San Basilio, un grupo de de personas palenqueras sobre todo maestras y maestros, profesionales de diversas disciplinas, tenían una gran preocupación; evitar la pérdida paulatina de identidad claramente manifestada en el deterioro y negación de referentes lingüísticos, culturales e históricos que impedían mantener aquella condición de pueblo libertario y autogestionario, que durante cuatro siglos había construido y defendido como elemento fundamental de resistencia contra la esclavitud y como condición de identidad y de desarrollo humano” (Guerrero García 5).

¹⁷ “Movimiento Cimarrón . . . se inspiraba en el ejemplo norteamericano de Martin Luther King y Malcolm X, entre otros, . . . su interés por la situación africana y . . . por el apartheid que azotaba a Sudáfrica.”

¹⁸ “Cuando inician las organizaciones de base, en este caso el PCN (Proceso de Comunidades Negras) que empieza en San basilio de Palenque, pero luego se articula María la Baja, San Onofre Sucre, y empieza esta organización a hacer talleres en las comunidades, con las escuelas, con los maestros, con los líderes comunitarios, y con los gestores culturales, y allí es que se empieza por decirlo de alguna manera una revolución para iniciar a implementar una educación que abarca la etnoeducación y la interculturalidad.”

The members from Montes de Maria set out to change the self-hate that had infiltrated their historically maroon towns and began to work on the foundation of what is now ethnoeducation in Colombia. They understood that they were more than what was taught and published and demanded that the change come from within to elevate the self-image of their communities: “people would say ‘I am brown,’ but nobody wanted to identify as Afro-Colombian or Black. There was no self-recognition. So, we said, we must begin with the schools and the universities” (M. Vanegas Batista, personal interview).¹⁹ They worked together in search of a method that promoted “autonomy, identity and community participation by self-managing knowledge,”²⁰ and in 1992, they received official recognition of the Programa de Etnoeducación de Palenque (Palenque Ethnoeducation Program) (Guerrero García 5). This was the foundation of what would become a national policy of ethnoeducation, “a pedagogical model for identity and self-management of knowledge” (Guerrero García 5).²¹

Contextualizing this with Cynthia B. Dillard’s philosophy on “(re)membering” the following three elements correlate with the transformation in the communities:

1. (Re)cognizing: Members of the community realized they were affected internally by external discrimination and invisibilization.
2. (Re)visioning: They began to discuss what needed to be done to change this reality that was influencing how they saw themselves and each other. Convening of minds and creating a plan.
3. (Re)searching: They looked within to pull out the history, skill, knowledge, and values of their society. They conducted research and published this which later was added to the curriculum.

I apply Dillard’s idea of “(re)membering” as the foundational and structural philosophy of the community work which is based on the concept of self-determination. To build the curriculum, the group used collective memory to mount an archive of collective history. Much of the focus of the earlier and subsequent years was based on knowledge of their African heritage, leading to a (re)visioning of themselves as having value in their history, culture, skills, and knowledge.

Their Pan-African outlook afforded them a wide expanse of examples of movements, literature, and leaders that they applied to their regional and national action plans. They worked in conjunction with the creation of Law 70, passed in 1993 which is “In Recognition of the Right of Black Colombians to Collectively Own and Occupy their Ancestral Lands” (“Law 70”). They wanted to include an educational component in this important law and in Chapter VI of the law, several articles were added. Article 32 states, “The Colombian State recognizes and guarantees the Black Communities the right to an education in accordance with their needs and their ethnic and cultural aspirations.” (“Law 70”). The resulting product of Law 70’s 6th chapter was ethnoeducation.

To train educators in ethnoeducation, institutions had to prepare for this undertaking and as a result, the Fundación Instituto de Educación e Investigación Manuel Zapata Olivella (Manuel Zapata Olivella Institute of Education and Research Foundation (MZO) was created in 2002. As stated in a methodology document produced by the institute, “The most expeditious space par excellence, enabled to stage the method of consulting the

¹⁹ “la gente decía ‘yo soy moreno’, pero nadie quería reconocerse como Afrocolombiano o Negro. No había autorreconocimiento. Entonces dijimos, hay que empezar por las escuelas y las universidades.”

²⁰ “autonomía, identidad y participación comunitaria autogestionando el conocimiento.”

²¹ “un modelo pedagógico para la identidad y la autogestión del conocimiento.”

collective memory, is the Manuel Zapata Olivella Institute of Education and Research Foundation, which emerged from the very bowels of the Afro-Colombian social movement, more specifically from the Process of Black Communities (PCN), Palenque Regional and Ku Suto” (Rodríguez Manotas et al.16).²² According to M. Vanegas Batista, a cofounder of the institute, their main objective is to promote knowledge from their own culture instead of what they had been learning from a Western viewpoint. They want the students to value their own culture as well as others through ethnic diversity (personal interview). The fact that this institute is housed in María la Baja resulted in the pedagogy and reinforcement of the values and principles of ethno-education being widely disseminated in schools and the community: “We had a traditional curriculum, which was a copy of others, which had Western ideas, now we brought it to our own” (M. Vanegas Batista, personal interview).²³ This aligns with the sentiments of Amos Wilson, who held that “the education of our children is too serious for us to leave it in the hands of other people. . . . They are always going to set things up in ways that work to their advantage, even when they have good intentions” (12).

In María la Baja, many if not all schools are supplied with teachers trained in ethnoeducation in accordance with the national law. This has been stated in several legislative agreements in Colombia as seen in Article 3, Chapter 1 in Decree 804 of 1995: “In the territorial entities where there are settlements of indigenous, black and/or raizal communities, ethno-education proposals must be included in the respective educational development plans to serve this population, taking into account the distribution of powers provided for in Law 60 of 1993” (Colombia 2). Thus, the schools use ethno-education as a means to build self-worth within the students and the community. According to ethnoeducator Deisy Vanegas Batista, “ethnoeducation came at a propitious moment when we were shown the true history of that time of enslavement. We are taking it to the schools, to the children so that they can see how beautiful it is and how the afro children feel identified with their color, with their hair, with their customs.”²⁴

In the same way that ethnoeducation was formed “by building its collective history, the community discovers the dimension of its identity,”²⁵ the teachers have their students follow the same methodology, and the students begin to discover the knowledge and value of their family, community, and self (Rodríguez Manotas y Hernández Cassiani 124). With this knowledge, the students can solve small problems in their classroom, then the larger issues in their community and beyond. This understanding of belonging, identity, and place is key for them to take hold, take charge, and have confidence as they build a positive understanding of their origins as African and Black.

Ethnoeducation was not created, however, as a national education model for each student and school, as stated by Miladis Vanegas Batista. It is geared toward the specific ethnic groups, and if a school has a high enough percentage of an ethnic group, they must provide a level of ethnoeducation for the students (personal interview). Thus, the example of María la Baja speaks to the depth of research, forethought, and intentionality brought to the curriculum of their schools.

²² “El espacio más expedito por excelencia, habilitado para poner en escena al método de la consulta a la memoria colectiva lo constituye la Fundación Instituto de Educación e Investigación Manuel Zapata Olivella, surgido desde las entrañas mismas del movimiento social afrocolombiano, más específicamente del proceso de Comunidades

Negras, Palenque Regional Ku Suto - PCN” (Rodríguez Manotas et al. 16).

²³ “Teníamos un currículo tradicional, que era la copia de otros, que tenía ideas occidentales, ahora lo trajimos a lo nuestro.”

²⁴ “La etnoeducación llegó en un momento propio, un momento propicio donde nos mostraron la verdadera historia de esa época de esclavización. La estamos llevando a las escuelas, con los niños para que miren lo bello y como los niños afros se sienten identificados con su color, con su cabello, con sus costumbres.”

²⁵ “al construir su historia colectiva, la comunidad descubre la dimensión de su identidad.”

Bullerengue as a Tool

Surrounding and bolstering ethnoeducation in María la Baja is the *bullerengue* music, song, and dance, which is the heartbeat of the town. María la Baja titles itself “The Cradle of *Bullerengue*” and has hosted *bullerengue* festivals along with the annual Children’s *Bullerengue* Festival. At every important community event that I attended, there was a *bullerengue* performance, whether it was an educational seminar, graduation, festival, or school assembly.

In María la Baja, there are three types of *bullerengue* —*sentao*, *chalupa*, and *fandango*—which are not done in conjunction with mourning during a Lumbalú ritual as in Palenque de San Basilio. It is a daily occurrence to hear *bullerengue* in María la Baja, but only recently are more youths finding an interest in this old tradition. As with the rest of the modern world, technology has become the standard form of entertainment, whether television, telephones, or the radio. However, in conjunction with ethno-education, children have been going to their parents and grandparents to conduct mini-investigations on their lives and culture. This has brought about a sense of connection and understanding that would not have happened without this intervention. Now, the children are proud when their grandparent is invited to the school to demonstrate a skill or share an experience and the children in turn look to emulate these exemplars within their family.

When the children decide to join a group, they learn skills and values that come from collective engagement with other children. These skills are then transferred to social engagement in school, and they can resolve issues and conduct themselves without needing much direction as they are learning these skills in the group. Another skill that the youth build is self-confidence. With *bullerengue* everyone participates in the singing, clapping, and dancing. Upon entering the circle, dancers must be sure of the steps, the placement of the hands, and how to respond to the call of the drum. The thrill of performing well in front of peers and family drives the young people to study and work hard to hone their dance skills. It is an even higher honor to be called upon to sing a *bullerengue* song and fosters a sense of pride and sharing, as lead singer Liceth Yohana Brian Cassiani, a 16-year-old from the group Chumbun Gale Compae, explained: “since I was a little girl my *bullerengue* is everything to me. I want to teach it to other children. . . , show it to the national and international world so they can see how beautiful this culture is. . . I tell them to enjoy it because this is for enjoying. *Bullerengue* is in our blood.”²⁶ For Liceth, *bullerengue* is embedded in her life’s rhythm: “Where my [*bullerengue*] teacher was going, I wanted to go... When I saw a drum, I felt the drum and I wanted to dance. In other words, it’s as if the drum was my life, and I say I am from Maria la Baja, and we identify with *bullerengue* because that is our custom, our race.”²⁷ As is evident here, the children are clear in the importance of this cultural tradition and how it identifies them and their community.

Bullerengue, a core cultural element in María la Baja, is heard daily in many spaces. When the elders are the only ones who sing, dance, and play the rhythms, it can certainly dissipate and become less practiced with each generation. One strategy of ethnoeducation in the town is highlighting *bullerengue*’s ubiquity as a current in the community that makes them unique and speaks to their culture. When there is a concerted effort to teach

²⁶ “Yo desde niña mi bullerengue pa’ mi es todo. . . Espero enseñarle a otros niños, . . . mostrar a todo el mundo nacional, internacional para que ellos vean lo hermoso que es esta cultura enseñarles y sí, yo les digo gócenlo porque esto es de gozo. El bullerengue es como sí, mira ve lo tenemos en la sangre.”

²⁷ “Pues yo pa donde iba mi profe yo quería ir, quería ir, que me llevaran o sea yo cuando veía un tambor, yo siento un tambor y quiero bailar. O sea, yo pareciera que el tambor fuera mi vida, y yo digo yo soy maríalabajense y a nosotros los maríalabajenses nos identifican con el bullerengue porque esa es nuestra costumbre, nuestra raza.”

bullerengue to the youth, it will survive at least another generation. The teaching components go beyond steps, words, and rhythms because fundamentally they are instilling cultural pride, establishing respect and honor for elders, learning history, self-confidence, leadership, and a commitment to cultural retention and representation. When residents develop a strong connection to their family and community, they in turn will represent it well and protect their people.

Bullerengue has been used as a tool for unification and cultural identity. Another outcome of learning, passing down, and practicing a cultural element with intention is the community coming together to celebrate who they are and affirm each other. When the students at a school are tasked to present projects, it is a core activity in the schedule. When there is a graduation, the *bullerengue* is the performance that highlights a point of pride in the community. *Bullerengue* has taken the name of the community to other towns, states, and countries. In essence, *Bullerengue* is an educational tool. When the students and teachers open their minds to cultural elements being a part of their life and applying the concepts of ethnoeducation, many things are found to be applicable in all subjects and life.

The integration of culture in the subjects allows for an epistemological shift from “other” to “self,” from “outsider” to “insider.” Knowledge and skills are tapped from within the community and encourage everyone to look for and recognize the abundance of knowledge in people and professions that have been overlooked, including fishermen and women, farmers, herbalists, instrument makers, singers, and songwriters, and *bullerengue* performers. This is expressed in a statement from Britany Sofía Marimon Caro who speaks of knowledge being passed down: “What I felt in the *bullerengue* is a way for me to express myself freely and artistically. Also, I can express my feelings. . . . My teacher William Muñoz. . . , who is now my stepfather, has been teaching me about the Afro-Colombian race and its roots”.²⁸ This shift has resulted in an Afroepistemological framework based on the values of the community.

The *bullerengue* is a singular focal point for a town that has so many cultural and historical elements in their repository that intersect with the identity of the community, I deeply appreciate this because I am a dancer myself, and also, throughout the years, it has been a highlight to every event I have attended in the town. Góngora Mera et al. state that “the history of the African diaspora develops outside the orbit of formal politics, fundamentally using performance, dance, music, or religion as forms of constitution” (56). *Bullerengue’s* place of importance as a cultural anchor is a key element for ongoing self-determination as Afro-Colombians create positive change in María la Baja. I posit that performance is discussed most because it is the most visible item in the main societies that were documented during the colonial era. Also, it is what has been most emulated and allowed to be shown which is another means to otherize and diminish the knowledge that is connected to the performative cultural practices. My commitment is to demonstrate how performative culture is a vessel to display and practice spiritual beliefs, knowledge, ritual, memory, and history to maintain sanity and togetherness.

Main Issues and Curricular Solutions

Within the school curriculum and based on the philosophy of drawing from the wisdom of their ancestors and elders, there have been community and school projects, programs, training, publications and more tackling

²⁸ “Lo que yo sentí en el bullerengue es que es una manera en la que yo me puedo expresar libremente, artísticamente. También, puedo expresar mis sentimientos. . . . My profesor Wilman Muñoz, como ahora él es mi padrastro, me ha ido enseñando conocimientos sobre la raza afrocolombiana y sus raíces.”

each issue that has plagued the town head-on. The issue of girl prostitution was countered with the *Valorarme* (“Value Myself”) project, and as attested by educator Miladis Vanegas Batista: “The girls started to value themselves and know that they didn’t have to give their bodies to someone else . . . just for some money to buy a blouse.”²⁹ Youths now have an outlet in the various *bullerengue* groups, which gives them a deeper sense of self and direction. Another issue was that of the students not being permitted to wear their hair natural in school, since it was seen as unkempt and dirty. This was countered with a project of educating the school leaders, teachers, and students about their heritage as African descendants along with hair shows and demonstrations of the beauty of black hair. The policy has been changed to allow natural hairstyles in the schools. Now, natural hairstyles are an element of fashion shows, performances, and the curriculum.

This connection from the curriculum to the *bullerengue* was intentional and based on research that was conducted 18 years ago according to M. Vanegas Batista:

Bullerengue is not only our traditional dance, but it is a pretext used in school to promote basic skills, that is, knowledge and wisdom in the children. Why? Because . . . research has shown that *bullerengue* rhythms develops fine and gross motor skills which helps them write and read better. In addition to valuing themselves and feeling proud of *bullerengue*, it also empowers them. As you realized today, there is an identity empowerment, everyone is proud that we are Afros and from María la Baja, and *bullerengue* is our emblematic folklore. (personal interview)³⁰

The *bullerengue* in María la Baja is a consistent display of African heritage where the elements of shame are converted into elements of pride on public display. The youth see their peers performing and traveling with natural hairstyles and a sense of confidence. They see their young family members involved in cultural activities that expose them to new people, places, and opportunities while having a great time. One youth participant shared that he was hesitant to dance *bullerengue* but is very grateful that he decided to join the group:

I thought *bullerengue* was something for crazies, I just didn’t know what it was. I thought hmm this looks pretty slow, and I said I’m going to go check it out. Little by little, I started to like it and later I began dancing here in the corporation. In my first festival, I felt enjoyment, happiness and enthusiasm and I began to enjoy it, and, thank God, I am here, here where you see me. (Valencia Urbina)³¹

Many of the children are curious about *bullerengue* since it was not something passed down within their age group like their games. However, they are now joining because their sibling or cousin participates, affording them opportunities to go beyond their neighborhood and reduce their exposure to potential discrimination. And underlying all of that is a deepening connection to their culture and a positive association of who they are and where they are from.

²⁹“las niñas empezaron a valorarse y saber que no tenían que entregar su cuerpo a otra persona . . . por algo de dinero para comprarse una blusa.”

³⁰ “No solamente el bullerengue es nuestro baile típico, sino que ese baile típico es un pretexto que se usa en la escuela para impulsar las competencias básicas, es decir, los conocimientos y saberes de los niños, ¿Por qué? Porque . . . los ritmos del bullerengue en las investigaciones se demostraron que desarrollan la motricidad fina y la motricidad gruesa en los niños y eso les ayuda a ellos a escribir y leer mejor, además de valorarse y sentirse orgullosos del bullerengue también los empodera, como te diste cuenta hoy hay un empoderamiento identitario, todo el mundo orgulloso de que somos afros y maríalabajenses y el bullerengue es nuestra insignia del folclor.”

³¹ “Yo en el bullerengue pensaba que eso era cosa pa’ loco o sea cosa de yo no sé qué entonces yo dije me parece que eso es muy lento entonces yo dije voy a acompañarla pa’ ve ya poco a poco me fue gustando luego bailaba aquí en la corporación. En el primer festival que yo empecé, yo empecé que yo sentía era gozo, alegría, y era entusiasmo y de ahí me fue gustando y gracias a Dios estoy aquí, aquí donde usted me ve.”

This connection is seen in the statements from the youth of the Chumbun Gale Compae group, as 14-year-old Britany Sofia Marimon Caro shares here: “When I first saw *bullerengue*, I was curious—they told me it was boring and that it was a dance that was passed to our ancestors from generation to generation. They had been leaving that to us as something we must practice today. For example, our objective as the new generation is to ensure that our tradition is recognized at the international level.”³² Marimon Caro illustrates the ownership that she and her peers feel for *bullerengue* as connected to themselves and their community along with the importance of being recognized through their cultural heritage.

This introduction of *bullerengue* to the youth is in alignment with Cynthia Dillard’s concept of “(re)visioning”: “We could set aside familiar definitions of ourselves and of others that may have been comfortable because we were used to them but that no longer fit our expanding spiritual understandings of ourselves and our power” (53). The school administrators had to “(re)vision” and see themselves and their students outside of a colonialist/racist view of the type of hairstyles that were deemed acceptable and tidy. Educators and the extended community had to see another side of the coin through re-education. They had to understand that what they had been taught from a white supremacist and capitalist viewpoint was created to keep them in a subservient place mentally and physically.

One last important issue to be considered is that of the grandparents. As indicated by Miladis Vanegas Batista, “before, grandparents were kept in the backyards like they were nothing; here, becoming an elderly person meant that nobody listened to them, they were not even bathed, and they had no value” (personal interview).³³ Pulling from the model of oral historians, the curriculum now includes elders as subject matter experts. One of the contributions of the elders is the transmission of the *bullerengue*. Miladis Vanegas Batista proudly shares that: “Grandparents are our main teachers of knowledge in school. They are part of these fundamental teachers because we bring them to the school to carry out this intergenerational dialogue, between the children and the grandparents. And the grandparents feel valued” (personal interview).³⁴ These are just some of the most significant issues that have been tackled by the schools and the town.

Conclusion

It doesn't matter to us where we dance the *bullerengue*, the important thing is that we dance it and express ourselves, so sometimes we dance it on terraces, in the street, at home, also at school and in other places, but what matters most to me is not the place, but that I like dancing the *bullerengue*, and even in the street I keep dancing. I like it, for us, it is a way of expressing happiness and joy. (Marimon Caro)³⁵

³² “Bueno, lo que yo vi en el bullerengue en primer lugar es que sentí curiosidad por esta danza porque me decían que eso era aburrido y además que es una danza que ha pasado a nuestros ancestros de generación en generación. Nos han ido dejando eso como algo que nosotros debemos ejercer hoy en día. Por ejemplo, nosotros la nueva generación, nosotros tenemos como objetivo es llegar a que nuestra tradición se reconozca a nivel internacional.”

³³ “antes los abuelos estaban en el patio de las casas como nada, aquí convertirse en adulto mayor significaba que nadie los escuchara, ni siquiera los bañaban, no tenían valor.”

³⁴ “Los abuelos son nuestros principales maestros del saber en la escuela. Ellos hacen parte de esos docentes fundamentales, porque los llevamos a la escuela para que realicen ese diálogo intergeneracional, entre los niños y los abuelos. Y los abuelos se sienten valorados.”

³⁵ “A nosotros no nos importa donde bailemos bullerengue, lo importante es que lo bailemos y nos expresemos, por lo tanto, a veces lo bailamos en terrazas, en la calle, en la casa, a veces también en la escuela y en otros lugares, pero a mí lo que más me importa no es el lugar, sino que me gusta bailar bullerengue, es decir, así sea en la calle yo sigo bailando, me gusta, para nosotros es una manera de expresar, felicidad y alegría.”

This essay argues that the community of María la Baja used self-determination to create what they needed for cultural and political survival despite their powerlessness to change a capitalist, classist, racist system. Additionally, within Dillard's concept of "(re)membering," we demonstrated that the *bullerengue* creates the continual ancestral link from Africa to Colombia and allows this direct line to guide the people in their continual quest to anchor themselves as individuals and a community in a country yet to fully embrace the African presence. The *bullerengue* opens the space for other elements of identity to be present and focal in the realm of education. The ethnoeducation curriculum of María la Baja has been developed from an Afroepistemological approach of using the heritage and knowledge from within, i.e., the *bullerengue*, and expanding that into other subjects seen inside and outside the schools.

As stated by Cynthia B. Dillard: "While Black people have definitely experienced that deep sense of loss, we are not lost. As we (re)member our way, we have the opportunity to move into the greatness of our being on our terms. This is the (re)cognition that must find its way to the center of education for Black people on these shores, as teachers and as students" (7). Here, she speaks to the resurgence of Black and African knowledge and culture as the core of who we are—an attempt at reversing the effects of centuries of violence and brainwashing where we forgot and recoiled at the sight of ourselves. She speaks to the understanding of Sankofa: "We must go back and fetch what we need and bring it to this moment in order to move forward and (re)member who we've been, what we've been through, who we are and can become" (10). The concept of Sankofa connects to the work being done in María la Baja for African descendants to reclaim and reconstruct their community as defined in the text Sankofa Movement, "Sankofa involves the parallel processes of rediscovery and rescue of that history, and the realization of those related cultural dynamics/imperatives for survival, development and expansion" (1, Agyei and Akoto). To go back to their elders and learn information and skills to restore the knowledge in their community as well as the pride of people and culture is the Sankofa of María la Baja. Carrying on the traditions of the *bullerengue* is one way to reclaim and reconstruct.

A community created out of resistance uses what they know to restore and re-educate the members by intentionally passing on their iconic tradition of the *bullerengue* and making it a pervasive part of life in the town. Developing a curriculum legalized through ethnoeducation, the adults set out to re-establish a positive sense of identity for everyone. Decades later the children now speak in tones of pride and cultural connection. They wear their hair natural; they follow their peers and become part of a *bullerengue* group; they connect more with their grandparents; and they are proud to be *afro-descendiente*. *Bullerengue* is María la Baja, self-determination, Afro-Colombian pride, ancestral legacy, and, of course, the rhythm, movement, and song of the people.

The utilization of the *bullerengue* as a catalyst for change can be used as a model in other communities of the African diaspora that are still plagued by racism and the effects of colonialist oppression. To highlight a specific cultural element, and then continue to highlight other practices that make the community unique, strong, and viable can foster a sense of pride and connection to ancestral legacies. Witnessing your culture celebrated both within and beyond the community enhances the idea of communal dignity and respect. As the music and dance of communities of the African diaspora have been favored by the media and used as national symbology, it is opportune to leverage the talent and beauty inherent in these cultural expressions as instruments for internal transformation.

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