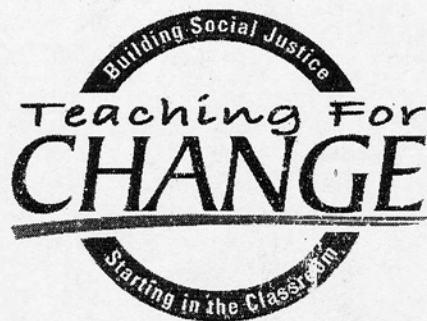
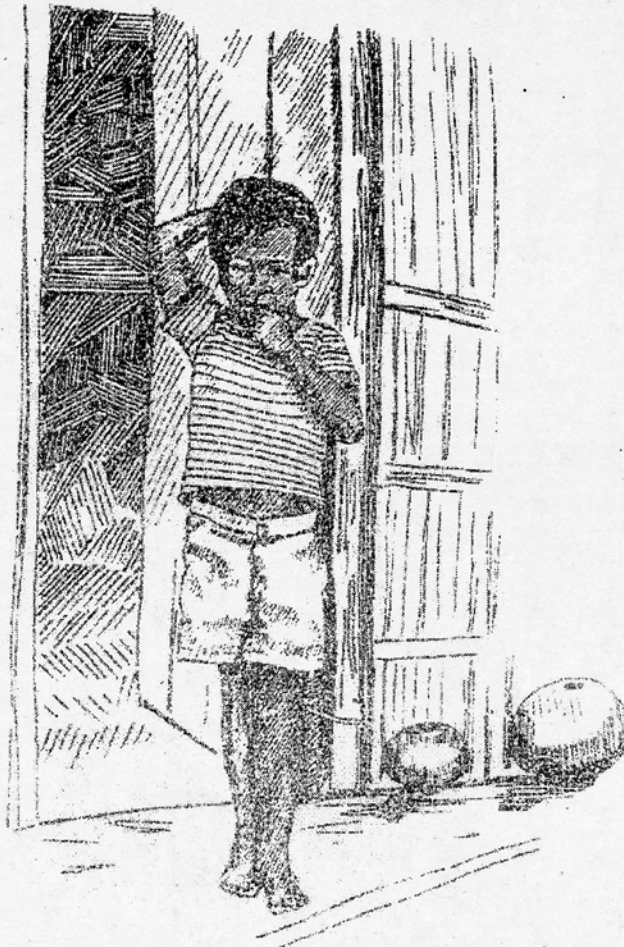


Collective Memory

The African Presence in Latin America

A Study Guide on the Maroon Community of Esmeraldas, Ecuador



P.O. Box 73038 - Washington, DC 20056

www.teachingforchange.org - 1.800.763.9131

Table of Contents

Preface and Credits	2
Introduction: The African Presence in Latin America	3
Décimas: Poetry of Afro-Ecuadorians	4
Table: The African Presence in the Americas	5
Map: Population of African Descent in Latin America	6
Historical Overview: The Maroons of Esmeraldas	7
A Gallery of Maroon Leaders	9
Tiger, Rabbit and the Festival: A Story from Ecuador	11
Tigre, Conejo y la Fiesta: Un Cuento del Ecuador	13
Bibliography	15

Preface

The Network of Educators on the Americas (NECA) has coordinated the production of this Study Guide in conjunction with the March-April 1993 U.S. tour of Juan García Salazar. It provides resources for classroom study of the African presence in Latin America.

For each of the 90 million people of African heritage now living in Latin America, there is a story going back generations. The stories form a rich legacy of struggle and survival. Each is different, but all have their beginning in Africa. They are stories that have been ignored by official national histories and omitted from the textbooks. Indeed, this history is not commonly known by many Latin Americans, and most North Americans are unaware of the African contributions to Latin American culture and history.

In this brief study guide, we can only tell a few of these stories. We focus on the *maroons*, Africans who bravely threw off the chains of slavery and established independent communities within colonial Latin America. In particular, we'll learn about the history and culture of Esmeraldas, a province in northwestern Ecuador that is home to one of the most interesting maroon communities, and where African traditions can still be seen and felt.

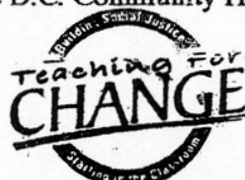
Juan García Salazar grew up in a small village in Esmeraldas near the mouth of the Santiago River. His mother is Afro-Ecuadorian; his father came from Spain as a refugee from the Spanish Civil War. Driven by the questions "Who am I? Where do I come from? Where do I fit in?," he began collecting and studying oral poetry, rituals, myths, folk medicine, music, and household artifacts of Afro-Ecuadorian communities. In addition to preserving this cultural heritage, he works tirelessly as a community organizer to empower his community with survival skills and as an advocate for recognition of Afro-Ecuadorian history and culture within all segments of Ecuadorian society.

We welcome your comments and suggestions for future publications on this topic. ✚

Credits

This Study Guide was compiled by Network of Educators on the Americas (NECA) and members of the Coalition for African American and Latino Unity (CAALU). Contributors include Allen Belkin, Charles Kleymeyer, Kemba A. Maish, Roland Roebuck and Juan García Salazar with advice and assistance from Arlette Clayton, Erica Gilbertson, Dr. Linda Haywood, Marguerite Lukes, Deborah Menkart, Bea Rief, and Deanna Wesson.

We gratefully acknowledge the support of the D.C. Community Humanities Council. ✚



PO Box 73038
Washington, DC 20056
Study Guide: **Collective Memory**

Introduction: The African Presence in Latin America

It is estimated that between ten and twenty million Africans were forcibly transported to the Americas from the 16th to the 19th centuries. There is also evidence that Africans visited the American continent prior to the arrival of the Spanish, and that Africans were among Columbus' crew on his voyages to the Americas.

As many as 125 million people of African heritage now live in the nations of the western hemisphere, including up to 90 million in Latin America (see table, p. 5). Yet, even in many countries with sizable populations of African descent (*Afro-Latinos*), their history is hidden, their cultural roots are ignored and their contributions to the development of the nation are unacknowledged. In addition, they often occupy the lowest rungs of the socio-economic ladder and receive less than their share of government services.

Despite having been uprooted from their traditional homelands and subjected to nearly four centuries of enslavement along with deliberate efforts to destroy their culture, strong links to Africa survive among Afro-Latinos. But the "deculturalizing" pressures did not end with the abolition of slavery. They came to take on more subtle forms. An intricate class-system emerged, based on gradations of skin color, degree of African blood and adoption of European lifestyles.

Mestizaje, the genetic and cultural mixing among Europeans, Africans and indigenous people is celebrated as the cultural identity of many Latin American nations, but little attention is given to the African contribution to the mix. In fact, the term *mestizo* is commonly defined more narrowly to refer only to people of mixed Spanish and indigenous heritage. The word *blanqueamiento* or "whitening" came to refer to an effort to advance within Latin American society by diluting one's African heritage. In contrast, *negritude*, a literary and cultural movement originating in the French-speaking Caribbean islands, encourages pride in African roots and found strong resonance among Afro-Latinos.

In this century, there are new threats to the cultural identity of Afro-Latinos. Most devastating are the spread of radios and televisions into remote areas and the implementation of standardized school curricula. Both promote images of society in which the African role is missing. Only the negative stereotypes persist. For centuries, Afro-Latino traditions have been passed from one generation to the next. Now, images on TV screens and in textbooks could have stronger appeal than stories told by grandparents.

In a number of countries, Afro-Latinos are now working to reclaim their culture, uncover their history and achieve recognition by legal, educational and cultural systems. Organizations have been formed in many of these countries and meetings have been held, both national and international. For example, in the Esmeraldas region of Ecuador, Afro-Ecuadorians have formed groups such as the *Confraternidad de Negros Ecuatorianos* (Brotherhood of Black Ecuadorians); *La Mascara de Oro* (The Mask of Gold); *Amigos del Bosque* (Friends of the Forest); *Grupo de Teatro* (Theatre Group); and *Lamento Campesino* (Lament of the Countryside). They have held a series of "Encounters on Afro-Ecuadorian History" and have collaborated on similar projects in other countries.

These efforts gained momentum in recent years as a result of attention surrounding the Quincenary of Columbus' arrival. A hemisphere-wide campaign to focus attention on the victims of the European invasion of the Americas was named *500 Years of Indigenous, Grassroots and Black Resistance* in recognition of the shared experiences of African-Americans, indigenous people and the lower economic classes during the past five centuries.✦



Four joined
Cowrie shells
signify:
*We want to live
together*

The literature of Afro-Ecuadorians has centered on oral poetry. It has been given the Spanish name *décima*, although it is very different from the classic compositions of 16th century Spain of the same name.

The American *décima* is a child of both African and Hispanic culture. Although the language and form is Spanish, and Christian motifs frequently appear, it is Africa which provided the framework that explains why these poems have been so important to Ecuadorians of African descent. In Africa, there were two kinds of poets: chroniclers and storytellers (or balladeers). The chroniclers were highly respected people who knew by heart the genealogy of the village or clan chief, recounted heroic deeds, and recorded the customs of the groups. The balladeers, on the other hand, were known for their wit as well as their memory. Balladeers preserved the proverbs, the stories, and the anecdotal history of the group.

In Ecuador, the *decimero* (the reciter of *décimas*) is both chronicler and balladeer. *Decimeros* may compose their own poetry or the *décimas* may be handed down, but the language is highly figurative and rhythmic to make memorization easier and to display artistic mastery. The style feels African and traditional African themes are often used.

Basically, there are two kinds of *décimas*. *Décimas a lo divino* have their roots in Catholicism, the only religion the slaves could safely practice. *Décimas a lo humano* range across the whole social life of coastal Ecuador. In these poems, the poet can interpret and narrate his community's experience - often the community's only historical record. Other poems poke fun at pompous politicians, Hispanic culture or local attitudes. Some are simply good stories.

Afro-Ecuadorian poets also engage in *argumentos*, or poetic duels. One *decimero* recites a poem and the next poet must respond. Grounded in spontaneity, these literary faceoffs challenge the competing poets' verbal dexterity, their wit, and their knowledge of the Bible and secular subjects (even such unlikely ones as mathematics).

Juan García Salazar has traveled throughout Esmeraldas Province in northwestern Ecuador, interviewing *decimeros* and recording *décimas*. Here is one of the *décimas* he collected. †

Décimas: Poetry of Afro-Ecuadorians

Collected by Juan García Salazar

Translated by Edith Grossman

LA PREGUNTA DEL NEGRO

THE BLACK MAN'S QUESTION

Como ignorante que soy
me precisa preguntar
si el color blanco es virtud
para mandarme a blanquear.

Like the ignorant man I am
I really have to ask:
if the color white is virtue
why don't you whiten me?

El ser negra no es afrenta
ni color que quita fama
porque de zapatos negros
se viste la mejor dama.
Las cejas y las pestañas
y su negra cabellera,
que lo analice cualquiera
que interrogando es que estoy
me precisa preguntar
como ignorante que soy.

It's no insult to be black,
don't let it give you the blues,
even society ladies
wear their shiny black shoes...
and black eyebrows and black lashes
and beautiful long black hair.
Let anyone here explain,
my question is very fair.
I really have to ask
like the ignorant man I am.

Pregunto sin vacilar
que esto no comprendo yo;
si el sabio que hizo la tierra
de qué color la dejó,
de qué pasta la formó
a nuestra primer padre Adán
y el que me quiera tachar
que me sepa contestar,
como ignorante que soy,
me precisa preguntar.

I ask without hesitation,
it's something I don't understand:
when the Lord who made us all
mixed his water and sand,
what color clay did he use
to give father Adam shape?
And if you want to shut me up
first answer- then I'll shut my trap.
Like the ignorant man I am
I really have to ask.

Pregunto porque me conviene,
si ser negro es un delito.
Desde que nací a este mundo,
letras blancas yo no he visto,
negra fue la cruz de Cristo
donde murió el Redentor,
de negro vistió María
viendo morir a Jesús.
Me precisa preguntar
si el color blanco es virtud.

I ask (because I want to)
if being black is a crime.
I've never seen white letters
since the beginning of time.
Christ's holy cross was black
that's where he died,
and Mother Mary wore black
when Her Son Jesus died.
I really have to ask
if the color white is a virtue

El negro con su color
y el blanco con su blancura,
todos vamos a quedar
en el negra sepultura.
Se acaban las hermosuras
de las blancas señoritas,
se acaba el que más critica
y el del color sin igual
y si el color blanco es virtud
para mandarme a blanquear.

The black man with his blackness
and the white man with his white,
all of us come to end
in the tomb as black as night.
Then, the beauty of white ladies
will end from pole to pole,
and the critic will be finished
and the man as black as coal.
If the color white is virtue,
why don't you whiten me?

Adapted from García Salazar, J. (1984). "Black poetry of coastal Ecuador" in *Grassroots Development*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (1984).

Table 1: The African Presence in the Americas

COUNTRY	Low estimate Population (thousands)	% of total	High estimate Population (thousands)	% of total
Central America				
Belize	92	46.9	112	57.0
Costa Rica	66	2.0	66	2.0
El Salvador	**	**	**	**
Guatemala	***	***	***	***
Honduras	112	2.0	280	5.0
Nicaragua	387	9.0	559	13.0
Panama	35	14.0	1,837	73.5
South America				
Argentina	0	0.0	**	**
Bolivia	158	2.0	158	2.0
Brazil	9,477	5.9	53,097	33.0
Chile	*	*	*	*
Colombia	4,886	14.0	7,329	21.0
Ecuador	573	5.0	1,147	10.0
French Guiana	37	42.4	58	66.0
Guyana	222	29.4	321	42.6
Paraguay	156	3.5	156	3.5
Peru	1,356	6.0	2,192	9.7
Suriname	146	39.8	151	41.0
Uruguay	38	1.2	38	1.2
Venezuela	1,935	9.0	2,150	10.0
The Caribbean				
Antigua & Barbuda	85	97.9	85	97.9
Bahamas	194	72.0	223	85.0
Barbados	205	80.0	245	95.8
Bermuda	38	61.0	39	61.3
Cuba	3,559	33.9	6,510	62.0
Dominican Rep.	847	11.0	6,468	84.0
Grenada	72	75.0	81	84.0
Guadeloupe	292	87.0	292	87.0
Haiti	6,500	94.0	6,900	100.0
Jamaica	1,976	76.0	2,376	91.4
St. Lucia	121	90.3	121	90.3
St. Vincent & Gren.	94	84.5	105	95.0
Trinidad & Tobago	480	40.0	516	43.0
North America				
Canada	260	1.0	260	1.0
Mexico	474	0.5	474	0.5
United States	29,986	12.1	29,986	12.1
TOTAL	64,859	9.0	124,332	17.2

This table is adapted from figures compiled by Rodolfo Monge Oviedo in "The Black Americas: 1492-1992" in *Report on the Americas*, Vol. XXV, Number 4. There are several reasons for the wide discrepancy between the high and low estimates for many countries. Primary among these is the large number of residents of mixed blood, with differences of opinion regarding who should be counted. In some cases, the low estimate includes only people of pure or nearly pure African descent, while the high estimate includes residents with lesser degrees of African blood.

Some countries have no sources of data, official or otherwise, while others keep such data secret. Information from the *Britannica Yearbook* is used as a base.

* Indicates that the presence of population of African descent is acknowledged but no figures are given

** Indicates that no figures are available.

*** Among those countries without available statistics, note that there is a substantial Afro-Guatemalan community, mostly living along the Caribbean coast, centered in the port cities of Puerto Barrios and Livingston.

Map: Population of African Descent in Latin America



Latin America map adapted from Rout, Jr., L.B. (1976). *The African experience in Spanish America*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Ecuador and Esmeraldas maps adapted from Naranjo, M. *La cultura popular en el Ecuador*. Centro Interamericano de Artesanías y Artes Populares (CIDAP)

Historical Overview: The Maroons of Ecuador

In 1501, Nicolás Ovando was appointed the first Spanish governor of Hispaniola (the island which is now the Dominican Republic and Haiti). When he sailed to take charge of the colony the following year, he brought with him *ladino* slaves. *Ladinos* were Africans who had been brought to Spain, converted to Christianity and learned Spanish language and customs.*

One of them promptly ran away, and joined the Taíno Arawaks, the indigenous people living in the mountains of the island. This dauntless individual, whose name is lost to history, became the first *maroon*—the Spanish word is *cimarrón*—referring to escaped slaves.

Many, many would follow in his or her footsteps. In addition, it wasn't long before Africans began to band together in rebellion against enslavement. For those who were caught fleeing or participating in insurrections, the punishment was harsh, often barbarous. But the yearning for freedom is integral to the human spirit and few years went by without a major slave uprising somewhere in the colonies.

By 1516, *ladinos* were seen as rebellious and prone to ally with or incite the indigenous populations. Thus began the import of slaves directly from Africa. These *bozales*, as they were called, came from different parts of Africa and spoke many different African languages. Since they could not initially communicate with each other, and be-

sides, were unfamiliar with European ways, it was thought that they would be easier to control. But rebellions continued. And though many Africans lived out their lives in slavery, few would miss an opportunity to flee.

The strength of the maroons, and the even more threatening prospect of a full-scale slave insurrection, was a continuing preoccupation for the Spanish, as well as the British, French, Portuguese and Dutch colonial authorities. Efforts to recapture maroons and squelch rebellions before they began took on the proportions of major military operations. More and more gruesome tortures were designed to punish captured maroons, as well as those who aided them.

Therefore, the two big concerns of maroons were to defend their newly-won freedom, and to meet basic needs of food and shelter. In the process, they created new societies, drawing on African roots to design the structure of those societies, and adapting to the conditions at hand. For their defense, they often settled in remote areas and built fortified villages called *palenques*.* They developed strategies of guerrilla warfare, including raiding Spanish settlements and convoys in order to liberate slaves and obtain food, supplies and armaments.



By the early 16th century, Peru had become a major center of Spanish exploitation of its colonies. To reach Peru from Spain (or from Africa), ships sailed to Portobelo on the Caribbean coast of Panama.

* Other terms for such settlements were *quilombo* (Brazil), *mocombo*, *cunibé* (Venezuela), *ladeira* or *mabís* (Cuba)

People and cargo were then transported across the isthmus of Panama and reloaded onto ships at Panama City for the trip to Callao, a seaport near Lima. In addition, Spanish ships from New Spain (Mexico) and Guatemala traveled along the Pacific coast of South America.

The last part of the trip was particularly difficult, sailing against the winds and currents. In addition, much of the shoreline is swampy and inhospitable, making landings for supplies difficult and dangerous. The coast of what would later be called *Esmeraldas*—‘land of Emeralds’—was particularly hazardous to navigation and there were many shipwrecks.

There's no record of when the first African arrived in Esmeraldas, nor whether he or she might have been a survivor of a shipwreck or a fugitive from one of the many Spanish expeditions that passed through the area. But by 1540, it is certain that small groups of maroons were living in the area, perhaps in isolation or perhaps in contact with Cayapas Indians who inhabited the region.

One of the first of whom we know any details was a *ladino* named Andrés Mangache. He had been brought from Spain to Nicaragua and in 1541, was on board a ship bound for Peru. The ship landed at Esmeraldas for provisions. The slaves (both African and indigenous) were sent to look for food and Andrés escaped with an indigenous woman from Nicaragua. They organized one of the first maroon societies in that region, which became known as the Mangaches. When their village was destroyed by the Spanish in 1584, they split into two groups but

* The term *ladino* also has other meanings. In Guatemala, it refers to people of European or mestizo rather than indigenous heritage and/or lifestyle. In Spain, it refers to a dialect of Spanish spoken by the Jews of Spain.

their descendants continued to influence politics in the region for generations.

Certainly, the largest and most important maroon group in the region was called the Illescas, led by Alonso de Illescas. Alonso was one of 23 Africans on a ship that left Panama—the history books disagree on the year which may be anywhere from 1553 to 1650. After being stranded 30 days without wind, the ship landed in a cove at Esmeraldas and the Africans were sent ashore to look for food.

There are different versions of what happened next. Some say a wind suddenly came up and drove the ship onto a reef; others say the Africans murdered the Spaniards; still others say the Africans hid in the jungle, then snuck aboard ship and made off with all the provisions while the Spanish were off looking for them.

Under Alonso's leadership, the Illescas achieved rule over all the African and indigenous people of what is now northern Ecuador, and kept Spanish authority to a minimum in the region.



As the settlement of Peru intensified, there was more shipping traffic and therefore, more shipwrecks. In the second half of the 16th century, there were many free Africans living among the indigenous inhabitants of the Pacific coast of what are now Ecuador and Colombia.

There are conflicting stories about how the maroons and the indigenous people got along. Most likely, there were times of cooperation and times of conflict. By 1577, maroons and indigenous were organized together to maintain sovereignty against Spanish efforts to impose Spanish authority. The Spanish so feared this obvious

alliance against a common enemy that, throughout the colonies, they did all in their power to limit contact between Africans and indigenous people.

By the end of the century, a good portion of this region was totally controlled by groups of maroons that formed a republic of free blacks and *zambos* (people of mixed African and indigenous blood). The Spanish authorities were unable to bring this area under their control despite several military campaigns, and by 1598, had



The double spiral signifies:
The creation by nyame (heaven) and nyankpon (earth)

decided to negotiate with the maroons. Among the negotiators for the maroons were Francisco and Juan, two of Andrés Mangache's sons, who were each given the title Captain by the Royal Audience of Quito.



There were other migrations of people of African descent to Esmeraldas. Far inland, in a mountain valley called Chota, a Jesuit settlement kept slaves to work a large plantation. Some escaped from time to time and followed the Chota River downstream to settle in Esmeraldas. Others remained in the Chota Valley, and their descendants continue to maintain African traditions high in the mountains of Ecuador.

The abolition of slavery in Ecuador was a long and drawn-out process, which began around the

time that independence from Spain was won. Throughout South America, many Afro-Latinos served in the armies of liberation—some say they were a majority.

Initially, Ecuador, Colombia and Venezuela were one country called Gran Colombia. The first anti-slavery law was passed in 1821. When Ecuador separated from Gran Colombia in 1830, that law was declared to be still in effect. Nevertheless, it would be nearly thirty more years before slavery was ended as an institution in Ecuador. When freedom was finally achieved, many of the former slaves migrated to Esmeraldas.

Another influx of African culture came at the end of the 19th century, when Afro-Caribbean workers from Barbados and Jamaica were brought to Ecuador to build the Quito-Guayaquil railroad. When the railroad was completed in 1908, many settled in Esmeraldas.

Today, in Esmeraldas and in the Chota Valley, the African cultural heritage lives on, evident in music, dance, stories, religion, traditional medicine and the organization of communities. ✦

SOURCES:

García Salazar, J. (1989). *Cimarronaje en el pacífico sur: Historia y tradición, el caso de Esmeraldas, Ecuador*. Masters Degree thesis, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore.

Rout, Jr., L.B. (1976). *The African experience in Latin America: 1502 to the present day*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

North American Congress on Latin America. "The Black Americas: 1492-1992" in *Report on the Americas*, Vol. XXV, No. 4, February 1992.