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Afro-Zulians in the Trans-Atlantic World: A Case Study of Jean de Chourio and the Black Venezuelans of the Sur del Lago Maracaibo (1722–1811)

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**Afro-Zulians in the Trans-Atlantic World:
A Case Study of Jean de Chourio and the
Black Venezuelans of the Sur del Lago Maracaibo (1722-1811)**

Raymond Andrew Keller, II

**Dissertation submitted to the
Eberly College of Arts and Sciences
at West Virginia University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of**

**Doctor of Philosophy
in
History**

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**Morgantown, West Virginia
2010**

**Keywords: Jean de Chourio; African Diaspora; Afro-Zulians; Venezuelan History
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ABSTRACT

Afro-Zulians in the Trans-Atlantic World: A Case Study of Jean de Chourio and the Black Venezuelans of the Sur del Lago Maracaibo (1722-1811)

Raymond Andrew Keller, II

This dissertation addresses the history of a small community of the African Diaspora mostly overlooked: the Afro-Zulians as the descendants of the first blacks brought over to the Sur del Lago Maracaibo region in Venezuela by the Basque-French slave trader Jean de Chourio in 1722. The significance of this group in the context of colonial Venezuela from the period of 1722-1811, the year of Venezuelan independence, is highlighted. This dissertation examines perceptions that the Afro-Zulian community has of itself, as well as the perceptions that others have of it both within and outside of Venezuela. The theoretical idea central to this study is that despite attempts by the European colonists and Creole elites to strip away the African identity of the Afro-Zulian peoples (deculturation), the Afro-Zulians have managed to hold on to both their racial integrity and those fundamentals of culture, language and religion that link them to the Imbangala peoples of pre-colonial Angola. These fundamentals in varying degrees have been transmitted to, and incorporated into, the larger Afro-Venezuelan and even greater multicultural Venezuelan historical and social matrix through a gradual process of acculturation and conflation. This study assists in augmenting an understanding of this overlooked minority's contributions to Venezuelan history and society. In addition, it will serve to generate further interest and investigation on the part of historians and researchers of the African Diaspora throughout the Americas.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Raymond Andrew Keller, II, was born in Cleveland, Ohio in 1954. He currently serves as an Americorps VISTA (Volunteer in Service to America), attached to Literacy Volunteers, a United Way agency in Monongalia County, West Virginia, where he is developing a program to assist immigrants in the United States obtain citizenship.

He graduated from Bedford Senior High School in Bedford, Ohio, in 1972, and went on to honorably serve in both the United States Navy and United States Army, where he worked as a voice intercept operator in the Spanish language throughout Latin America. He received an associate degree in business from the University of Maryland in 1977, and his bachelor of arts in world history from the University of Maryland in 1985, both degrees while on active duty. In 1989 he successfully completed the Multicultural Education Program at the College of Santa Fe in New Mexico, whence he went on to become the Director of English as a Second Language and Bilingual/Multicultural Education programs for secondary education at the Hilmar Unified School District in the San Joaquin Valley in California from 1990-1995.

Keller was employed by VENUSA (Venezuela-United States Academy) in Mérida, Venezuela, in 2001 and 2002 as an ESL instructor and editor of the textbook division. He also was attached to La Universidad Valle del Momboy in Valera, Venezuela, from VENUSA. He returned to the United States in 2002 to accept a scholarship in foreign languages at West Virginia University, receiving his master's degree in Spanish with an emphasis on Latin American literature in May 2004. He enrolled in the doctoral program in the Department of History in the Fall of 2004, and mostly taught classes on Africana Studies, with some World History and Latin America. He and his wife, Ydalis M. Herrera, make their home in Morgantown, West Virginia.

Eskertzen Dizut
(Basque/Euskara)

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This dissertation was motivated by several factors. First, my wife, Ydalis María Herrera Chourio, and her family, originate in the Sur del Lago Maracaibo region. Therefore, this dissertation can be considered as a work of love, revealing for the first time a history of the Afro-Zulians. Second, I made my home in various countries in Africa from 1995 -1996, and Venezuela from 2001 -2002, whence my interest in the worldwide African Diaspora was significantly augmented. This dissertation allowed me to consolidate my observations and experiences into a case study of one aspect of the Trans-Atlantic world. Lastly, my experiences as a graduate instructor of Africana Studies and Latin American History at West Virginia University permitted me to broaden my perspective on the overall dispersion of African peoples throughout Latin America. The research for my classes paralleled the work being carried out on the dissertation.

For the research conducted in Venezuela, special thanks go to my wife Ydalis and her entire family, but particularly to Cirilo Antúnez Pirela of San José and Deglis Atilano Herrera Chourio of San Antonio for their help with the sections on Jean de Chourio and San Benito, without whose kind assistance this work would not have been possible or completed. Another thank you goes to the entire staff at the public library in Mérida, Venezuela, for their patience in helping me find and allowing me to hand copy the royal decrees pertaining to Juan de Chourio, as well as other important historical documents of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Also highly appreciated were the contributions made by Roberto “Diken” Carlos López of the Afro-Asian Center of the La Universidad de Los Andes (ULA) in Mérida, Dr. Jesús Angel Parra of the La Universidad de Zulia (LUZ) Department of History in Maracaibo and esteemed member of

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Raymond Andrew Keller, II
September 8, 2010
Morgantown, West Virginia

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CHAPTER ONE

PRELUDE TO THE AFRO-ZULIANS

Introduction

A review of African Diaspora studies leads the Trans-Atlantic historian to conclude that none of the Afro-American peoples can be understood as isolated local cultures. And in a more expansive sense, none of their involvements in broader relations of national and global power relations can fully explain or affix a specific form of ethnogenesis. While linkages to Africa can be ascertained, the task of the researcher into the black peoples of the Sur del Lago, or any other community of the African Diaspora, is one of more than the mere practice of historical recovery, i.e. the collection of data, but rather the application of a critical analysis of meaning from an African centered perspective, what Maulana Karenga refers to as the “Sankofa” principle.¹

Studies conducted on ethnic contingents of the African Diaspora have primarily focused on those areas of the Western Hemisphere with significant demographic representation. This includes those areas where the percentage of blacks in the overall population is high, or where there are large black populations in sheer numbers.² Belize, Guyana and sundry islands of the Caribbean have high percentages of black population, while the United States has approximately 36 million blacks, but constituting only thirteen percent of the overall population.³ This study addresses a small community of the African Diaspora, the Afro-Zulians, who are the descendants of the first blacks brought over to the Sur del Lago Maracaibo region of Venezuela by the

¹ Maulana Karenga, *Introduction to Black Studies* (Los Angeles, California: University of Sankore Press, 2002), 77-78.

² Arlene Torres and Norman E. Whitten, Jr., eds., *Blackness in Latin America and the Caribbean: Social Dynamics and Cultural Transformations*, 2 vols. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998). This is a new extensive compilation of studies dealing with the black populations in individual countries of the Caribbean, Central and South America.

³ Jesse McKinnon, *Black Population of the United States: March 2002* (Washington, DC: United States Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, Series P20-541, April 2003), 1. The census is conducted every ten years in the United States.

Basque-French slave trader Jean de Chourio in the year 1722. This community is small with regard to land occupied, percentage of the national demographic and numbers.⁴ Nevertheless, its significance in the context of colonial Venezuela from the period 1722 through 1811, the year in which Venezuelan independence from Spain was proclaimed, will be the focus of this dissertation. This allows for the sufficient development of those themes pertinent to the Afro-Zulians as diaspora peoples cognizant of their Angolan origins, resistors to enslavement, opponents of racism, and forgers of their own destiny within the emerging cultural and political Venezuelan mosaic.

Geography

Figure 1.1: Lake Maracaibo in relation to South America and northwest Venezuela

Source: http://www.worldlakes.org/uploads/Maracaibo_index_locat.gif

⁴ Richard A. Haggerty, ed., *Venezuela: A Country Study*, 4th ed. (Washington, DC: Department of the Army Pamphlet 550-71, 1993), 63. While there has not been an ethnographic census in Venezuela since 1926, it has been estimated that a credible ethnic breakdown would be somewhere around 21 percent pure white, 10 percent pure black, 68 percent *mestizo* and 1 percent indigenous, to include miniscule components of other groups. And while the Central Intelligence Agency of the United States concedes that these statistics are generally accurate today, the 21 percentage points for pure whites is probably a little inflated, whereas the *mestizo* class should reflect a higher number. See *Ethnic groups*, <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/ve.html>, 27 September 2002, as well as María Alejandra Carrillo, “En la tierra de los hijos de Ajé,” *Panorama* (daily newspaper), Maracaibo, Venezuela, 16 June 2002. According to Carrillo, with Afro-Zulians constituting a subset of the approximate 2.8 million black Venezuelans, their population in 2002 was estimated at around 68,400, mostly concentrated in their ancestral homeland in the Sucre Municipality, Zulia state, of the Sur del Lago Maracaibo. This municipality is divided into two sections by a corridor of land that belongs to the neighboring Venezuelan state of Mérida. The municipality covers 1,174 square kilometers of Zulia state, or approximately 2.33% of the state’s total land area.

Figure 1.2: Sur del Lago region of Zulia State in relation to the rest of Venezuela.

Source: http://www.guittard.com/home/images/growing_regions/surdellago/surdellago02.jp

For the purpose of clarification, it should be noted that Zulia is in the extreme northwest of Venezuela and that its capital and largest city is Maracaibo (1.5 million inhabitants). The state has an estimated population of about 3.5 million inhabitants. In a contemporary context, the state is important to Venezuela's economy because of its rich petroleum deposits. Since the discovery of oil in Zulia state in 1922, Venezuela has become an energy superpower. In cooperation with the state-run oil concern, there are many foreign oil companies operating in the region today. Zulia state is also recognized as the largest producer of milk and associated dairy products in Venezuela, with the majority of these industries being centered in the Sur del Lago region. Zulia state is also one of the principal producers of quality beef cattle. Many Afro-

Zulians find employment in the oil, dairy and ranching sectors.⁵

Lake Maracaibo is the largest lake in South America. It is approximately 155 kilometers long and 120 kilometers wide. On average, it is about 50 meters in depth. The lake is fed by five large rivers: the Catatumbo, the Chama, the Escalante, the Santa Ana and the Zulia, whence the state derives its name. For the most part, the geography and geology have served to determine the types of towns that have developed along the lake. Along the eastern shore, oil was the prime motivator for the growth of population centers such as Bachaquero, Cabimas (second largest city in Zulia, 150,000 inhabitants), Lagunillas, Mene Grande, Ojeda, and Tia Juana. To the southern and western ends of the lake, we find agricultural and cattle towns, most notably Machiques in the west and San Carlos, Santa Barbara and others to the south. The Venezuelan Andean state of Mérida also lays claim to some of the Sur del Lago, but that will be a matter for the Venezuelan higher courts to arbitrate.

⁵ José Enrique and Gaviria Lievano, “El archipelago de Los Monjes y las relaciones diplomáticas con Venezuela,” *Revista Credencial Historia* 124 (April 2000): 9-15. Larger geo-political issues may impinge upon the future of the Afro-Zulians, such as the so-far diplomatic squabbles regarding an area of the Colombia-Venezuela frontier, i.e. a territorial dispute over the maritime border between both countries in the Gulf of Venezuela, where about 25 miles off the northernmost tip of Colombia lie three current Venezuelan-controlled strategic islands called Los Monjes, which permit entrance to the Gulf of Venezuela, and hence Lake Maracaibo. The gulf is also believed to be rich in oil and gas reserves. Another issue is the resurgent Zulian independence movement. See James M. Inian, *Encyclopedia of the Stateless Nations* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002), 2108-2113. A small but increasingly vocal nationalist movement on both sides of the Colombia-Venezuela border seeks to create an independent Zulian Republic to exert greater control over the natural resources in the area, rather than diverting the acquired wealth, especially from oil revenues, to Bogotá or Caracas. Independence would give Zulians the highest standard of living in Latin America. Some blacks on both sides of the border look favorably on the prospect of Zulian independence. For information on neighboring Colombia's black population, see *Minorities at Risk: Assessment for Blacks in Colombia*, <http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/mar/assessment.asp?groupId=10001>. Colombia's black population, like Venezuela's, is distinguished by ethno-cultural traits and religious traditions combining Catholicism with African customs. Afro-Colombians are the descendants of African slaves brought to Colombia in the 1700s to serve Spanish colonists, primarily as laborers. The abolition of slavery in the years after 1850 coincided with the displacement of black laborers by an influx of non-blacks seeking employment in the mining, commerce and timber industries then developing in black areas. Consequently, many blacks were forced to look for labor in urban centers, where they work today primarily in domestic service and various low-skilled labor positions. Black labor continues to drive Colombia's labor-intensive industries, notably the coffee plantations, mines and trade services. The long-held practice in both Colombian and Venezuelan society of *blanqueamiento*, or the dis-identification with blackness as expressed through the encouragement of miscegenation and the societal privileging of lighter skin, carries the legacy of discrimination and disadvantage that blacks in both countries have endured since slavery. About three percent of Colombia's black population inhabits the border area with Venezuela's Zulia State.

Two of the more well-known centers of Afro-Zulian culture in the Sur del Lago are the towns of Bobures (a name of Angolan origin) and Gibraltar (a name of Arabic/Moroccan Berber origin). Bobures is colorful and tropical. Most of its approximately 4,000 inhabitants claim to be descendants of Angolan peoples brought there in colonial times to work the cacao and sugar cane plantations. Bobures is also the terminus of 13 miles of railroad track from an inland sugar refinery. The town has a very clean, sandy beach and is a popular tourist area. As for Gibraltar, it is the home of the famous *porcelana* cacao, whose bean is white when snapped in two. Gibraltar became one of the most important transshipping points for the produce of the eastern and northern Andean area. In the seventeenth and eighteenth century, the area was noted for piracy and smuggling activities. Both the main burro-pack path and train route, crossing the eastern Andes, found their terminus here. Today there are about 1,000 inhabitants in the town, mostly of African descent. People from all over Venezuela come to both Bobures and Gibraltar from December 27th to New Year's Day in order to listen to sound of the *chimbánqueles*, or African drums, and honor the black saint, San Benito.

Because of the constant formation of sand bars further to the north in Lake Maracaibo and the need to consistently dredge them, as well as the later development of the oil industry in that sector, trade diminished to a trickle in the Sur del Lago region over time, being diverted to the port city of Maracaibo. Additionally, the cordillera of the Andes fronting the Sur del Lago inland to the both the east and south, served to further isolate the region. This isolation from the mainstream of the dominant Venezuelan society may have contributed to the perpetuation of a more truly representative Angolan culture in this remote section of Venezuela, where the Afro-Zulians were able to keep hold of their ethnic integrity more so than blacks in other regions of Venezuela.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this dissertation is to show how Chourio's group was instrumental in halting the process of deculturation⁶ among Afro-Zulians through the infusion, maintenance and fostering of Angolan Imbangala culture among them. In addition, it details the emergence of ethnic, linguistic and religious links between the historic Imbangala and the black peoples of the Sur del Lago region of Zulia state that resulted from this process of resisting those forces pushing deculturation. This dissertation also seeks to establish those connections that the Afro-Zulians made with the greater Trans-Atlantic world: the Basques, the Dutch, the English, the French, the indigenous peoples, the Portuguese, the Spanish, as well as Africans and others of African descent. This is especially noted in the case of Jean de Chourio, for it is through his exploits that the actions and interactions of the ancestors of the Afro-Zulians with all of these Trans-Atlantic groups, to include the European colonists and Creole elites in the Caribbean and Circum-Caribbean regions, are more keenly observed.

In this dissertation, perceptions that Afro-Zulians developed of themselves as a separate and distinct community are explored, in addition to the views that others developed of this community both within and outside of Venezuela. That many Afro-Zulians now consider themselves as members of a community of New Africa is largely the result of those historic forces that worked against the ever present push for deculturation on the part of the European

⁶ Carlos Esteban Dieve, "African Influence in Dominican Culture," in *Dominican Cultures: The Making of a Caribbean Society*, ed. Bernardo Vega (Princeton: Marcus Wiener, 2007), 90, originally published in the Spanish language in 1981 by the Fundación Cultural Dominicana, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. In Venezuela, as well as other colonies in the Caribbean and circum-Caribbean regions, the plantation economy absorbed the largest number of slaves. This allowed for the emergence of various complex cultural mechanisms, with the most prominent being that of "deculturation." In the context of this work, deculturation is defined as a "conscious process to eradicate the culture of one human group for the purpose of economic exploitation." Afro-Venezuelans, for the most part, are seen as just such an exploited group. They were utilized as a primarily unskilled workforce to facilitate the expropriation of Venezuela's bounteous natural riches. Clearly, in the case of most Afro-Venezuelans, the process of deculturation to which they were subjected, wrought dire consequences for the maintenance of their respective African cultures. This dissertation permits the researcher to see how circumstances served to mitigate the impact of deculturation in the Sur del Lago. See footnote 1 in Chapter Six for a detailed definition of the cultural mechanism of "acculturation/assimilation."

colonists and their descendants. The theoretical idea central to this study is that despite attempts by the European colonialists and Creole elites to strip away the African identity of the Afro-Zulian peoples (deculturation), the Afro-Zulians still maintained a significant semblance of those fundamentals, such as culture, ethnicity, language and religion that linked them to the Imbangala peoples of Angola.

During the formative years of 1722 through 1811, the Afro-Zulians both contributed to, and incorporated themselves into, the larger Venezuelan historical and social matrix (acculturation). If assimilation is defined as the process by which many Africans imported to Venezuela became socialized to the dominant European/Spanish culture, the colonial “nation-state,” so to speak, then a term is needed to denote the process by which this oppressed people were transformed by the colonizers. Therefore, “deculturation” comes to mind. However, concepts of ethnicity and race are ambiguous, at best, and particularly in Venezuelan history. For Venezuela has become a nation peopled by many groups from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds, with no group except the nebulously defined *pardos* (in some contexts is used interchangeably with the term *mestizos*) forming a majority. And this group represents an amalgam of diverse infusions over time. The dissertation demonstrates, by the very nature of their mission and deployment, how the core Afro-Zulian contingent brought over by Chourio was able to resist this trend of deculturation. The Afro-Zulians are not seen as passive, colonized people, but rather as agents of their own destiny.

The nature and degree of participation in the process of deculturation and assimilation varied with sectors of the Afro-Venezuelan populations over time. This dissertation assists in increasing an understanding of this overlooked minority’s contributions to Venezuelan history

and society. It serves to generate further interest and investigation on the part of researchers of the African Diaspora throughout the Americas.

Significance

The decision to introduce the Africans who were to become the Afro-Zulians into the Trans-Atlantic world was made by Jean de Chourio, of Basque⁷ and French descent, and the son of the Spanish consul in Amsterdam. He also represented the French trading *Compañía de Guinea* in Cartagena, Colombia. As early as 1708 he arrived on the island of Curaçao from La Guaira, Venezuela, setting up an office with a staff of 32 in the port of Willemstad under the pretext of a commission from King Philip V of Spain to purchase slaves in both Curaçao and Jamaica for subsequent transport to the colonies of the Spanish American mainland.⁸

In 1709, however, the Dutch West Indies Company directors in Amsterdam forbade Chourio or any of his staff to reside on the island and ordered their immediate deportation and the confiscation of their commodities, including human ones. As a state of war then existed between the Dutch and the French, the directors were concerned that the constant losses of Dutch ships to French privateers along major trade routes lent credence to the notion that there were probably some French spies among the 150 French residents of Curaçao. However, because of debts incurred with local merchants and a reliable reputation for paying his bills, Governor Beck

⁷ Robert J. Ferry, *Colonial Elite of Early Caracas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 195. Linkages are made to prominent families of Basque descent in the ranks of the commodities and slave trading Guipuzcoana Company. Of further note, Ferry states that, "From its headquarters in San Sebastián in the Basque province of Guipúzcoa, the Guipuzcoana Company enjoyed exclusive rights to carry cacao from Caracas to Spain. Reflecting the general autonomy of the Basque provinces, which were united with the crown of Castile only through the person of the king, Company ships could leave for Caracas directly from San Sebastián without paying any duty whatsoever, and, after stopping to pay royal taxes at Cádiz, they could return there to unload." (Ibid., 4) Chourio apparently saw no conflict in advancing the interests of either the French or Guipuzcoana companies, when and where it suited him.

⁸ Linda M. Rupert, *Roots of Our Future* (Willemstad: Curacao Chamber of Commerce, 2002), online book, http://books.caribseek.com/Curacao/Commercial_History_of_Curacao/profiles/jean-chourio.shtml, (10 March 2009).

allowed Chourio to continue his operations on the island.⁹ Despite being under a constant cloud of suspicion,¹⁰ Chourio profited handsomely in the slave trade; but one year after the signing of the Treaty of Utrecht (1713),¹¹ whence the transatlantic slave trade had fallen under control of the British, Chourio left the island to pursue his trade interests in a more favorable setting (Venezuela), and never returned to Curaçao. The Treaty of Utrecht provided the basis of British claims against Chourio in both the Netherlands Antilles and Venezuela.¹² Even after his death, British litigations against his estate in Venezuela continued.

Before his departure from Curaçao in 1714, Chourio purchased 350 of the 1200 Africans who were brought to the island on two ships in 1712. And in early 1714, despite the restrictions then imposed by the Treaty of Utrecht, he purchased 511 of the 556 surviving blacks who arrived on the slave ship San Marcos, and placed an advanced order for that ship's entire cargo from its next trip scheduled later in that same year. But because he had to leave the island before the last contract could be fulfilled, economic necessity impelled Chourio to continue his trafficking in slaves operating from the Spanish American mainland, and that is where a boatload of 600 slaves of Angolan descent arrived intact in the area that is now Zulia state in Venezuela, in 1722.

The involvement of Chourio in the slave trade was primarily based on economic self-interest. However, Chourio's importation of Angolans to Venezuela in 1722 also had a military rationale. In that year, King Philip V of Spain appointed Chourio to serve as a district captain, giving him license to import Africans, found a peaceful town and settle its surrounding area, and

⁹ C. A. Goslinga, *Los Holandeses en Venezuela* (Caracas: Asociación Holandesa de Venezuela, 1992), 180.

¹⁰ Ramon Aizpurua, *Curaçao y la costa de Caracas: Introducción al estudio del contrabando de la provincial de Venezuela en tiempos de la compañía Guipouzoana, 1730-1788* (Caracas: Biblioteca de la Academia Nacional de la Historia, Fuentes para la Historia Colonial de Venezuela #222, 1993), 323.

¹¹ Dale Miquelon, "Envisioning the French Empire: Utrecht, 1711-1713," *French Historical Studies* 24:4 (Fall 2001): 653-677.

¹² Francisco de Ugarte to Jose Solis Folch de Cardona, 28 November 1757, Archivo Histórico Nacional de Colombia (Ciudades de Venezuela), Catálogo R-3:110-113, Public Library, Mérida, Venezuela.

Disputations took place in Maracaibo over the disposition of his property and slaves, contesting the last will and testament of Juan de Chourio.

granted him the authority to pacify the indigenous Motilones, who were then obstructing Spanish colonization efforts in the region that now constitutes the base of the mountain range that separates the Zulian Upar Valley from the northeastern frontier of Colombia.¹³ In 1722 Chourio arrived in this region with his contingent of 600 blacks, along with several families from the Canary Islands and others from Maracaibo. Captain Chourio established the Villa de Nuestra Señora de Perijá¹⁴ as well as the Villa Vieja, which is situated a few miles closer to the mountains. The importation of these Africans for the express purpose of the military pacification of the Motilones helps establish the uniqueness of the Afro-Zulian population in contrast to other Afro-Venezuelan groups, who derived from more mixed African ancestry and were largely engaged in agricultural or ranching pursuits.¹⁵ That black soldiers were deployed by the Dutch, Portuguese and Spanish, and held special privileges both for themselves and their families, was well known throughout the Trans-Atlantic world from the sixteenth through the nineteenth century.

¹³ Findings of the Royal Commission at Maracaibo in favor of Juan Chourio de Iturbide, signed and sealed by Joseph Moreno de Santisteban, the public scribe and clerk of court, 5 September 1732. Archivo Histórico Nacional de Colombia (Ciudades de Venezuela), Catálogo R-6:66-84, Public Library, Mérida, Venezuela. The Commission was presided over by the visiting attorney and Judge Chancellor of the City of Santo Domingo Royal Commission, Juan Pérez Garza, who took into account various statements filed for (by sundry Spanish colonial authorities) and against (by representatives of the Royal English Company) Don Juan de Chourio respecting the authenticity of the Royal Order dated 9 May 1722, and subsequent royal orders. It was the Royal Order of 9 May 1722 that granted Chourio the authority and funds to 1) establish a city and Capuchin mission in the valley lands at Perijá, 2) pacify the indigenous Motilones tribe in the regions surrounding both Perijá and Maracaibo, and 3) to take possession of four ships of Spanish registry, 100 tons each, for the purpose of bringing immigrant families and goods free of taxation from the port of Cadiz, Spain, as well as 600 Africans to defend the outpost, to include their women in this number, also free of taxation, along with sufficient arms and munitions to satisfy the royal officers in Maracaibo that Chourio would be able to complete his mission. Judge Juan Pérez Garza ruled in Chourio's favor, decreeing that Chourio should be released immediately and that all his property, to include slaves and merchandise previously confiscated, should be returned to him, and also that he should be allowed to proceed unhindered to any and all parts of the Spanish Empire in the resumption of his business transactions. Three years later, Chourio's concessions were renewed. See Miguel de Villanueva, Secretary to the Spanish King, to Captain Juan de Chourio, 27 October 1735, Archivo Histórico Nacional de Colombia (Ciudades de Venezuela), Catálogo R-3:185-186, R-6:66-84, Public Library, Mérida, Venezuela.

¹⁴ Geographic coordinates: 10° 19' 24,0" N, 72° 19' 02,9" W ± 4m (measured from the Plaza Bolívar), *Perijá*, www.elbrollo.com (27 April 2009).

¹⁵ Matthew Restall, "Black Conquistadors: Armed Africans in Early Spanish America," *The Americas* 57:2 (October 2000): 175.

Literature Review

In reviewing the existing literature relating to the history of the Afro-Zulians in the transatlantic world, several general approaches and themes were identified. One may be termed the structural anthropological approach. Structural anthropological research is carried on by the Ajé Foundation, founded by Juan de Dios Martínez Suárez in 1972. This foundation sponsors investigation into the African origins of the Afro-Zulian peoples, most notably in those areas linking music and culture.

As far as structural anthropological research, the Ajé Foundation carries out an ongoing investigation into the Angolan origins of the Afro-Zulian peoples, and especially their *chimbángueles* (Angolan drums) and music.¹⁶ The foundation offers the public objective information about the Angolan origins and characteristics of the drums, music and dances which can be heard in the Sur del Lago communities of San José, Gibraltar, Palmarito and Bobures of the Sucre Municipality as well as the emergence of new syncretic forms of worship based on the fusion of Catholicism (San Benito), Central African orishas (principally Ajé), and indigenous myth (Mucúchies).

Martínez has published varied works for both popular and scholarly audiences, and his work has been helpful insofar as he indicated specific ethnicities in Angola, with a special emphasis on the Imbangala, and tied them to the first 600 Africans brought into the Sur del Lago

¹⁶ John C. Super and Briane K. Turley, *Religion in World History* (New York: Routledge, 2003). 162. Music is a powerful transmitter of culture, an “aural icon of power” that both invokes and symbolically represents power in the universe. The authors state that, “music is widely recognized as a potent force because of the deep and lasting effect it can have upon the emotions and intellect of humans.... This immersion in the sounds of ritual song conveys assurance to the believers that a sacred thing has, or soon will, occur.” The relevance of this statement to the Afro-Zulians lies in the beating of the *chimbángueles*, heralding the arrival of the orisha Ajé in the iconic statue of San Benito, annually removed from his special chapel and carried in procession from village to village throughout the Sur del Lago during designated festival days.

region by Captain Juan de Chourio in 1722.¹⁷ Therefore, with Chourio operating across the transatlantic world, through Martínez' work Chourio can, for a season, be linked to Angola. But by itself, this approach is not sufficient to provide a meaningful exposition of the topic.

A second type of research focused on African religions and their impact on Venezuela. While Martínez Suarez explored in-depth the connections with the West African orisha Ajé and the Catholic black saint, San Benito,¹⁸ the Venezuelan state-run oil concern, PDVSA historian L. A. Crespo, researched the religious significance respecting the import of this Italian-Ethiopian worker of miracles into the overall Venezuelan mythos.¹⁹ And cultural ethnologists Ysabel Balza Santiago and Juvenal Rangel²⁰ explained how the cult of the black saint transferred to the indigenous Mucuchíes of the mountainous Mérida state, and the patriotic and wondrous visions ascribed to him. This dissertation fuses these disparate elements into an integral and secular view with regard to the emergence of San Benito in the pantheon of Venezuelan religious experience and history. In addition, this dissertation compares the cult of San Benito to other forms of syncretic religion manifested throughout Venezuelan history, such as María Lionza,²¹ the Black Panther Woman,²² and San Juan Bautista.²³

¹⁷ Juan de Dios Martínez Suárez, *Como Bailar Chimbángueles: Colección Danzas Étnicas y Tradicionales* (Maracaibo: Fundación Ajé, 1991), 5, 10.

¹⁸ Juan de Dios Martínez Suárez, *El culto a San Benito de Palermo en Venezuela* (Maracaibo: Cultura de la Universidad de Zulia, 1999).

¹⁹ Luis Alberto Crespo, *Venezuela: Tierra Mágica* (Caracas: Corpoven- affiliate of PDVSA, the state-owned oil concern), pamphlet, undated (ISBN 980-259-525-V).

²⁰ Ysabel Balza Santiago and Juvenal Rangel, "Mucuchíes honra a San Benito de Palermo", *Revista Bigott* 42 (March-June 1997).

²¹ Hercilia Garnica, "Humedad y corrosión debilitaron estructura de María Lionza." *El Nacional* (Caracas), 7 June 2004. The author explains how normal wear and tear has weakened a statue in honor of María Lionza in Caracas. She also details the origin of this cult in terms of syncretic religion and the meaning it has for contemporary Venezuelans of all races.

²² Berta E. Pérez, "The Journey to Freedom: Maroon Forebears in Southern Venezuela," *Ethnohistory* 47:3-4 (Summer-Fall 2000): 623, 624.

²³ David M. Guss, "The Selling of San Juan: The Performance of History in an Afro-Venezuelan Community," *American Ethnologist* 20:3 (August 1993): 451-473.

Another important theme is resistance. Resistance and struggle against both slavery and the Spanish empire find expression in numerous historical works. For example, the research of Jeremy Cohen of the University of Florida, serves to provide little doubt that blacks of the Sur del Lago joined with other Afro-Venezuelans in the colonial era up through independence to aid and abet pirates and other enemies of the Spanish Crown. According to Cohen, freed blacks from various ports in the Netherlands Antilles were signed on to schooners that would ply the coasts of Venezuela. These freed blacks acted as agents of the Dutch, furthering smuggling operations against Spain and establishing sundry commercial and strategic contacts within Venezuela, to include blacks and *pardos* of varied status as possible recruits to Dutch Caribbean operations.²⁴ If a Venezuelan black or *pardo* were to join the ranks of the Dutch smugglers, they would be released on their own once the ship returned to Willemstad, or some other Dutch port, and the crews broke up. Each individual could go their own way, “seeking the next opportunity to cruise the Caracas coast.”²⁵

Many other Afro-Venezuelans in the colonial era up through independence fled from their masters when occasions permitted and augmented the ranks of maroon communities. Jesús María Herrera Salas investigated one of these maroon communities and its leader in depth.²⁶ In 1553, Miguel del Barrio, popularly known as “El Negro Miguel,” led a full-blown slave rebellion on the mines and plantations of Nueva Segovia de Buría. Herrera shows how Miguel went from village to village in this province, liberating the slaves and leading them to the lands of the Jirahara indigenous peoples, whence an African-style kingdom along with a judicial and

²⁴ Jeremy Cohen, Department of History, University of Florida, “Smuggling in Eighteenth Century Venezuela: The Role of the *Práctico*,” unpublished address to the 27-29 March 2003 meeting of the Latin American Studies Association at Dallas, Texas.

²⁵ Cohen, “Smuggling in Eighteenth Century Venezuela,” 5.

²⁶ Jesús María Herrera Salas, *El Negro Miguel y la primera revolución venezolana: la cultura del poder y el poder de la cultura* (Caracas: Vadell Hermanos, 2003).

ecclesiastical hierarchy was established in the interior of Venezuela on lands granted to the runaway blacks by the indigenous *caciques* (chiefs). Herrera goes so far as to classify the rebellion of Miguel as Venezuela's first true revolution, which he asserts passed through four distinct phases:

1) attacks on crown property in the mines and plantations of Nueva Segovia de Buría, 2) the establishment of an independent political organization, 3) the formation of economic, military, political and religious alliances with the Jiraharas, and 4) a united defense against Spanish efforts to repress the revolution. Miguel was ultimately unsuccessful as a consequence of the overwhelming forces arrayed against him and his people.²⁷

Afro-Venezuelans, to include Afro-Zulians, fought when necessary against the evils perpetuated against them by colonial administrators and slave masters. As independence loomed on the horizon, both Afro-Zulians and Afro-Venezuelans aligned themselves with parties partial to both the French and Haitian revolutions.²⁸ For the significance of events on the ground in Haiti to the entire Afro-Caribbean and circum-Caribbean world, as well as to the literature review, there is no finer chronicler and analyst than C. L. R. James.²⁹ The Haitian revolution struck fear into the entire plantation economy. The owners of slaves could not sleep, unaware when revolting slaves would cut their throats from ear to ear. Restricting access to information about the French and Haitian revolution thus became a primary concern for slave holders.

Bohórquez and Enrique demonstrate how Afro-Venezuelans aligned themselves with the revolutionists, Manuel Gual and José María España, who staged an insurrection based on the ideals of abolition and the French declaration on the *Rights of Man and the Citizen* (1789), on the

²⁷ Ibid., 104.

²⁸ Federico Brito Figueroa, *30 Ensayos de Comprensión Histórica: Colección Historia 25* (Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela, Ediciones de la Biblioteca, 1997).

²⁹ C. L. R. James, *Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1963).

Coro pe ninsula i n 1797 . M any A fro-Zulians a lso pa rticipated i n t his i nsurrection, a nd t he referenced documents provide particular insight into their awareness of revolutionary ideals and their willingness to even die for them.³⁰

For specific Haitian contributions to the efforts of the Creole revolutionaries Francisco Miranda, Simon Bolivar and the Afro-Venezuelans in their fight for independence from Spain, the author of this dissertation has come upon a one-time, limited print edition of the discourses presented on 30 October 1953 to commemorate the erection of an equestrian statue to the great Venezuelan liberator Simon Bolivar in Port Au Prince, Haiti.³¹ This will add something new to the academy with respect to the emergence of a genuine Afrocentric perspective in an era when European liberal positivist philosophy prevailed among most Latin American historians.³²

This i s d esirable, as t he r esistance t heme h as n ot, i n e very cas e, p rovided an a ccurate account o f t he role o f b lack V enezuelans. In fact, from 1937 t o t he p resent, t he c elebrated Venezuelan historian Arturo Uslar Pietri, with the greatest influence on the white elite, has kept the official discourse alive in his writings and addresses to Venezuelan intellectuals concerning issues of m odernity and t he na tion. Uslar P ietri's p remise i s i n k e epi ng w ith t he nor ms o f European liberal positivist philosophy, that being that "blacks did not arrive in Venezuela with a culture that visibly affected the construction of our nation identity."³³ He actually believes that if Venezuelans do not s ucced i n " substantially m odifying t he e thnic c omposition o f our population, it will be virtually impossible to change the course o f our history and to make our

³⁰ López B ohórquez, A lí Enrique, r edactores, *Manuel Gual y José María España: Valoración múltiple de la conspiración de La Guaira de 1797* (Caracas: Comisión Presidencial del Bicentenario de la Conspiración de Gual y España, 1997).

³¹ Marcos P érez J ímenez, Colonel an d P resident o f t he Republic o f Venezuela, a uthorized p ublication a s a "souvenir," *Inauguración de la estatua ecuestre del Libertador en Haití* (Caracas: Imprenta Nacional, 1954).

³² Arturo U slar P ietri, 1 983, as ci ted i n Senta E ssenfeld de B ruwer, *La cara oculta del desarrollo* (Caracas: Ediciones Monte Ávila, 1987), 16, and Uslar Pietri, *El país necesita inmigración* (Caracas: Boletín de la Cámara de Comercio de Caracas, February 1937), 235.

³³ Pietri, *La cara oculta*, 16.

country a modern nation.”³⁴ Implicit in this type of liberal positivism is an embedded racism at all strata of Venezuelan society.

Nevertheless, for an excellent synthesis of insurrectionist ferment and the creation of radical political movements throughout the Americas in the age of revolutions, the most recent and comprehensive work of Lester D. Langley can be consulted.³⁵ He asserts that neither the American, French/Haitian or Latin American revolutions can be viewed as singular events. They are all intricately interconnected as a transatlantic revolution.

There is also a substantial literature relevant to this dissertation that focuses on the African continent, specifically the early history of the Angolan interior. From the works of Joseph Miller, Beatrix Heintze and others, for example, we learn much about the origins of the Imbangala, the primary ethnic group composing the Kasanje kingdom. From these studies, we also learn that the Imbangala, like the Portuguese, were invaders of the territory that became Angola. Miller’s work is particularly significant in identifying the earliest documentary citation of the term “Imbangala.” According to Miller,³⁶ this citation of the “Imbangala” is found in a letter from a Portuguese Jesuit brother who accompanied Paulo Dias de Novaes.³⁷ In the letter, written in 1563, the cleric relates that the armies of the *ngola a kiluanje* had recently fought a series of battles somewhere in the interior of Angola against a ruler simply known as the “King of Benguela.” Miller believes that this King of Benguela was certainly the king of the Imbangala, one of the Lunda *makota* who had taken over the *kilombo*. Also, the word “Imbangala”, in the contemporary Angolan language of Umbundu, signifies a “brave and

³⁴ Pietri, *El país necesita inmigración*, 235.

³⁵ Lester D. Langley, *The Americas in the Age of Revolution, 1750-1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

³⁶ Joseph C. Miller, “The Imbangala and the Chronology of Early Central African History,” *Journal of African History*, XIII, 4 (1972): 561.

³⁷ Letter of Irmão António Mendes to the Father General, 9 May 1563, in António Brásio, *Monumenta Missionaria Africana*, 2 vols. (Lisbon: Agência Geral do Ultramar, 1952-65), II: 509.

courageous person, especially one who has no settled home.”³⁸ Thus, the Umbundu definition seems highly appropriate, as it aptly fits the warrior caste of the Imbangala, embodied as a transitive social institution with military and political functions. This also ties in nicely with the term *kilombo* or *quilombo*,³⁹ which in Brazil and many parts of Latin America takes on the meaning of a war camp or a settlement of fugitive slaves. If not for Miller’s conscientious research, however, the groundwork would not have been laid whereby these connections between the Imbangala and fugitive slave settlements in Brazil and other parts of South America have been made.

The work of Heintze, moreover, provides additional perspectives on the Imbangala. She notes, for example, their role in the Atlantic slave trade: “The northern groups of Jaga/Imbangala had in the meantime become ever more essential to the Atlantic slave trade, a number supporting the Portuguese in their campaigns and finally crossing the Kwanza to the north. At the beginning of the tenure of the Portuguese governor Luís Mendes de Vasconcelos (1617-21) one finds the ‘Jaga’ groups under the leaders Kasa Kangola, Donga, and João Kasanje involved in and siding with the Portuguese in battles against the kingdom of Ndongo...”⁴⁰

Coming from Central Africa sometime around the start of the sixteenth century, the Imbangala occupied vast portions of the east; while the Portuguese, expanding southward from the Gold Coast (present-day Ghana) and always on the lookout for suitable harbors to construct new port facilities, established a settlement at the Bay of Benguela in 1617, with the purpose of seeking out new entrances into the Angolan hinterland, thereby affixing their hegemony over the

³⁸ Albino Alves, Fr. *Dicionário etimológico Bundu-Portugues*, 2 vols. (Lisbon, 1951), I:664.

³⁹ Hebe Mattos, “Black Troops and Hierarchies of Color in the *Portuguese* Atlantic World: The Case of Enrique Dias and His Black Regiment,” *Luso-Brazilian Review* 45:1 (2008): 15, 16

⁴⁰ Beatrix Heintze, “The Extraordinary Journey of the Jaga through the Centuries: Critical Approaches to Precolonial Angolan Historical Sources,” *History in Africa* 34 (2007): 81.

southwest of the African continent. This port ultimately became the nucleus of slaving operations, which reached their peak around 1720.

As it has been demonstrated that the Imbangala were a military society, another area of the literature review involves the engagement of armed black contingents. Apart from the capacity of common slave, some Africans served as both unarmed and armed auxiliaries.⁴¹ The majority of these hailed from West Africa, although a smaller contingent came directly from the Iberian kingdoms in the early decades after the Spanish had crossed the Atlantic. During the first century of conquest in the Americas, however, the militarized environment made it often difficult to distinguish between the unarmed and armed auxiliaries. Therefore, the experience of black auxiliaries in any military capacity, i. e. foot soldier, in intelligence, logistics, maritime operations, etc., markedly differed from that of the mass of common slaves. The black soldier could function as an individual, alone or in small detachments, as well as in the capacity of a personal dependent or agent of a Spanish master. In addition, while some entered into military service in the capacity of slave, they were more likely than their enslaved counterparts to acquire their freedom, should they survive a few enemy engagements. The enslaved obtained their freedom soon after they commenced fighting alongside the Spaniards, if not sooner, and Restall notes that, “very few black conquistadors seem to have remained slaves after their participation in the Conquest.”⁴²

Inasmuch as Chourio brought such a naval auxiliary contingent into the area that now comprises Zulia state in Venezuela, it can be deduced from historical knowledge that the men of that Afro-Zulian detachment held predictable posts,⁴³ becoming part of colonial life in various

⁴¹ Restall, “Black Conquistadors,” 173-175.

⁴² Ibid., 175.

⁴³ Mattos, “Black Troops,” 15, 16. The Portuguese Crown utilized black soldiers on both sides of the Atlantic, principally in Angola and Brazil, throughout the seventeenth century. The Imbangala, a. k. a. Jagas by the

ways. Juan de Dios Martínez Suarez, an ethnographer and musicologist from the University of Zulua, has indicated that many of the initial 600, branded on their bodies⁴⁴ with the name of Chourio, later went on to become well known as effective hacienda managers.⁴⁵ Their diffusion across plantations of the Sur del Lago also allowed them to perpetuate the cult of the West African orixa Ajé among the slaves they found under their supervision. The mass of slaves were mostly of Angolan descent and recognized the Imbangala origins of the branded Chourios.

Therefore, even though the Chourio band were few in number, the available literature indicates that their lives sufficiently conformed to certain patterns that allow analytical generalizations to be made about them, thus allowing them to constitute themselves as an important part of the black experience in colonial Spanish America and the Afro-Venezuelan legacy. It can also be seen that the perspectives gained by researchers of African history, comparative religion, resistance and structural anthropology are vital to the outcomes of this dissertation.

Portuguese, were known as fierce warriors in Central Angola, and had allied themselves for a season with the Portuguese in fighting as their proxies in those interior areas to the east of Luanda. They were exclusively male groups whose members lived in militarized camps, called *ki-lombos*. Interestingly, the counter-conquistador maroon communities which later sprung up in Brazil were called *quilombos*, so named because of their alleged Imbangala leadership and military structure. The *ki-lombos* in Angola constituted an alliance among young warriors who rejected traditional kinship structures and the supremacy of the elders, much as the *quilombos* of Brazil rejected traditional Portuguese colonial structures and the supremacy of the Portuguese Crown. In Angola, the Portuguese military adopted the tactics and organizational forms of the Imbangala, reconstituting their force into small contingents, allied in operations with a variety of local African forces, to include private armies of regional authorities (*sobas*). Imbangala armed groups allied with the Portuguese as mercenary troops and slave regiments to form the so-called *guerras pretas* (black troops), with each *guerra preta* considered a small infantry force. The Portuguese military leader, Henrique Dias, himself of the Imbangala, was proclaimed by King João IV of Portugal as “Major of All Black Troops in Angola and Brazil” on 16 November 1644. As is demonstrated further on in this dissertation, the Brazilian maroons in the *quilombos* of Palmares and surrounding areas shared much in common with the Afro-Zulians of the Sur del Lago.

⁴⁴ María Alejandra Carrillo, “En la tierra de los hijos de Ajé,” *Panorama* (Maracaibo), 16 June 2002.

⁴⁵ Juan de Dios Martínez Suárez, *Como Bailar Chimbángueles: Colección Danzas Étnicas y Tradicionales No. 1* (Maracaibo: Fundación Ajé, 1991), 5. “A fact of great significance is the following: There existed slaves that were dedicated to the work in the homes of the masters and not to the tasks of the field. These received a better instruction about the cultural values of the Europeans, but also exercised the capacity to compare, and hence, put a greater value on their African traditions. This advantage, in comparison to those who worked on the plantations guarded by the henchmen of the masters, oriented them to leadership in the search for their identity and to succeed in defining just what it was they were going to be in the New Africa (term of black nationalist identification for the Sur del Lago region used by some Afro-Zulians).”

Methodology

These published sources constitute an important literature that provides information upon which the dissertation may be founded. Even more important, however, are the primary sources utilized. First, in the General Archives of the Nation in Caracas, there is the principal repository of documents related to Venezuela's black population. Other areas to search out, by degree of importance, are the archives of the Archbishop of Caracas and some of the registers from major city administrations (*cabildos*), such as Caracas, Maracaibo or Mérida. The General Archives of the Nation are divided into three major epochs: the colony, the struggle for independence, and the republic. Naturally, the first is quite rich in documentation relating to the importance of the slaves, the ethnic composition of these slaves, their purchase and sale, the names of their owners, diverse regulations pertaining to slaves and the slave trade, titles of ownership to slaves, etc., especially during the eighteenth century. It is in these files where a wealth of material pertaining to Juan⁴⁶ de Chourio and the Africans he transported to the Sur del Lago Maracaibo region can be found.

The documents relative to the Africans and their descendants, however, have not been grouped in a section apart. Notices about African slaves can be found in all three parts. Relative to the colonial era, the notices are divided among the following sections: royal licensures, royal orders and provisions, city administrations, causes of resistance, family and marriage records, designation of work details, local governments and local military detachments, tax and customs houses, exhortations on maintaining the purity of Spanish blood, royal legates, commissars to indigenous populations, religious orders and Papal bulls, contracted companies in slaving enterprises, plantation records, shipping records, church negotiations, the collection of titles by the church, public health decrees, and public expense ledgers. And inasmuch as the slaves

⁴⁶ In Spanish documents Jean de Chourio is referred to as "Juan de Chourio" or "Juan de Chourio de/e Iturbide."

formed the primary sector of the working class during the colonial era, it is also possible to encounter references to them in almost any other type of record that has come to be preserved down to our time. Nevertheless, the principal sections in which African material can be referenced for the colonial era are under local government (*gobernación*), military detachments (*Capitania General*), military administration (*Intendencia del ejército*), tax administration (*Real hacienda*), royal affairs (*Real consulado*), miscellaneous affairs (*Diversos*), family court and matrimony (*Diseños y matrimonios*), and royal chartered slave companies like the *Compañía Guipuzcoana*.

During the 1950s and 1960s, investigators of Afro-Venezuelan culture like doctors Federico Brito Figueroa (economics of slavery) and Miguel Acosta Saignes (the culture of slavery), established credibility in their work by digging deeply into these resources, and both these experts were, in turn, frequently quoted by doctors Angelina Pollak-Eltz (anthropology) and Jesus García (African studies). Some documents from the General Archives, and many pertaining to the Afro-Venezuelans, have been subsequently collected by Arellano Moreno and published in sundry editions: *Sources on the Economic History of Venezuela in the Sixteenth Century*, *Documents on the Economic History of Venezuela* and the *Relationship of Venezuelan Geographic Areas* (Caracas: Biblioteca de la Academia Nacional de la Historia, 1993), XIV.

The tomes of diverse collections in the General Archives of the Nation possess an index. For certain collections an index was later added in the form of an attached notebook. It should be mentioned that the former sections, falling under the title of *Translados* (Transferred Documents), contain 670 volumes, of which a good deal were taken from the *Archivos de Indias* (Archives of Spanish America).

As to the second epoch, relevant to the Bolivarian revolution and the era of the struggle for independence, most references to blacks in the General Archives can be found under the categories of administration (*Intendencia*), the causes of disloyalty (*Causas de deslealtad*), the government of Guyana (*la gobernación de Guyana*), the illustrious leaders of independence (*Ilustres próceres de la independencia*), the Court of Naval Jurisdiction (*El Corte de Almirantazgo*) and the correspondence of the founding fathers (*La correspondencia de próceres*).

Corresponding to the third epoch, the founding of the republic and the abolition of slavery, the sections on interior affairs and justice (*Interior y Justicia*), customs, war and the sea (*Hacienda, Guerra y Marina*), public works and public servants, development and education, etc., are all important with regard to black people, but especially interior affairs and justice. The documents from these sources were particularly helpful to John V. Lombardi in the construction of his significant work, *The Decline and Abolition of Negro Slavery in Venezuela*. These guidelines were published, in Spanish, by the United Nations Organization on Education, Science and Culture, headquartered at place de Fonteney, 75 Paris 7^e, and printed by Sainte-Catherine, Brujas, in Belgium, 1970.

There is also a plethora of material related to the origin and growth of rituals surrounding the Roman Catholic/African/Amerindian syncretic cult of San Benito in the Sur del Region and throughout Venezuela. These are significant in that they highlight the adaptation and modification of Eurocentric belief systems to accommodate New World realities. By infusing African and indigenous peoples' beliefs and values into the pantheon of Roman Catholic saints, oppressed peoples of color found a vehicle to not only endure and preserve essential elements of their culture, but also transmit it across time for future generations to unveil its deeper meanings. Much of this material has been archived by Roberto "Diken" Carlos López, director of the Afro-

Asian Institute of the University of the Andes in Mérida, Venezuela. López, under the auspices of the university, directs the activities of the Bambata Project and frequently conducts investigations and seminars into the evolution of the San Benito cult. The research will include information gained from interviewing López on the impact of San Benito on both the Afro-Zulians and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.

African Diaspora Theory

In approaching this area, a paradigm is employed that provides a comparative and theoretically integrated approach to the African diaspora within a worldwide context. This new paradigm would also serve to link the historical development of the African peoples of the Sur del Lago Maracaibo in Venezuela (Afro-Zulian) with the global or international network of African diaspora peoples. This conceptual and research framework is clearly on the cutting edge of change as it contributes to a refinement of the theory and method of studying the survival and persistency of the Afro-Zulian people over time and cross-culturally as an integral part of the Trans-Atlantic community. The interdisciplinary nature of the concepts and principals will be useful in shaping both the thinking and direction of researchers in the field from varied backgrounds and epistemological orientations in both the humanities and social sciences.

Elliot Skinner, for example, has stated that the growth of any new intellectual discipline has followed a three-stage progression.⁴⁷ The first stage is the period of delineation and definition. This embodies all the excitement inherent in the pioneering experience of exploring new frontiers, and for this dissertation would involve the accumulation of that information indicating the existence of an Afro-Zulian community. The second stage is essentially a micro-level fact finding stage and embodies the time when the concepts and definitions that emerged

⁴⁷ Remarks made by Elliot Skinner, Franz Boas Professor of Anthropology, Columbia University, conference, "Transformation and Resiliency in Africa," 12-13 October 1977, at Washington DC.

from the first stage would be utilized to form a detailed case study and field research. For this dissertation it means the incorporation of those primary documents cited in the first stage dealing with the case of Juan de Chourio and the 600 blacks he brought over to the Sur del Lago Maracaibo in 1722, who came to form the nucleus of the Afro-Zulian community. And the third and final stage is that of maturation. At this point in the developmental process, a more systematic assessment of the collected body of data will emerge, with two major thrusts. The first of these would be challenges to, or the reinterpretation of, the original conceptual models, and the second of these would be the formulation of new models built upon the knowledge gained in the first two stages, but simultaneously suggesting innovative theoretical approaches or untried avenues of exploration.

Moreover, this dissertation will take an integrative approach to the African diaspora, drawing attention to those linkages of African peoples throughout the Caribbean and the Americas, as well as with specific African societies. There is little doubt that the African diaspora represents a type of social grouping characterized by an historical patterning of particular social relationships and experiences. As a social formation, the African diaspora is conceptualized as a global aggregate of actors and subpopulations differentiated in social and geographical space yet exhibiting a commonality based on historical factors and conditioned by and within a world ordering system. Among the characteristics that distinguish the diaspora, and hence the Afro-Zulians, as part of a global formation from other differentiated groups, are the following based on historical factors:

- Migration and Geo-Social Displacement: The Circularity of a People. This embodies the historical dialectic between geographical mobility and the establishment of "roots."
- Social Oppression: Relations of Domination and Subordination. This encompasses the conflict, discrimination and inequity, based primarily, although not exclusively, on race, color, class and gender.

- Endurance, Resistance, and Struggle: Cultural and Political Action. This area takes into account the creative actions of a people as subjects of their history, thus mobilizing action “for itself,” i.e. changing the forms and context of struggle. It also concerns itself with psycho-cultural and ideological transformations, as well as the social networks and institutional dynamics.⁴⁸

In this dissertation, all of the above should be incorporated into each section, with the final chapter reserved for historical analysis and interpretation that reflects Molefi Asante’s “Afrocentricity.”⁴⁹ Basically, Afrocentricity is seen by Asante as a mode of thought or action in which the centrality of African interests, values and perceptions predominate. In the case of the Afro-Zulians, this would mean the placing of them, as African people, at the center of analysis of what is essentially an African phenomenon, i.e. their dispersion to the Sur del Lago Maracaibo, Venezuela, and the establishment of an essentially Angolan community there. In terms of action and behavior, it represents a devotion to the idea that what is in the best interest of African consciousness is at the heart of ethical behavior. In this endeavor, Afrocentricity seeks to enshrine the idea that blackness itself encapsulates a body of ethics. In other words, being black means that one is against all forms of oppression, racism, classism, sexism, etc.⁵⁰

In this dissertation, Asante’s Afrocentricity theory will form the fourth category of data analysis and interpretation, essentially encompassing the emergence of a new Afro-Venezuelan, and even more specifically, an Afro-Zulian identity. An associate and colleague of Asante, professor of History and Chair of History, Geography and Global Studies at Coppin State

⁴⁸ Ruth Simms Hamilton, “Toward a Paradigm for African Diaspora Studies,” in *Monograph No. 1: Creating a Paradigm and Research Agenda for Comparative Studies of the Worldwide Dispersion of African Peoples*, ed. Ruth Simms Hamilton (East Lansing, Michigan: African Diaspora Research Project, Michigan State University, 2007), 18.

⁴⁹ Molefi Asante, *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change* (Chicago: African American Images, 2003), 2.

⁵⁰ Jean Paul Sartre, *Black Orpheus* (Paris: Edition Gallimard, 1948), 11. As a precursor to Asante’s Afrocentricity, Sartre concluded that the development of a revolutionary consciousness emerged from an understanding and appreciation of the struggles of African peoples, rising up from the bottom of history to take their rightful place as equals among humankind. To this end, Sartre addressed his poetry and other writings to the whites of twentieth century France, to help them understand their deteriorating position in the grand scheme of history. If it could be arranged, Sartre would have these whites jump out of their skins for a while, to perceive and act in the capacity of just being human. Whites must consider the costs to their own psyches and mental well being inherent in the imposition of European institutions upon Africa and peoples of African descent wherever they are found.

University, Katherine Bankole-Medina, believes that Asante is taking African Diaspora studies to new levels with Afrocentricity's emphasis on matters of race, rhetoric and identity.⁵¹ She felt that Asante was moving in directions that informed African peoples worldwide in areas that went far beyond the rudimentary constructs of race and power.

Tentative Conclusions

Some tentative conclusions may be drawn, and these are that despite their gradual process of *mestizaje* (miscegenation) and a diminishing of some of their cultural traditions, the Afro-Zulians held on to their Imbangala ethos or spirit. In addition to self-identification as descendants of the Angolan blacks brought over by Jean de Chourio, they are cautious, mysterious and reserved toward outsiders. Even until the present, they managed to maintain a sense of autonomy, authority and control in the making of formal and informal decisions regarding their rights, duties, privileges, housing, land use and other issues throughout their history. In other words, as active social actors on the stage of history, they have maintained their own ethnic identity and have continued to interpret, construct, reproduce and transform their experiences within the context of the Trans-Atlantic world. The case study elaborated in this work also reveals that any approach to the Afro-Zulian community must include more than a mere collection and cataloging of miscellaneous data. It must be gleaned for the purpose of synthesizing and reconstructing a New Africa in the northwest of Venezuela.

⁵¹ Molefi Asante, *Race, Rhetoric and Identity: The Architecton of the Soul* (Amherst, New York: Humanity Books, 2005), jacket review by Katherine Bankole (nee)-Medina.

CHAPTER TWO

JEAN DE CHOURIO E ITURBIDE

Introduction

This chapter examines the early through midlife of Jean de Chourio e Iturbide in the context of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century Trans-Atlantic world. Chourio was born in the French Basque country, and heavily influenced by both of these European cultures. His Basque roots provided him with a worldwide fraternity and network of fellow countrymen. Wherever Basques, whether from the French or Spanish side of the Pyrenees, congregated, they did not hesitate to assist each other in advancing their mutual objectives. The Basques are also a people intimately connected with the sea; and this, too, provided an impetus in career selection for the young Chourio. Additionally, his French origins allowed him access to the corridors of power in Europe and beyond. Throughout his youth, Chourio accompanied his father on various diplomatic missions throughout Europe, no doubt making many valuable contacts that would assist him later in life. From the French, he also garnered a more worldly education and attitude toward Africans and European policies geared toward them. Acting initially as an agent of the French Royal Guinea Trading Company, and later as an independent businessman, Chourio tenaciously hung on to the margins of a thriving outpost of Western European society developing in the Caribbean and circum-Caribbean.

It was a society infused with a conglomeration of Western European influences. A part from the Basque and French, Chourio participated in sundry smuggling operations under the auspices of the Dutch authorities in the Netherlands Antilles. From a base in Curaçao, Chourio plied sloops all along the coast of the Spanish Main, from Cartagena to La Guaira, providing manpower and materials to the developing colonies of the region in exchange for their cacao

harvests. Keeping in mind that the early eighteenth century Trans-Atlantic world was governed by the norms of mercantilism, each European power established trade monopolies over all of the commercial activities in their respective colonies. Therefore, throughout the Spanish realm, that included Venezuela, the British, Dutch, French, and Portuguese were to be excluded from buying or selling activities. Only commerce between Spain, the mother country, and her own colonies, was permitted. This policy, of course, led to the development of illegal trade with other European countries. Because the Spanish imposed high port taxes, and because Spanish manufactured goods were expensive anyway, being compounded by long trans-Atlantic voyages and the cost of abating pirate activity, it was more advantageous for Spain's American colonists to simply do business with the British, French or Dutch then operating in the Caribbean. These foreign powers could offer a more elaborate variety of products at lower prices than either the Spanish *peninsulares* or even the colonists themselves.

Meanwhile, especially after the signing of the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, Chourio had to deal with near constant British attempts to shut him out of Caribbean and Circum-Caribbean commercial ventures of all types. Other Europeans he encountered were the Germans, who had long controlled aspects of the Venezuelan slave trade through the Welser family; the Italians, who supplied the majority of the missionaries for the Capuchin missions in both Angola and the Spanish American colonies; the Portuguese, who monopolized the source of black slave labor on the African continent; and the Spanish, whose new king of French ancestry would walk a tight rope in trying to placate the British while still hanging on to men like Chourio, who made the continued development and success of the Spanish American colonies a reality.¹ It was also a

¹Federico Brito Figueroa, *Estructura Económica de Venezuela Colonial* (Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1963), 99. The presence of the Welser family in Venezuela has its origin in an accord signed between the Augsburg banking house and the Spanish Crown on 27 March 1528 for the development, settlement and governance of the Province of Venezuela. This accord obligated the German Welser family to establish at least two

society heavily impacted by both an African and Native American ethos, regardless of whether or not the European colonists or Creoles wanted to recognize this fact. Thus was the world of Juan de Chourio e Iturbide.

Chourio and Venezuela

Chourio chose a life that some considered “infamous.”² Being of French Basque origin, he was always viewed with suspicion outside of his own ethnic circle. He and others involved in the extra-legal trade with Venezuela, originating mostly from the island of Curaçao, were attributed an infamy and inordinate symbolic attention as a direct result of their association, physical or ideational, with the massive cultural, economic and political transitions that took place in early eighteenth century Caribbean society. Men like Chourio were viewed as the harbingers of change, and a change that not many were willing to accept. Because Chourio operated on the edges of socially accepted behavior and space, he fell subject to ritualized social interactions and spatial segregation, especially by the British and Spanish colonial authorities. It is ironic that while these authorities reviled Chourio and others involved in the extra-legal trade, the very existence of their societies depended on them for needed supplies and the defense of emerging European New World colonies.

As noted in Chapter One, Chourio began his career in the extra-legal trade with Venezuela from an office on the island of Curaçao, whence he was under suspicion by Dutch colonial authorities as being an agent of the French. Hence he was eventually expelled from the

cities within two years of their arrival, construct at least three forts, and arm four ships of the Spanish armada. It also allowed for the transport to Venezuela of 300 Spanish men and 50 German miners. It gave them the right to enslave any Native Americans they encountered as well as to import 4,000 African slaves to the colony. This was the first such *asiento*, or charter to import African slaves, granted by the Spanish Crown. The first of the Welsers arrived on the Venezuelan Coro Peninsula on 28 February 1529 to begin these endeavors. However, the exclusivity of the *asiento* did not last, as within one year others from Santo Domingo and Spain were importing African slaves to Venezuela.

² Anton Blok, *Honour and Violence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 44-68.

island and had to seek the patronage of the Spanish king, through royal decrees, in order to operate directly from the South American mainland as a duly-appointed representative of a recognized French trading concern. But before making this tentative leap into legality, it could not be denied that Chourio had been a broker of this extra-legal trade between Dutch Curaçao and Spanish Venezuela in the early eighteenth century, and therefore his was continually considered more dangerous than others in a n “ institutionalized, society-wide system of transgression.”³

Essentially, Chourio was a smuggler, and a very good one. But smuggling in Europe’s New World colonies entailed the direct violation of sundry mercantile trade restrictions, Crown territorial boundaries, and often the ecclesiastical divides imposed between faithful adherents and perceived heretics (i.e. the Catholic Chourio doing business with the Protestant Dutch). Thus, intermediaries and smugglers like Chourio, who facilitated exchanges across imperial bounds in the eighteenth century Caribbean and circum-Caribbean, played a critical role in not only connecting American colonies with each other, but also in establishing new Trans-Atlantic circuits of trade with European and African systems of production and consumption, thus forging New World commercial and, as a by-product, cultural, linguistic and political linkages.

Spanish colonial bureaucrats and military officers in eighteenth century Venezuela tended, on the other hand, to seriously overestimate the threat that Chourio and other smugglers posed to Crown-sanctioned trade and social stabilization. Chourio and other brokers of extra-legal trade were known in eighteenth century New Granada (Colombia) and Venezuela as *prácticos*, *pláticos* or *peritos*. These smugglers enjoyed a special attention within an extensive

³ Cohen, “Role of the *Práctico*,” 2.

but infamous system of exchange that also included the trafficking in human cargo.⁴ Basically, New World smuggling during the early eighteenth century pitted Crown designs for the mercantile integration of the metropole's colonies against local desires and practices.⁵

Smuggling was widespread throughout the entire Caribbean and circum-Caribbean regions from the late seventeenth through the eighteenth centuries. And according to Cohen, there were some places, especially the periphery islands and mainland regions that bordered the sea, where “extra-legal trade represented a greater portion of commercial activity than the trade conducted in accord with imperial mercantile policies.”⁶ Some European powers, like Holland, established colonies like Curacao and Saint Eustatius, whence the infraction of other colonial nations' commercial restrictions could be carried out on a regular and profitable basis. Chourio must have been keenly aware of this fact, positioning himself nicely to gain a foothold in the region and claim his slice of the pie.

The Dutch with whom Chourio dealt had two significant colonies in the Caribbean: the islands of Curaçao, off the coast of Venezuela, and Saint Eustatius.⁷ Curaçao was captured from the Spanish in 1634 and was converted into a staging area for early seventeenth century raiding parties on the Spanish South American mainland. By the end of the seventeenth century, the Dutch West Indian Company succeeded in transforming the island of Curaçao into its hub of Caribbean activities, the West Indian counterpart to Holland's prized city of Amsterdam, where

⁴ For works done on *prácticos* in the colonial Spanish Caribbean and circum-Caribbean, see Lance Grahn, *The Political Economy of Smuggling: Regional Informal Economies in Early Bourbon New Granada* (Boulder: West View Press, 1977); Aizpurua, *Curacao y la Costa de Caracas*; Wim Klooster, *Illicit Riches: Dutch Trade in the Caribbean, 1648-1795* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 1998); and Hector R. Feliciano Ramos, *El contrabando inglés en el Caribe y el Golfo de México, 1748-1778* (Sevilla: Publicaciones de la Excm. Diputación Provincial de Sevilla, 1990).

⁵ Pieter Emmer, *The Dutch in the Atlantic Economy, 1580-1880: Trade, Slavery and Emancipation* (Brookfield, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing, 1998), 16-17.

⁶ Cohen, “Role of the *Práctico*,” 3.

⁷ St. Eustatius or Statia, is located in the northeastern Caribbean, 150 miles east of Puerto Rico (latitude 17.00, longitude 63.04), 90 miles east of St. Croix, 38 miles south of St. Maarten and 17 miles southeast of Saba. *Statia State Tourist Office*, <http://www.statiatourism.com/map.html> (17 August 2009).

Chourio's father had worked as a diplomat. Most likely, it was the political influence of Chourio's father which allowed Jean Chourio e Iturbide to begin his operations on the island of Curaçao. According to Rupert:

In early 1708 a dapper French gentleman (Jean Chourio) arrived in Willemstad (the capital of Curaçao) from La Guaira, Venezuela, requesting an audience with the Governor. The son of the Spanish consul in Amsterdam, he represented the French *asiento* (trading concern) in Cartagena, Colombia. Jean Chourio informed Governor Beck that his *asiento* commission, signed by Spain's Philip V, granted him the right to purchase slaves in Jamaica and Curaçao for the colonies of the Spanish American mainland. Although the Dutch and French were at war, such examples of 'peace beyond the line' were typical of the times. It would be highly profitable, he suggested, if the trade included other activities that were needed on the mainland; this open invitation to contraband smuggling met with immediate interest from the Governor and local merchants.⁸

Note how Governor Beck and other Curaçao merchants demonstrated a willingness to engage in contraband trade with Chourio, despite the fact that France and Holland were technically at a state of war.

There were, to be more specific, two significant commercial circuits that met at Curaçao.⁹ First, there was the Trans-Atlantic trade between Holland (United Provinces) and her (Dutch) colonies in the Caribbean. This was known among the Dutch as the *grote vaart*. Second, there was the transit trade within the Caribbean, circum-Caribbean and North America, known among the Dutch as the *kleine vaart*. The *kleine vaart* joined the island with some points along Atlantic North America, the Greater Antilles, the Windward and Leeward Islands, and its most important link, that being the routes to and from Venezuela.¹⁰ Primarily, Dutch ship captains, merchants and their representatives would cruise the Venezuelan coast. Sometimes Venezuelan merchants or planters would go directly to Curaçao to trade or make arrangements for future transactions.

⁸ Rupert, *Roots of Our Future*, http://books.caribseek.com/Curacao/Commercial_History_of_Curacao/profiles/jean-chourio.shtml.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ramón A izpurua, *Temas de historia colonial de Venezuela y del Caribe* (Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1966), 16-17.

Sloops,¹¹ like Chourio's, would sail out from Willemstad throughout the year bound for Venezuela; and this traffic would more than double during times of the cacao harvest.¹²

Almost all of Venezuela's colonial economy was based on the export of cacao.¹³ The output of other agricultural exports, like tobacco or wheat, was literally dwarfed by the tremendous harvest of cacao. From the mid-seventeenth century forward, cacao dominated Venezuela's agricultural landscape, orienting the colony's economy to a literal single product export status. This cacao production was geared almost exclusively to meeting the demands of external markets. The cacao plantations were established all along the Venezuelan coastal region [*litoral*], in Choroní, Ocumare, Chuao and Turiamo; in the valleys of Caucagua, Capaya, Curiepe and Guapo; as well as in the cities of Barquisimeto, Trujillo and Mérida. The cacao harvest took place twice a year, in June and December. It was during these months, and the weeks that followed them, that the sloops would jam Venezuela's ports and inlets close to the coastal valleys to load up on the cacao exports.¹⁴

Ships arriving in Venezuela usually followed two main itineraries. The first was a stay in Venezuela that included calls at numerous ports. This could last anywhere from two weeks to two months. Second, there were shorter, but more direct trips, to specific destinations closer to

¹¹ Captain Jean Chourio e Iturbide commanded many sloops in the Caribbean. Having a length of 30 to 60 feet and a top speed of over 10 knots, a crew of 20 to 70 men could easily maneuver this father of today's sailing yacht for quick in-and-out surprise attacks, avoiding broadsides and outrunning pursuit. With the sloop weighing as much as 100 tons and being armed with as many as 15 cannons, its draft was still very shallow at eight feet and allowed it to find refuge in shallower waters far beyond the reach of any warship. This also was the reason that those commissioned to hunt pirates often chose the sloop to gain access to their hiding spots. *Pirates, the Scourge of the Spanish Main*, piratesofthecaribbeansea.com/ships2.html, (17 August 2009).

¹² Eugenio Píñero, *The Town of San Felipe and Colonial Cacao Economies* (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1994), 113-138.

¹³ Alan Davidson and Tom Jaine, *Oxford Companion to Food* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 178. "Cacao is the usual term for the tree and for its seeds (misleadingly, 'cocoa' has sometimes been used in English). A complex process of roasting, fermenting, and grinding turns these seeds into chocolate."

¹⁴ Rafael Estrada, et al, *Estudios Sociales* (Caracas: Ediciones Co-Bo, 1997), 47.

the Dutch islands of Aruba, Curacao, and Bonaire.¹⁵ These more direct trips were destined for the Venezuelan Coro Peninsula, not far from and south of Aruba, or the Dutch enclave of Tucacas,¹⁶ on the Venezuelan coast halfway between Coro in the west and Caracas in the east, and south of Curaçao and Bonaire. At times a stay in Tucacas might result in an extended layover, depending on the presence of Spanish corsairs in the area or weather conditions at sea.

The crews of the ships emanating from Curaçao and bound for Venezuela were composed of a captain, sailors, and a merchant or his representative.¹⁷ In the case of Chourio, he occupied the dual post of captain and merchant. Being viewed suspiciously by the Dutch, he no doubt wanted to take personal charge of the cargo, from the point of its pick-up all the way through its unloading and ultimate purchase.¹⁸

The sailors were mostly free blacks and slaves from Willemstad, recruited by the captain or merchant and hired out by their owners. Klooster maintains that free black sailors were usually hired for a single journey, and that when the ship returned to Willemstad the crews were dispersed with each individual going his own way, seeking the next opportunity to ply the

¹⁵ The Netherlands Antilles [Dutch: *Nederlandse Antillen*], previously known as the Netherlands West Indies or Dutch Antilles/West Indies, is part of the Lesser Antilles and consists of two groups of islands in the Caribbean Sea: Curaçao and Bonaire, just off the Venezuelan coast, and Sint Eustatius, Saba and Sint Maarten, located southeast of the Virgin Islands. The islands form an autonomous part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The islands' economy today depends mostly upon tourism, international financial services, international commerce and shipping and petroleum. *The Central Government of the Netherlands Antilles*, <http://www.gov.an/> (17 August 2009). In 1636, near the culmination of the Eighty Years' War between Spain and Holland, the Dutch took possession of Aruba and remained in control for nearly two centuries. In 1805, during the Napoleonic Wars, the British briefly took possession of the island, but it was returned to Dutch control in 1816. Today, Aruba remains a part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, but functions independently with its own government apparatus. *The Official Tourism Website of Aruba*, <http://www.aruba.com/ExploretheIsland/IslandFacts/history.aspx> (17 August 2009).

¹⁶ Celestino Andrés Arauz Monfante, *El contrabando holandés en el Caribe durante la primera mitad del siglo XVIII* (Caracas: Biblioteca de la Academia Nacional de la Historia, 1984), 65-66, 198-201. Early in the eighteenth century, merchants from Curaçao established an outpost in Tucacas toward the western frontier of the Province of Venezuela. Here they constructed warehouses, residences, and even a synagogue. Spanish colonial authorities in Caracas sent several military expeditions against the Dutch settlement, only to see it rebuilt and reoccupied not soon after they withdrew.

¹⁷ Cohen, "Role of the *Práctico*," 4.

¹⁸ Cohen claims that he was unable to find a Basque, European or white Creole *práctico* from the mainland of Venezuela, so this dissertation at least confirms the existence of one in Jean de Chourio. *Ibid.*, 15.

Venezuelan coast.¹⁹ While Chourio was involved for a time in the slave trade, it is clear that his primary business concern was cacao, cloth and other non-human merchandise. The historical record with regard to the *práctico* indicates that Chourio most likely viewed Africans with a more pragmatic eye.

Figure 2.1: Jean de Chourio sailed on a sloop like this one.

Source: piratesofthecaribbeansea.com/ships2.html

The World that Formed Jean de Chourio

The means by which Chourio arrived in the Caribbean conducting trade with sundry European colonies had a lot to do with his upbringing in the Basque country. This section explores the Basque region that helped shape the younger Juan de Chourio's life and outlook. The saga begins in the Basque village of Azcaín, where Juan de Chourio, the son of Don Juan de Chourio and Doña Estafanía Itrubide, was born in 1676. During that time, Azcaín was a part of the Spanish kingdom of Navarra.²⁰ Today, however, it falls within the predominantly Basque jurisdiction of the region of the Pyrénées-Atlantiques, and the French province of Aquitaine. By heading due south, one can find mountain passes through the Pyrenees, leading to the Baztan valley, where the young Chourio spent his formative years with his parents in the Villa de

¹⁹ Klooster, *Illicit Riches*, 135.

²⁰ *Alcaldia Rosario de Perija: Historia: Su fundador*, <http://alcaldiarosariodeperija.com.ve> (27 April 2009).

Bisadea.²¹ Writing about the famous families and genealogies in this Basque region encompassing both sides of the contemporary French and Spanish border, Caro Baroja stated that from the recovery of archives from various courts and viceroyalties, we see that Navarra had, overall, a strong and prosperous presence in the Spanish colonies.²² We also see that the Navarre colonists were especially favored by Madrid, by reason of royal officials appointed from, and trade concessions granted to, them.²³ The solidarity that existed between Navarre families was no longer an idea found just in the writings of the seventeenth century, but also at the beginning of the reign of Philip V, in the emergence of a dialogue between Basques and Castilians in Peru, where the Castilians blamed the French-Basques in territories in America of representing French interests, and being protected by Spanish-Basques. But this Basque/Navarre solidarity was clearly based on strong kindred and border ties. Others today in the Americas say that many Castilian names are really of French Navarre origin, because the largest part of the kingdom of Navarra was in France.²⁴ It should also be pointed out that in the Basque regions of France, the name Chourio is quite common, but spelled “Xurio.”²⁵ Also, the Iturbide family ancestral town

²¹ Ibid.

²² Julio Caro Baroja, *Hora Navarra del XVIII* (Pamplona, España: Editorial Gómez, 1969), 19.

²³ *Government of Navarra*, http://www.navarra.es/home_en/Navarra/Asi+es+Navarra/Autogobierno/El+Reino+de+Navarra.htm (27 April 2009). In accordance with this official Navarra website, government jurisdictions in this region may be broken down into the following periods: 1) From the Ninth Century to 1515, Navarra was an independent kingdom; 2) From 1515 to 1839, Navarra was a kingdom annexed to the Spanish crown, but except for the monarchy, maintained its own institutions; 3) 1841-1982, Navarra was a Spanish province, with administrative and fiscal autonomy; and 4) 1982 to the present day, in accordance with the Constitution of 1978 and the *Ley de Reintegración y Amejoramineto del Fuero* (the official name given to Navarra’s own statute of autonomy), Navarra is a *Comunidad Foral* within the framework of Spain’s status as a nation of autonomous communities. This means that it preserves its own democratic institutions and a high degree of self-government. Therefore, in considering the case of Chourio or other Navarre of the 18th century, it must be noted that the sovereignty of Spain’s Philip V held sway.

²⁴ Caro Baroja, *Hora Navarra*, 13. The author examines people, families, businesses and ideas important to the formation of 18th century Spain, and explains how the influence of France extended throughout the whole of Navarra, on both sides of the Pyrenees.

²⁵ Hector Iglesias, http://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/docs/00/33/98/60/PDF/Patronymes_d_origine_basque.pdf (27 April 2009). Also, see Jaime de Querexeta, *Diccionario Onomástico y Heraldico Vasco*, (Bilbao: Biblioteca de la Gran Enciclopedia Vasca, 1970), Tomo I, 8-11; (1971), Tomo II, 179; (1972), Tomo III, 163. Tomo I provides a list of abbreviations employed and a guide for interpreting the data pertinent to the Basque family names listed. Tomo II states, “CHOURIO (Xurio).-1. En Sara (Laburdi), en 1609. 2. Var. De Churio” (179), and “CHURIO

of Irissarry is presently located on the French side of the Pyrenees and is known there as “Irissarry,”²⁶ not far from the place of Jean de Chourio’s birth.

There remains little doubt, therefore, that France held an overwhelming cultural sway throughout Navarra and all the Basque lands. Adds Caro Baroja, “Whether it was Colbert on the politics of Carlos II or Felipe V, or just modes of thinking about economics, religion or general topics, in the eighteenth century Kingdom of Navarra there was a definite orientation to all things French. The influence of France was prevalent, exercising both visible and invisible lines of force.”²⁷

Prior to the signing of the Treaty of Utrecht, Chourio took advantage of his French ancestry at every occasion. Alberto Santana Ezkerra, a professor and director of Basque Studies at Boise State University in Idaho, has stated that, “the Iturbides were one of the most powerful families in the valley of Baztan (Nafarroa): bankers, traders and the leading members of a selected group of *navarrese* families....”²⁸ He further explains that since Juan de Chourio e Iturbide shared a French and Basque ancestry, he came from a family branch that at the end of the seventeenth century was well settled in the town of Irissarry (Nafarroa Beherea), where there is still a farmhouse called Iturbide. Santana Ezkerra adds that since Juan de Chourio was a prominent Basque resident of colonial Venezuela, he was intimately involved in the foundation of the Real Compañía Guipuzcoana de Caracas. This company was established in 1728 to give

(Txurio).-1. En Ataun (G), en 1383. 2. Der. De Churí, con el suf. Loc. –tegi, leguar de, vivienda, casa de” (180). Almost the entire right side column in Tomo III provides an entry for ITURBIDE, where from one branch sprang the Mexican liberator and emperor in 1822, Agustín de Iturbide y Aramburu (163).

²⁶ Irissarry, <http://maps.google.com/maps> (16 August 2009). Also note the comments of Alberto Santana Ezkerra, Boise State University, Idaho, later in this chapter regarding this Iturbide family town.

²⁷ Caro Baroja, *Hora Navarra*, 13.

²⁸ Alberto Santana Ezkerra to Patty Miller, Executive Director of Basque Museum and Cultural Center at Boise, Idaho, 25 March 2009. Forwarded e-mail in possession of author.

some legal sanction to the increasing volume of primarily Basque-conducted trade which had proliferated in Venezuela since the Treaty of Utrecht.²⁹

As for the life of the average Basque male, residing on either the French or Spanish side of the Pyrenees Mountains and living at the end of the seventeenth or beginning of the eighteenth century, it was very hard. For the most part, life was drudgery. The typical Basque male was trying to eke out a survival existence for himself and his family by farming in rocky soil or fishing off the coastal areas. But the young Juan de Chourio was anything but mediocre. He could see what was going on around him, and he quickly realized that there were only four possibilities for escaping the grinding cycles of poverty that were encroaching upon him and the Basque nation as a whole: the church, commerce, the government bureaucracy, or the military (land and/or sea forces).³⁰

Within Chourio's own family, many had attained powerful influence in European society through ecclesiastical careers. The town of Chourio's birth, Ascain, was a focal point for religious zealots in the burning of suspected witches. In 1610, a priest of approximately seventy years of age by the name of Arguibel was burned at the stake for his alleged failure to maintain the purity of Roman Catholic doctrine in his speech and writings.³¹ He supposedly was a practitioner of varied forms of Basque magic and witchcraft, and mixed these administrations with his local service as a parish cleric. In that old world of beliefs, all things and people, and their respective images, were united by a magical power known by the Basques as *adur*. If you had a sufficient faith in the *adur*, then whatever was done to the image was bound to happen to the thing or person it represented. This was something akin to African and Caribbean Voodoo.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Caro Baroja, *Hora Navarra*, 29.

³¹ J.-B. Daranatz, *Traductions Basques de la "Philothée,"* <http://hedatuz.euskomedia.org/167/1/16056064.pdf> (27 April 2009).

And even if an educated Basque had his doubts about this fetish system, he would maintain silence about it. There is an old Basque saying that goes, “*Direnik, es da sinistu behar; ez direla, es da esan behar.*” Translated, this means that: “If you don’t believe they exist [dark spiritual forces], don’t say they don’t exist.” So, in essence, you were damned if you did not acknowledge the existence of magic, and equally condemned if you were seen as too eager to believe it.³²

The young Chourio was surrounded by this religious hysteria. Perhaps he recognized that the evil deeds attributed to witches were completely fictitious. After all, he was raised in a family with noble connections to both the French and Spanish Crowns, and literate in several languages. Sundry accounts became jumbled in the witch trials as well, with innocent people being accused of things only read about in books on witchcraft. The accused were then tortured until they confessed. And then there were accusations brought about by disgruntled fellow villagers with quarrels to settle, or even by prompted children. In addition, natural disasters that ruined crops or caused flood or wind damage had to be explained away in some fashion, and in an age without meteorological testing equipment of any accuracy, it was quite convenient to look for scapegoats.³³

Nor can one dismiss the possible survival of ancient pre-Christian Basque rites, which the Roman Catholic Church had failed to suppress during the Inquisition and that had managed to continue for all that time. In Basque culture a witch, or *sorjin*, can refer to two types of individuals. First, there are mythological beings with special powers that appear in countless folk tales; and secondly, there are those persons who conclude pacts with the devil, participate in witches’ sabbaths, and curse people by inflicting the “evil eye” upon them. Nevertheless, many

³² Juan Carlos Etxegoien, *Country of the Basques* (Pamplona: XAMAR, 2001), 50-51.

³³ Ibid.

of the individuals accused of witchcraft were ecclesiastical officials, like the poor Father Arguibel, or *seonak* (church wardens, lay workers, etc.).³⁴ As far as any similarities between these earlier Basque beliefs and the tenets of not a few African animist and fetish sects adopted and modified by blacks in the Americas, more will be written in a subsequent chapter.

Chourio, it should be recognized, also had relatives who served in the priesthood. For example, the church registry at Azcain indicates that on 4 January 1690, Father Axular Pierre de Chourio accepted an ecclesiastical nomination to the cathedral at Bayonne.³⁵ The young Juan de Chourio, upon visiting this relative at the cathedral on the French coast, may have been enticed by the pomp and splendor of the majestic edifice, but upon further recollection, decided that the ecclesiastical life was one too full of hypocrisy. He may have also concluded that his chances of living a long and happy life would be better enhanced living further out from this madness, as clerics, more than most people, ended up as the targets of witch hunters. As an educated man, Chourio could accept and appreciate the basic tenets of Roman Catholicism, but most likely could not brook religious superstition masquerading as truth.³⁶ According to Etxegoien, the witch hunts that spread throughout Europe especially affected the Basque country. According to this Basque historian: “There are more than a few who think they (the witch hunts) constituted an attack on *Euskal Herria*, (the Basque lands) since most of the witch trials took place after Nafarroa was conquered by Castile.”³⁷

In all probability, Chourio saw it as a land and power grab by Castile, but he had the common sense to keep his opinions to himself and to consider other avenues for making a fortune, or at least making his way in life.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ <http://hedatuz.euskomedia.org/167/1/16056064.pdf> (27 April 2009).

³⁶ See Appendix C for some of the Roman Catholic motivations that may have inspired Juan de Chourio.

³⁷ Etxegoien, *The Country of the Basques*, 51.

On the other hand, the siren call of the sea was tempting to many young Basque men at the end of the seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth century, and Chourio was counted among this number. The number of Basque males who found success on the high seas during this time was wholly disproportionate to their numbers. Combining commercial, maritime, mercantile and military activities, Basque sailors were reaching the uttermost parts of the Earth. One reason for this attraction may be that Spain's ship construction industry was centered in the Basque country, where a plentiful supply of hardwood was located in the mountains. Most of the iron used in Spanish ship building was forged in this area as well. Thus, the Basque Navarre entered maritime commercial activities in a big way. Many Basque men thus developed outstanding commercial habits and titles of nobility as well, to match their accumulating fortunes. Caro Baroja notes that the spirit of Basque solidarity worked to bring many great and profitable economic enterprises to the fore in both seventeenth century Spain and America.³⁸

Interestingly, Caro Baroja commented on those of Navarre in the Americas:

Everything seems to end. Another world begins. There are new homelands, new patriotisms.... The importance of the descendants of Navarre in this dramatic moment is recognized. It is sufficient to remember the young man Mina, and Iturbide, with their radical actions. It is enough to also remember the most useful Count of Guaqui. All of them are beyond the modest area of our investigation, but whether Creole or not, as the men of earlier times and later, the men of this time [the eighteenth century] served well, maximizing their individual potential, and adjusting for events and people.³⁹

Ricardo Cierbide Martinena of La Universidad del País Vasco has gone even further, detailing a list of prominent Basques residing in Venezuela throughout the eighteenth century.⁴⁰ According to Cierbide Martinena, the Basque presence in Venezuela during the eighteenth century can be distributed among four groups: 1) Those families who migrated there prior to the

³⁸ Caro Baroja, *Hora Navarra*, 33.

³⁹ Ibid., 392.

⁴⁰ Ricardo Cierbide Martinena, "La Compañía Guipuzcoana de Caracas y los vascos en Venezuela durante el siglo XVIII," *Revista Internacional de Estudios Vascos* 42, 1 (1997), 71-75.

eighteenth century and owners of large estates; 2) Officials of the Spanish Crown; 3) Members of the Guipuzcoana Company (mentioned in Chapter One); and 4) Those who arrived from Basque lands as officials of this same company. These are just some of those at the top of an alphabetical list who arrived in Venezuela prior to the founding of the Guipuzcoana Company, and were, or whose descendants were, fundamental in establishing it in 1828:

Joseph Fuctuoso Alzuru. He donated funds and land for the construction and maintenance of Roman Catholic chapels at Chavazquito, Santo Domingo, Pasohondo, Saguá and Cruces.

Manuel de Alzuru. He was the owner of vast herds of cattle in the Sabana Grande de Yguez.

Miguel de Aristeguieta. He built a private Roman Catholic chapel on his estate.

Gil de Arratia. He was a large landlord, originally from Vizcaya in the Basque country.

Domingo de Arrieta. He inspected the pueblos of the Laguna de Maracaibo in 1738 by order of the bishop Joseph Félix Valverde. In the Sur del Lago today, Arrieta is almost as common a name as Chourio, and there has been, and continues to be, a lot of intermarriage between these two families. Aside from the cooperation of Arrieta and Chourio in establishing the Guipuzcoana Company, it is probable that their respective families shared many other business and personal transactions.

Ascaín, or sometimes referred to as the Ascanio Family. Members of this family held majority shares in the Guipuzcoana Company.

Simón Bolívar. He first went to Santo Domingo, where he worked as a royal court scribe before moving on to Venezuela. He was the first of the Bolívar family to reside in the New World.

Vicente Bolívar. He was a rich landowner who took up residence in Caracas, and father of the Great Liberator Simón Bolívar (1783-1830). This Bolívar was a legal auditor for the Royal Court and member of the Assembly, an organ created by the Guipuzcoana Company in 1751 to advance its interests in Caracas. He was also a patron of the Chapel of the Most Holy Trinity in Caracas.

Juan Chourío⁴¹ de Iturbide. He established the village of Perijá in order to serve as a base of operations in pacifying the bands of the Mutilones *indios* (Native

⁴¹ In some Basque publications, Chourio's name appears with an accent over the (i).

Americans), the Coyama and the Macoa, that were attacking cacao plantations in the regions roundabouts.

The inclusion of Chourio in the list of Cierbide Martinena is very significant in the context of Venezuelan historiography. Until recent times, little, if any, attention was paid toward the role of either the black conquistadores or black colonial soldiers on fronts in Africa, the Americas, or the Caribbean.⁴² That Chourio employed free blacks on his Caribbean sloops and also utilized an African military contingent in putting down Native American rebellions, constitutes a new and overlooked category in regard to the African Diaspora in Venezuela.

European Background

To better understand the conditions that allowed Jean Chourio to prosper as a Trans-Atlantic trader, it is necessary to look at some key events that transpired on the Iberian Peninsula in Spain and Portugal, as well as to the north of the Pyrenees in neighboring France from the late sixteenth through early eighteenth century. As for the Spanish kingdom, it was under constant threat from within and without. In May 1640 peasants in Catalan rose up against Castilian troops, with the rebels capturing Barcelona and killing the viceroy. The Catalans even went so far as to first declare themselves an independent republic, and later as subjects of the French king, when doing so would garner military assistance from him. Thus, the unity of the Spanish kingdom had been destroyed, and it took twelve years for King Philip IV to sufficiently subdue the rebelling Catalans and regain a semblance of control. In order to assure the continued loyalty of the Catalan nobility, however, the Spanish king was required to reaffirm all of their special

⁴² Even the liberal economist and historian, Antonio Arellano Moreno, with respect to the African legacy in Venezuela, stated that, "the three essential functions delegated to blacks in colonial society were: 1) Working in the mines; 2) Working in the agricultural sector with sugar cane, and especially cacao; and 3) Working as 'beasts of burden,' i.e. porters." Antonio Arellano Moreno, *Orígenes de la economía venezolana* (Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1982), 120.

privileges, known as *fueros*.⁴³ This is very important, because in a future time the Spanish Crown would have to grant such favors to its Basque nobility as well, so as to secure their continued cooperation.

There was also trouble brewing on Spain's western flank. In 1580, the Spanish king, Philip II, inherited neighboring Portugal. The king promised that he would allow his Portuguese subjects to maintain their own courts and liberties. He was sure that this would garner their loyalty, much as it had done with his subjects in Aragon. And as long as Philip II was alive, he kept his word and the Portuguese were content with Spanish rule. However, his successors had other plans. They appointed Castilians to the courts and royal offices and imposed heavy tax burdens on the Portuguese to finance Spanish military adventures on the continent and overseas. By 1640, the Portuguese had enough and launched a rebellion against the Spanish crown. The Portuguese nobles declared one from their own ranks as the new king. For the next twenty-eight years, the Spanish tried to regain control of Portugal, but to no avail. Portugal's traditional allies of England and France supplied the needed margin of military assistance to repel the occupying Spanish army.⁴⁴

Despite this turmoil on the Iberian Peninsula, an excitement was stirring in the rest of Europe regarding stories that had long circulated concerning the unprecedented wealth to be found on the distant shores of Spanish America. Naturally, this attracted the attention of the French. Even as early as the sixteenth century, French ships were covertly loading their wares onto Spanish caravels, freighted in Seville and bound for the Indies. By the seventeenth century, Robertson estimated that illicit French trade with the Spanish American colonies slightly

⁴³ Herr, *Modern Spain*, 43, 44.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

exceeded ten million francs annually.⁴⁵ In fact, a scribe of the French Crown stated in 1691 that at least one-quarter of all the commerce carried out through the port of Cadiz with the Indies was French.⁴⁶ And when hostilities broke out between France and Spain, those buccaneers who had swarmed the Antilles were encouraged by the French to carry out raids on Spanish American colonial settlements. In 1699, Governor du Casse of Saint-Domingue led an expedition of filibusters in the sacking of Cartagena. This expedition was augmented by a detachment of French soldiers under the command of Baron du Pointis, and both attacking parties ended up quarrelling over the division of the booty.⁴⁷

However, France was about to become more intimately tied to the fortunes of Spain, whose king, Philip IV, had only one surviving son, Charles II (1665-1700). This son was mentally handicapped and unable to assume the regal duties. In addition, he was not capable of begetting any children. This necessitated a change in the ruling dynasty. Therefore, upon his death Philip IV bequeathed his kingdom to the grandson of Louis XIV, the French king. The grandson of Louis XIV was the Duke of Anjou, and his claim to the Spanish throne was largely based upon the marriage of his grandfather to the daughter of Philip IV. This is important, because the Duke of Anjou ascended to the Spanish throne, assuming the title of Philip V, being the first Spanish king from the French line of the House of Bourbon that ruled in Spain until 1931.⁴⁸

The Hapsburgs of Austria claimed that the throne of Spain belonged to Archduke Charles, the grandson of Philip III. Great Britain and the Netherlands immediately recognized Archduke Charles as the rightful heir. They reasoned that a French and Spanish alliance,

⁴⁵ William Spence Robertson, *France and Latin-American Independence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1939), 3.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 3, 4.

⁴⁸ Herr, *Modern Spain*, 44.

brought on by the ascendancy of the Duke of Anjou, could either be broken in the royal courts or on the battlefield. But in either case, it had to be challenged as a French-Spanish alliance would surely create a near invincible maritime and colonial power. Because the Duke of Anjou (Philip V) would not abdicate his throne, the Spanish War of Succession ensued, becoming both a major European and colonial conflict that would not be settled until the signing of the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713. Basically, this treaty represented a compromise. It allowed Philip V to maintain the crowns of Castile and Aragon, as well as most of Spain's New World colonial empire, but ceded control of its Italian and Low Countries' possessions to Austria and the island fortress of Gibraltar to Great Britain. It also ceded certain monopoly trade privileges to the British for Spanish colonies in the New World. This caused some grief for Chourio and others associated with the French; and so it was that Chourio and others involved in the Trans-Atlantic trade would find themselves tossed to and fro by the conditions of economic and political instability that resulted from the issues of royal succession in Europe.

The heavy military losses suffered by Spain during the War of Succession, both at sea and on the continent, and especially the loss of Gibraltar, right at their own backdoor (Southern flank), only served to reinforce the idea that Great Britain was Spain's mortal enemy.⁴⁹ Therefore, the Spanish were now legally forced to do business with the British in the New World, rather than the French. This, however, did not mean that they liked it.

At the beginning of the War of Succession, moreover, not every party in Spain was on board with Philip V, and there would be repercussions for this. The nobles in Aragon, Catalonia and Valencia recognized Archduke Charles as their rightful king, having more confidence that a Hapsburg, rather than a Frenchman, would continue recognizing their privileges. But even with help from Great Britain and Austria, these rebel kingdoms proved no match for the might of

⁴⁹ Ibid., 44, 45.

Philip V's Castilian forces. As a measure of retaliation toward these rebelling kingdoms, Philip V revoked their privileges and abolished their autonomous courts. Henceforth, these kingdoms were required to send their representatives to the royal court in Castile to resolve any issues, even of a local nature. In addition, Philip V appointed Castilian military officers, called captains general, to replace the regional viceroys. These captains general were answerable only to Philip V. The king also sent *corregidores*, or royal managers, to run the cities in these rebellious areas, and additional taxes were also levied upon the population there. Only the provinces of the Basques and Navarre preserved their traditional *fueros*.⁵⁰ This is significant because Chourio, being of Basque and French descent, was allowed some commercial privileges not usually afforded to traders from other provinces.

The French

Almost immediately upon Philip V's ascension to the Spanish throne, he began to establish economic policies favorable to France. One result of this was that Jean de Chourio found his edge in the New World doing business with the French Royal Company of Guinea. It was one such business enterprise formed as a result of the rise of the house of Bourbon to the throne of Spain, by writ of 27 August 1701, for the introduction into Spanish America of 48,000 blacks from the French domains in Africa.

According to Robertson: "By a treaty between France and Spain in the autumn of 1701, the French Company of Guinea was authorized to carry on the slave trade with the Indies, to build ships in Spanish ports on the Pacific Ocean, and to dispose of the merchandise which it

⁵⁰ Ibid., 45.

received in return for Negro slaves. Under cover of this contract, an extensive illicit trade developed between French merchants and Spanish colonists.”⁵¹

Clearly, Philip V consciously acted to include France in the profitable emerging American markets. And according to Hussey, the War of Succession that followed the rise of Philip V was nothing more than a conflict for control of America’s riches; and France would win, for its efforts, a guaranteed monopoly over the African slave trade and a tacit license for the ongoing work of its slave traders.⁵² This did not come without conditions, however, for in Maracaibo, Santa Marta, Cumaná and Barlovento, the company could not sell the slaves for any more than 300 pesos each. This restriction was not limited to just the ports of the province of Venezuela. The company was committed to pay the Spanish Crown an advance of 264,000 pesos. It was then licensed to remove or introduce, free of any duties, food and supplies required for the maintenance of blacks during the sailing, or in the factories that the company established in the ports of the Indies.⁵³

These foods and supplies could not be traded on the open market, under the pretext of preventing the Guinea Company franchise from developing a clandestine commerce with the French. Therefore, a penalty of death was imposed on any Spanish subject buying French goods at a value of more than 100 pesos. Despite the penalty, this illegal trade actually flourished, and the French came to traffic freely everywhere, with the authorities unable to prevent it. In fact, sometimes the authorities just looked the other way, because during the long years of the War of Spanish Succession (1700-1713) some colonies, including Venezuela, were exposed to great

⁵¹ Robertson, *France and Latin-American Independence*, 4.

⁵² Roland Dennis Hussey, *Caracas Company, 1728-1784* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1934), 38-40.

⁵³ Arcila Farías, *Reformas económicas del siglo XVIII*, 2: 52, 53.

hardships, and the supply of essentials was one of the biggest problems they had to overcome if their settlements were even to survive, let alone prosper.⁵⁴

On more than one occasion French ships helped alleviate acute food shortages suffered by Spanish American colonies with meager resources. In reality, throughout the entire period of conflict in which Spain and France participated as allies against England, the Guinea Company enjoyed a prosperous trading contract in Spanish America, but within the narrow limits imposed by the ongoing armed struggle. The Guinea Company also encountered tenacious opposition from the merchants of Cadiz and Seville, who were not hiding their fears of the risks of competition in the American markets posed by the activity of the French enterprise.⁵⁵

Caracas merchants were also affected in their reciprocal trade with both Spain and New Spain (now Mexico). Many of the Spanish officials in the ports of the Indies were in opposition to the Guinea Company, at times being overzealous in trying to prevent trade beyond the terms of the contract, even when the inhabitants of their territories wanted or needed such trade. On other occasions, the Spanish officials in American ports cited some of the same political reasons that agitated their passions against France when they were back in Spain. Given this hostile attitude towards the French and the Guinea Company assumed by some of the Spanish officials and the regional governors, especially in Cartagena of the Indies, the company filed a petition to the king of Spain for redress. Then, in a royal decree of 23 December 1704, Philip V ordered the proper treatment of the French and the faithful fulfillment of the contract.⁵⁶

The Crown attempted several times to reduce the company's business to the terms agreed upon, and gave orders not to handle the sale of food and supplies that were introduced under the pretext of being for consumption by blacks. But nothing could stop the French in their trade.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 53.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 54.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Sometimes it was tolerated by the authorities because they felt as if they were forced by the scarcity imposed by the war to allow the colonists access, at least on a temporary basis, to French goods. And often the trade just went on in open violation of the contract and the strict provisions of the Spanish monarch. In any case, the French continued to supply the American markets through the auspices of the Royal Company of Guinea; and in its first year, 1701, the company introduced to Venezuela the largest number of blacks so far in a single operation. This endeavor comprised the landing of a fleet of eight ships transporting a total of 778 slaves, of whom 18 died from various illnesses acquired during the 30 days that the boats remained in the port of La Guaira. According to Arcila Fariás, this death rate was then considered rather low. Arcila Fariás considers it remarkable that the entire complement of blacks had arrived in La Guaira intact, despite a very long sailing across the Atlantic with the slaves crammed into the narrow compartments.⁵⁷

However, in the years following, this flow of African slaves came to a complete standstill, a consequence of the ongoing war that extended to the Caribbean and circum-Caribbean regions. The English, buoyed by their allies, affirmed their dominance of the sea in the Caribbean and waters off the African coast. Thus, the increased pressure on French shipping forced the Guinea Company to use Portugal's maritime resources for the extraction of black slaves from Portuguese areas of influence in Africa. The trading companies wanted an exemption from import and export taxes in the American colonies, especially the lucrative export of cacao from Caracas to ports in Spain and America, alleging that this was so authorized by the contract

⁵⁷ Eduardo Arcila Fariás, *Economía colonial de Venezuela* (México, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1946), 162, 163.

of 1701. Nevertheless, Philip V ordered that taxes and fees needed to be collected on any company transactions carried out in Spanish domains.⁵⁸

After a few years, however, it appears as though the authorities in La Guaira wanted to avoid potential trouble with the Crown. Therefore, these authorities limited the duration that French boats could remain docked at their port. Because La Guaira served as the main terminus for the import of African slaves into Venezuela and the principal port for the export of the profitable Caracas cacao, it was imperative for the French to seek another port offering a friendlier business environment, or at least a port offering a similar contract to the one they enjoyed at La Guaira. Hence, we note a gradual shifting of the Guinea Company's business to a base of operations at Willemstad on the island of Curaçao. By 1708 even Chourio completed the move of his office and operations from La Guaira to Willemstad.⁵⁹ The Guinea Company ceased operations as a corporate entity in 1713, when the Royal British South Seas Company was granted a monopoly over the trade of African slaves in Spanish America in accordance with the provisions of the Treaty of Utrecht.⁶⁰

The Treaty of Utrecht stipulated that ports in the Spanish colonies would henceforth be closed to all foreign merchants and transferred to the British the lucrative contract to engage in slave traffic that had previously been enjoyed by the French.

The Tory ministers of Queen Anne, who up until the negotiations began at Utrecht were the principal spokesmen in the anti-French alliance, pressed for a British "blue water" policy, i.e. they were seeking victories and spoils overseas. And during the finalizations at Utrecht, this same group pushed aside their former Dutch allies for the purpose of making themselves, and

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Rupert, online resource, *Roots of Our Future*.

⁶⁰ Arcila Farías, *Reformas*, 54-55.

hence the British, the sole “brokers and chief beneficiaries of the peace.”⁶¹ They would hence be willing to allow Philip of Anjou to keep his Spanish crown, but pressed the French with audacious commercial and colonial claims.⁶² King Louis XIV of France felt that he could be generous at making concessions in the Spanish Empire, and instructed his chief trade negotiator, Nicolas Ménager, to go to London and do just that. Thus it was that the French allowed their exclusive trading contract in Spanish colonial America (*asiento*) to pass into British hands.⁶³ From this point we see Chourio and other French traders cut off from any direct support from the Spanish Crown. They would have to find their own way, or at least an excuse to get their proverbial “foot back in the door,” so to speak.

In Cadiz, however, it should be noted that there were established French mercantile houses through which illicit traffic with the Spanish American colonies continued to take place.⁶⁴ French government documents from this time indicate that French commerce “took the route by way of Cadiz for the disposal of such of her agricultural and manufacturing products as found markets in Spanish America.”⁶⁵ This illegal trade would not last long, nor be sufficient for Chourio to regain the good graces of the king. He would have to find a new angle.

The British took control of the slave trade following the Treaty of Utrecht; and moreover, the French Guinea Company was disbanded and most of these Basque and other non-English traders reverted to either importing African slaves illegally or bringing them into Venezuela on “special orders” from King Philip V. Until the Guipuzcoana Company was established, all of

⁶¹ Daniel A. Baugh, “Great Britain’s ‘Blue Water’ Policy, 1689-1815,” *International History Review* 10 (1988), 35-58.

⁶² Miquelon, “Envisioning the French Empire,” 653, 654.

⁶³ Ibid., 655, 656.

⁶⁴ Robertson, *France and Latin-American Independence*, 5.

⁶⁵ This was Robertson’s paraphrase of the gist of this document: “*Rapport su la législation politique que régit le Commerce de la France, a l’égard le l’Amérique Espagnole et de Colonies Étrangères en général*,” 2 February 1716, Archives du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Mémoires et Documents, Amérique, Paris, 31.

these non-English traders had to go back to the pre-*asiento* system of obtaining individual royal licenses if they wanted to be part of the lucrative slave trade.

Consider the following data:

Table 2.1: Legal Importation of African Slaves in the Spanish American Colonies⁶⁶

<i>Years</i>	<i>Slaves Imported</i>	<i>References, Observations</i>
1700	10,000	Pending <i>Asiento</i> : Royal Guinea Company
1701-1711	48,000	<i>Asiento</i> : Royal Guinea Company
1712-1713	12,000	Individual Licenses
1713-1743	144,000	<i>Asiento</i> : Royal South Seas British Company
1728-1778	20,000	Guipuzcoana Company and Individual Licenses

Note: Illegal importation of slaves in eighteenth century: 390,000 (approximately).

To help understand this, African slaves could legally be brought into Venezuela under three distinct systems: First there was a system of individual licenses for general or special concessions to be carried out in a stipulated period of time. Second, there was a system of *asientos* (royal charters) and companies. Third and last, there were royal monopolies granted over all general trafficking.⁶⁷ The first category was sometimes applied to the introduction of black soldiers into the country for the purpose of subduing indigenous peoples in varied states of non-compliance or outright rebellion to Spanish authority. Hence it would conform nicely to the case of Juan de Chourio.

The British

The British assumption of those slave trading privileges previously held by the French forever altered the balance of economic power in Europe, and hence the world. The profits

⁶⁶ Brito Figueroa, *Estructura Económica*, 110.

⁶⁷ Miguel A costa Saignes, *Vida de los esclavos negros en Venezuela* (Valencia, Venezuela: Vadell Hermanos Editores, 1984), 25.

garnered by Great Britain from slave trafficking would fuel its economic and military expansion, propelling it forward to become the first global imperialist power. The slave trade, legal or illegal, and carried out under the flags of sundry European powers, or at least on their behalf, increased the mass of accumulated capital to be invested by the bourgeoisie to augment economic development in their respective nations. The Royal South Seas British Company, that replaced both the Portuguese and French monopolies of the slave trade, was organized as a powerful joint stock company. Being integrated with the capital provided by the British aristocracy, the bourgeoisie and the commercial lenders of the most important cities of Europe, the company spilled over national boundaries. It brought seemingly divergent elements together for the purpose of exploiting one of the most economically productive capitalist ventures of all time, the traffic in African slaves. Queen Anne of England, Philip V of Spain and the Duke of York, who served as Chairman, numbered among the most powerful on the board of the Royal South Seas Company. The old rivalries were set aside in the name of profit. With increased investment of the capital generated through slave trafficking came increased manufactures, the wider availability of goods and services in England and to a lesser extent, the other countries of Europe.⁶⁸ And along with the seeming delight of the European masses with this new wealth, also came a loss of their last vestiges of decency and conscience. Whom mourned for the Africans, whose blood mixed with the mortar of the new manufacturing industries?

Not without reason Karl Marx penned the following concerning this tumultuous time in England:

Various countries cynically boasted of all the outrages that could serve as a means of capital accumulation. Just read, for example, the naive and unblemished *Annals of Commerce*, compiled by A. Anderson. They proclaimed to the four winds the triumph of the political wisdom of England, which, in the Peace of Utrecht, this country garnered from the Spanish, by the treaty provisions, the privilege of

⁶⁸ Brito Figueroa, *La Estructura Económica*, 111-112.

operating between Africa and the West Indies. England won the privilege of being the sole supplier of slaves to Spanish America until 1743, with four thousand eight hundred blacks to be imported there each year. This trade was carried out while under an official flag to also cover for the British smuggling of other goods. Liverpool is so great thanks to the trade in blacks. This trade was their method of accumulation. And it still is to day, so much so that distinguished Liverpool residents sing their praise of the slave trade, being literally carried away in their passion that celebrates the spirit of commercial enterprise, which produces famous navigators and throws huge profits continually in their direction. In 1730, Liverpool was found with 15 ships engaged in the slave trade; in 1753 there were 53; in 1760, 74; in 1770, 90; and in 1792, 132.⁶⁹

Profit was the motivating force behind British overseas expansion; and labor, whether obtained from free subjects of the monarch or enslaved Africans, was just another commodity to be bought and sold. The *asiento* granted to the British Company on 26 March 1713, in accordance with the Treaty of Utrecht, was an outright monopoly of all general slave traffic. It specifically allowed for the British to exercise a monopoly over the trade for thirty years, starting on 11 May of that year and lasted until 11 May 1743. The company promised to import 144,000 African slaves into Venezuela during this period at a rate of 4,800 per year. Of the 4,800 brought in annually, an import tax was paid of 33 pesos and eight escudos only on the head of each of the first 800. The company anticipated a near profit of 200,000 pesos, with 100,000 to be received within the first two months of the contract and the remaining 100,000 to be received within the following two month period. The provisions of the charter called for the Africans imported to Barlovento, Cumaná and Maracaibo to be sold between 150 and 300 pesos each, and the company was also to be afforded special privileges to import diverse merchandise.⁷⁰

Clearly, Chourio and other freelancers were going to be squeezed; but since cacao was the most profitable Venezuelan export, it was necessary for the Crown to protect the cacao plantations in the lands surrounding Lake Maracaibo. For this purpose Chourio was permitted to

⁶⁹ Karl Marx, *El Capital*, T. 1, 2 vols.. (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1946) 2:849-850. Original published in German as *Das Kapital* in 1867.

⁷⁰ Brito Figueroa, *La Estructura Económica*, 108.

bring in 600 Africans in 1722, warriors and their families from the Imbangala of Angola,⁷¹ who shared a long history of working as mercenaries for the Portuguese and other Europeans. And this despite the exclusive contract that the Royal South Seas British Company had with the Spanish Crown, because Chourio's blacks were not common laborers for the mines or plantations, but highly trained soldiers and their dependents who would carry out the specialized task of pacifying a rebellious indigenous tribe in the regions around Lake Maracaibo.

The British acted in 1722, however, when *factores* [agents] of their Royal South Seas Company presented claims against the license granted to Juan de Chourio on 9 May of that same year by King Philip V. The purpose of Chourio's license was to import blacks and others in order to establish a village at Perijá and subdue a rebellious indigenous population in the name of the Spanish Crown. The British agents asserted that despite the supposed uniqueness of Chourio's mission in the regions round about Lake Maracaibo, he should not have exercised any option to introduce Africans into that situation outside the preview of their company. Therefore, on 21 July 1722,⁷² another royal decree was issued stipulating that Chourio subject himself to the agents of the British Company to obtain any Africans he might require, and that he should, under no conditions, sell any of these at any price over 300 pe sos.⁷³ The *Real Cédula* [Royal Order] issued to Don Juan Chourio on repeal of permission to introduce 600 slaves to Maracaibo, 31 July 1722 is given in full below.⁷⁴

As per the order of 9 May of this year, I have licensed Don Juan Chourio, a resident of the city of Maracaibo, in that province, to establish a town and populate it and surrounding lands, and to pacify some of those jurisdictions, under different conditions, one of them being the granting of permission to introduce

⁷¹ These and other Angolan connections will be explored more fully in the following chapter.

⁷² Acosta Saignes' date of 21 July 1722 conflicts with the date appearing on the document in the archives, given as 31 July 1722.

⁷³ Acosta Saignes, *Vida de los esclavos*, 54.

⁷⁴ In contrast to other documents pertaining to Chourio, this document spells his name with a double *r*. Philip V to Juan de Chourio, 31 July 1722, *Documentos del Archivo Histórico Nacional de Bogotá, Salón de la Colonia, Reales Cédulas*, Tomo VII, fols. 739 r. – 740 r.

into these areas, for their own enhancement as well as for the sake of the mission, 600 black and physically fit slaves, and that this importation be free of some duties and taxes in accordance with the provisions of Law 7, Title 3 of Book 4. However, it was brought to my attention by the *Asiento* (chartered contractor for the importation of blacks), in consultation on 15 June, that this importation is contrary and opposed to chapters 18 and 19 with the adjusted provisions for the Royal Company of England and their exclusive rights to the introduction of black slaves in the Indies. Therefore, I resolved to conform precisely to those chapters of the company's accords, and have adjusted the Crown policy to rescind the condition of Don Juan Chourrio.

Therefore, I hereby repeal and cancel the permit issued on condition to the referred Don Juan Chourrio, with the expressed 600 black slaves to be introduced, as the British Company has the sole authority to bring blacks to Barlovento, Santa Marta, Cumaná and Maracaibo; and basing this on Chapter 8 of the chartered agreement, no one can sell in these ports any slave at a price exceeding 300 pesos. Thus, may the blacks of Don Juan Chourrio be subject to the Company of England according to the provisions of the law as set by the Viceroy, President and *Oidores* (Judges) of the Royal *Audencia* (Court) of the New Kingdom of Granada, governor and royal officials of Maracaibo and other judges and ministers who, in part or in full compliance touching on this, my resolution, do keep, satisfy and perform accurately and timely all that I have ordered. As to the next question, however, concerning the royal order of the aforementioned 9 May of this year, I void it and make it of no value or effect, and that is my will.

De Balsaín, the 31st day of July, 1722. I, the King, by order of Our King the LORD. Don Francisco de Arana (there are three seals). I annul the permission granted to Don Juan Chourrio for the introduction of 600 black slaves in the Province of Maracaibo.

In this matter, however, the colonists were behind Chourio, and in the next chapter the events that transpired in Perija will be more fully developed. So despite the limitations imposed on Chourio to sell any slaves at no more than 300 pesos each, this venture meant much more than just another commercial transaction, and he was committed to fulfilling the dual mission of pacifying the rebelling indigenous population and establishing a town to the glory of God and his Catholic Spanish king.

French Attitudes toward Africans Impact Chourio

Before proceeding further into the settlement of Perijá and its surrounding area and the controversy surrounding the British claims against Chourio, it would be good to examine some of the possible motivations behind Chourio's engagement with African peoples. One cannot divorce Chourio from his French connections. While there are seven Basque Provinces situated in the western extension of the Pyrenees, it should be noted that three of them are on the French side of the mountainous chain. The three French Basque provinces are Nafarroa Beherea, Lapurdi and Zuberoa. The four Spanish Basque provinces are Araba, Biskaia, Gipuzkoa and Naffarroa. Although Basque territory has long been divided between the two nations of France and Spain, the Basques consider themselves to be one people. The Basque coat of arms, for example, is emblazoned the words, "Zazpiak Bat," which means that the "Seven are One," thus emphasizing their sense of unity.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, throughout the seventeenth century, both France and Spain were consolidating into strong nation states under absolutist monarchs. Thus, the Basque people continued to suffer further integration into either France or Spain, depending on which side of the Pyrenees they found themselves. With the signing of a treaty that fixed the border between France and Spain in 1659, the process of Basque integration into the cultural and political orbits of either of these two countries only accelerated. Since the creation of the French and Spanish frontier, it has therefore been increasingly necessary in many spheres to think in

⁷⁵ *Symbols of Basque Unity* (fact sheet), undated, Basque Museum and Cultural Center, 611 Grove Street, Boise, ID 83702, received on 13 July 2009. This pamphlet also explains the origin of the coat of arms for each of the Basque provinces. Interestingly, Nafarroa in Spain and Nafarroa Beherea in France share the same coat of arms. The gold chains on a field of red represent those that surrounded the tent of the Moorish Caliph when his forces were captured in 1212 by Sancho the Strong, King of Nafarroa, at the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa. Other symbols represent confiscated Moorish riches distributed to Christian churches throughout the Kingdom of Nafarroa. Nafarroa Beherea was the northernmost portion of the ancient kingdom, and when the French and Spanish concluded the Treaty of the Pyrenees in 1659, without first consulting the Basque people, this northernmost portion was ceded to France. Because Nafarroa Beherea was subsumed by the French into their pre-existing kingdom, the Basque leadership there did not deem it necessary for the new province to adopt an emblem apart from the original coat of arms of Nafarroa on the Spanish side of the frontier.

terms of a distinction between French Basques and Spanish Basques.⁷⁶ Juan de Chourio was of the first generation born under uncontested French rule. He was schooled in French and loyal to the French Crown.

With respect to Africans, however, France had a troubled past, especially when it came to the sad history of racism and slavery. France was a major player, like the British, Dutch, Portuguese and Spanish, in the establishment of slave societies. For the French in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, this was particular to both the Greater and Lesser Antilles; hence the stage was already set for Chourio to move in and take advantage of it.

Certainly, the dynamics of racism varied in accordance with cultural contexts throughout the French empire. There was a variation of black-white dynamics within France, Africa, and the New World that impacted all of Chourio's decisions with respect to the imported Africans. France was decidedly a major player in European overseas expansion, so the experiences with and conceptions of black people by individuals like Chourio helped to form images of Africans in Western culture. While many of the French experiences were similar to those of other expanding European powers that clashed with foreign peoples during the course of enslavement and empire building, it should be noted that Frenchmen have long asserted that their countrymen, unlike their European neighbors and their white colonists in the New World, have generally upheld the principles of racial equality both on the home front and overseas. Henri Blet, in his three volume treatise on the history of France, published in 1950, stated emphatically that,

⁷⁶ William A. Douglass and Joseba Zuliaga, *Basque Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (Reno: Center for Basque Studies, University of Nevada, 2007), 104. The French and Spanish frontier was not officially demarcated with border stones until 1868. It has remained one of the oldest and stable border regions in Europe. Some Basque people on both sides of the border, however, have been struggling for more political autonomy.

“Frenchmen have never adopted the racial doctrine affirming the superiority of whites over men of color.”⁷⁷

However, despite the assertions of Blet, the initial French reactions to blacks, which began in the 1530s, were similar to those of the English, Portuguese and Spanish. France, like England, Portugal and Spain, thrived in the context of a Christian population within the borders of a centralized political state. The material cultures that flourished throughout Western Europe during this time were similar as well. Thus, when contrasted with the traditions of peoples in the non-European world, such as blacks or Native Americans, it should come as no surprise that Europeans would consider them “particularly unusual,” at best.⁷⁸

Frenchmen had traveled to various parts of Africa, but it was mostly West Africa that helped to shape the French reaction toward African peoples overall and to fix ideas about the African continent in the French imagination. This was also the area where the French enjoyed their longest and most important relations with African peoples. This encompassed a relationship that would span the centuries, until decolonization in Francophone Africa beginning in the late 1950s and early 1960s.⁷⁹

By the middle of the sixteenth century, moreover, French traders plied the coast of West Africa seeking to extend commerce in gold, gum, and ivory. This was also the start of the slave trade for France, but it didn’t really take off for another one hundred years. Nevertheless, the groundwork was being laid for an extensive French presence on the African continent. By the 1630s, a group of Rouen merchants had actually established a fort at the mouth of the Senegal River, near to the site where the town of Saint-Louis would later be constructed. This fort would

⁷⁷ Henri Blet, *France d’outre mer: L’oeuvre coloniale de la troisième république*, 3 Vols. (Paris : B. Arthaud, 1950), 3 :284.

⁷⁸ William B. Cohen, *French Encounter with Africans: White Response to Blacks, 1530-1880* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), xv, xvi.

⁷⁹ Ibid., xvii.

serve as the base for a more active French involvement throughout West Africa, whence French traders and administrators would go on to establish a commercial and political network both inland, as well as up and down the coast.⁸⁰

The French presence in the Caribbean, however, began in 1625 when the buccaneer Pierre Belain, *sieur d'Esnamouc* [Lord of Esnamouc], captured the small island of Saint-Christophe (now Saint Kitts). Upon his return to France, Pierre Belain convinced the Crown that the French government needed to establish further control in the Caribbean, and to this end the buccaneer returned to Saint-Christophe, whence he led expeditions to the neighboring islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique, which led to them being officially annexed as French territories in 1635. Also, on the Greater Antilles island of Saint-Domingue, French adventurers, buccaneers, and pirates began to settle to breed cattle and grow tobacco, and later, the much more profitable sugar. Before official French government control was exerted over Saint-Domingue in 1655, however, these independent colonists began to import black slaves from Africa. The labor intensive nature of sugar production required continued importation of ever increasing numbers of African workers into Saint-Domingue and other French Caribbean possessions.⁸¹

By the eighteenth century and the time of Juan de Chourio, the European French response to Africans on the European mainland was beginning to change from one of benign neglect to concern. The *philosophes* were outraged by some of the abuses perpetuated by fellow Frenchmen upon African slaves in the Caribbean. The *philosophes* believed in the inherent equality of all men, and proclaimed this to the world. Thus the *philosophes*, through a campaign of public awareness, began the first abolitionist crusade. Nevertheless, it should be noted that in the initial phase of the movement, the *philosophes* did not advocate for the immediate

⁸⁰ Ibid., xxi.

⁸¹ Ibid., xxii.

emancipation of black Caribbean slaves, but rather a transitional emancipation based on the economic and political needs of the emerging French colonial state.⁸²

Moreover, there was also a sharp contrast between how the French treated blacks in Africa and those in the Caribbean. In Africa, Frenchmen were more likely to treat the blacks, or at least their leaders, with deference.⁸³ The Africans were already used to trading with the Portuguese. For over one hundred years before the French arrived in West Africa, Africans knew how to evaluate potential European clients and were both clever and intuitive in striking bargains. William B. Cohen said that the French merchants, “accustomed to cheating both their masters at home and the Africans with whom they traded, were surprised to meet their match in Africa.”⁸⁴ These French traders quickly realized that commercial, military, political and even religious missionary inroads could more likely be achieved by treating the black leadership as equals. Therefore, in Africa the European area of control was limited to coastal regions and dependent upon the good will and collaboration of African leaders. This forced the European to tread lightly. However, in the more rigid plantation societies of the Caribbean or the Indian Ocean, there were sufficient controls in place to subdue or at least contain any rebellions, with the European in total control of a small and unarmed island population.

While the general public in seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe could rarely see beyond the blackness of an African’s skin, her or his lack of Christian faith and strange social customs, it is not surprising that the typical uneducated European would develop single and stereotypical concepts applicable to all black people. However, it does seem that a more

⁸² Ibid., 69. While some of the *philosophes* at times depicted the blacks as “noble,” at other times they would portrayed them as “savage,” and therefore in need of guidance and redemption. This placed an aura of beneficence around the institution of slavery that it certainly did not merit. Cohen implies the origins of European positivism and racism rested in these musings of the *philosophes*, and that this, in turn, delayed the total declaration of emancipation throughout the French colonial world.

⁸³ Ibid., xxiii.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 21.

pragmatic, but human, view of the African continent and its people was beginning to emerge among the elites, and even to trickle down to some with an even limited education.⁸⁵ Mark Kurlansky, an authority on Basque culture and history, stated that as far back as the sixteenth century, when most Europeans were focused on their particular region, country and crown, the successful Basque was a “man of the world.”⁸⁶ Kurlansky adds that the Basque man “was interested in Africa and Asia, and especially passionate about the lands Basques called Amerika.”⁸⁷ Chourio, growing up in the *Pays Basque* of France, was certainly such a man of the world, in the truest sense of the word.

Chourio’s attitudes toward Africans may also have been shaped by his personal observations on the treatment of blacks in France itself. The blacks that he saw in France were mostly from coastal West Africa. Despite the fragmentary nature of these observations, he may have met both Moslems and animists, and people hailing from large, extensive city-states, small city states and even stateless (acephalous) societies.⁸⁸ The more he observed various Africans in Europe, the more difficult it became to affix stereotypes about black people. Desiring a life dedicated to maritime commerce, the young Chourio probably read various accounts of European explorers in distant parts of the world, including Africa. The French royal cartographer penned these comments about the African continent in 1666, an account that Chourio may have read in his youth: “Every day reveals to us what the ancients did not know; it shows us that the greatest heat of Africa is also accompanied by some cool weather... that the animals are not so dangerous that the men cannot defend themselves, that the men are not so

⁸⁵ Ibid., 27.

⁸⁶ Mark Kurlansky, *The Basque History of the World* (New York: Walker Books, 1999), 103.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Cohen, *French Encounter*, 26.

faithless that there is no trade or human relations between them and foreigners; that the dragons, their serpents, their griffins, etc., are mostly imaginary ones.”⁸⁹

Chourio also had to contend with the fact that slavery had long since been abolished in France proper, and was considered illegal. In 1571, when a slave ship owner placed some captured Africans on the auction block in Bordeaux (French Basque territory), the *Parlement* ordered that they all be immediately released, as slavery did not exist as an institution within the French realm; and 120 years later, another slave ship captain was required to free all of his vessel’s human cargo when it docked in a French port.⁹⁰ Therefore, when a French planter from the Antilles would arrive in France with a black domestic, he or she had to be set free. Cohen speculates that the French legal apparatus failed to face the contradiction of freedom for blacks in France, but permitting their enslavement beyond the metropole, by rationalizing that slavery was considered only a “temporary aberration,” and not an enduring institution.⁹¹

For its part, the French government only tolerated the slave trade, insofar as it picked up the slack caused by the lack of white settlement in the Caribbean. The French Crown wanted to secure some portions of the Caribbean and circum-Caribbean as a base to launch forays against the bastions of other European powers in the area. As late as 1699, the governor of Saint-Domingue, Du Casse, had declared that it was not the revenue gained for the crown from the export of staple items from the island that made it so valuable, but rather its militarily strategic location, whence it could be utilized as a springboard for uniting the French monarchy with Mexico, Peru and the Kingdom of Santa Fé (present day Colombia).⁹² The French Crown authorities would have preferred to carry out Caribbean colonization efforts with the importation

⁸⁹ Nicholas Sanson, *L’Afrique et plusieurs cartes nouvelles et exactes et en divers traités de géographie et d’histoire* (Paris, 1666), n.p.

⁹⁰ Shelby T. McCloy, *The Negro in France* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1961), 12.

⁹¹ Cohen, *French Encounter*, 46.

⁹² Quoted in Pierre de Vaissière, *Saint-Domingue: La Société, 1629-1789* (Paris, 1909), 16.

of more white indentured servants (*engagés*). The king had even issued a decree in 1686 stating that the black slave population could not exceed the total number of white indentured servants on the island of Saint-Domingue, but it proved unenforceable.⁹³ For even though the law prescribed the equal treatment of indentured servants and slaves, the planters could only count on the services of the indentured servants for a limited duration, while the imported Africans were required to remain in their charge for the totality of their lives. Also, the planters tended to mistreat the indentured servants more than the slaves, since an African slave was much more expensive to purchase than the limited service of an *engagé*.⁹⁴ As word of the mistreatment of white men in the Caribbean reached French shores, and as the continued deportation of white workers from French soil was also causing labor shortages on the home front, a political cry went up throughout France for an end to the *engagé* system.⁹⁵ So despite some French differentiation as to the legal status of slaves in society, the crown was able to justify the continuation of slaves beyond the metropole based on the economic gains accrued to France itself.

Chourio and Slavery

Whether Chourio was able to see beyond the inherent contradictions of the French Crown slave policy is still a matter of conjecture, but there are various indications that he subscribed to some of the racial views held by French colonists in the Caribbean that blacks from some areas of Africa were more suitable for certain kinds of work than others. Many of the supposed differences between black groups in the Caribbean were based on a mythology created by the planter class. Nevertheless, these differentiations reveal a willingness among some Frenchmen to look at Africans in a context beyond that of being the mere constituents of a homogenous

⁹³ Cohen, *French Encounter*, 47.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

category from whence sundry and purely negative generalizations could be made. Among the planters, it was believed that the Bambaras were best suited for labor, while the cleanest were the cattle-herding peoples of the Senegambia region, esteemed fitter for positions as household slaves or craftsmen. Many of the assumptions made by French colonial planters were based on at least a sparse knowledge of these ethnicities in Africa. The planters knew, for example, that the Aradas were born into a slave class in Africa, and hence they would probably encounter little resistance from them once transported to the Caribbean. Additionally, they were aware that the Mine people, back in Africa, were nomadic and could probably not be counted on to be good tillers of the soil.⁹⁶

Chourio, being a “man of the world” and seeking a life in trans-Atlantic commerce, most likely made it a point to find out as much as possible about various African groups, at least insofar as their pros and cons for accomplishing sundry tasks of colonization in the New World. Chourio realized that many Europeans also feared Africans, and he used this fact to his advantage. According to some European medieval traditions, Satan was a black man. He was sometimes referred to as the “black horseman” or the “Great Negro,” leading his dark minions in nefarious activities.⁹⁷ Seeing that Chourio’s father circulated in diplomatic cliques, there is one particular case that the young Chourio was probably aware of wherein this fear of blacks was strategically employed to gain a political edge. In 1644, the French ambassador went to Munster in order to conduct peace negotiations with a Spanish delegation. In this so-called “protocol war” with the Spanish, the French won the day, for upon seeing the French ambassador

⁹⁶ Jean-Baptiste Labat, *Nouvelle relation de l’Afrique occidentale*, T. 4 (Paris, 1728), 87. The Aradas and Mine were some of the African ethnic groups ascribed certain characteristics as workers by Labat.

⁹⁷ Ignacy Sachs, « *L’Image du noir dans l’art européen*, » *Annales, économies, civilisations, sociétés* 4 (May-June 1969) : 886.

accompanied by a contingent of 140 black troops, the Spanish became “horrificed,” immediately capitulated and scurried out of town.⁹⁸

Chourio was also keenly aware of the reputation for military prowess gained by certain African groups both in Europe and the New World. While his primary financial interest was the exportation of cacao from Venezuela to Europe, two factors were throwing up obstacles in the accomplishment of this objective: the stronger British presence and Native American uprisings. The importation of a black fighting force into the emerging cacao production areas in the region of Perijá was going to solve both of these problems.

Chourio, by purchasing the abandoned plantations and placing them in his own name and that of his son-in-law, Manuel García Peña, and by keeping the 600 Africans for himself in order to work on as well as defend the recently bought plantations, assured a technical compliance, at least, with the provisions of the Treaty of Utrecht, and avoided potential troubles later on with Philip V and the Spanish royal court. The Spanish King had no difficulties with Chourio regarding his intended goals of conquering the rebelling Native American factions and implanting a Capuchin mission in Perijá. He was concerned that Chourio’s activities with Africans and the slave trade might put him in some hot water with Queen Anne, hence the repeal of permission order issued by him to Chourio on 31 July 1722.⁹⁹

Unsatisfied that his colonial authorities had acted sufficiently in carrying out his order of 31 July 1722, the King issued another royal order on 11 April 1729 in which he decreed the seizure of all of Chourio’s property, for the fraud that Chourio had allegedly committed in his transactions in illicit trade.¹⁰⁰ In addition, the King stated that he would initiate an investigation

⁹⁸ Cohen, *French Encounter*, 15.

⁹⁹ See footnote 72.

¹⁰⁰ *Diccionario de la Historia Venezuela*, 2nd ed., Marianela Ponce, s.v. “Chourio, Juan de Iturbide,” ed. Manuel Rodríguez Campos (Caracas: Fundación Polar, 1997), I:804.

against Chourio based on allegations that the captain was not a Spanish subject by birth and that his commercial activities in the Spanish colonies were only serving the interests of the French nation.

After some exhaustive investigations by royal officials from Santo Domingo, Cartagena and Maracaibo, however, the King later promulgated a new order in which Chourio was rehabilitated in the eyes of the Spanish court. On June 27, 1732, Chourio was authorized to take a ship to transport his cocoa harvest, and his license was extended for six more years to complete the pacification of the Motilones. He was also granted a company of 100 soldiers to carry out the task, but he died without completing it. By that time, however, he had pacified four villages of the Maco tribe. The King granted another extension for three more years to his heirs, so that the mission could be satisfactorily concluded, along with the promise of cancelling the costs of military escorts and other debts previously incurred by Chourio. Then, in 1735, a newer order also expressed the King's satisfaction with the services provided by Chourio, referring to him in the context of a loyal vassal and providing no reference to him as a Frenchman or a foreigner. The Royal Order to Don Juan Chourio, issued at San Lorenzo, Spain, on 27 October 1735, follows.¹⁰¹

The King to Don Juan Chourio, the principal individual responsible for the pacification and population of the valleys and lands of Perijá, in the province of Maracaibo y la Grita:

It has come to my attention the hardships that have befallen your endeavors because of the rebellious Indians (Native Americans) in the province, and the reasonable methods you have taken to accomplish your assigned mission. Finding yourself confronted with an armed people, you took the proportionate methods to discourage them. At a difficult time, Don Juan de Valderrama, governor of this province, went out with an armed contingent to confront the Motilones, a tribe causing many problems in the area. Along with this contingent

¹⁰¹ Miguel de Villanueva, Secretary to the Spanish King, to Captain Juan de Chourio, 27 October 1735, *Archivo Histórico Nacional de Colombia (Ciudades de Venezuela)*, Catálogo R-3:185-186, R-6:66-84, Public Library, Mérida, Venezuela.

came a group of previously pacified natives. You have taken these actions to preserve all that we have built up so far, in compliance with the contract that I previously granted you for said pacification and population of these valleys wherein the natives are found, that said natives should develop a bond of friendship with the Spanish settlers. Overall, I am very satisfied, principally viewing your determined efforts, undertaken with great Christian zeal. You diligently strove to obtain a satisfactory conclusion, i.e. containing threats and pacifying the native population. Under the light yoke of our Holy Catholic Faith, hoping to endure to the end of this mission, it is my sincerest desire to see all united under Our Mother the Church. Through your ongoing efforts, it will be revealed, without a doubt, that we could not have come this far without you. I appreciate your honest endeavors on my behalf and how well you have performed this task. Be assured that your work was as much in God's service as it was in mine. I hope to soon see the materialization of many good things from this, as you have given me good reason to believe. At this time I express my gratitude to you for your zealous efforts in my royal service.

Given at San Lorenzo this 27th of October 1735, I, the King, by the grace of God.

-Don Miguel de Villanueva
Secretary to the Consejo de Indias (Council of the Americas)

Conclusions

What makes Chourio an impressive figure for his time was the intricate labyrinth of Trans-Atlantic connections. His birth in a Basque country without self government, divided in loyalties between Spain and France; his operations of both legal and illegal trading in the Caribbean and Circum-Caribbean regions of the Dutch, French, and Spanish colonies; and his conflicts with the British following the Treaty of Utrecht, all these placing him as a man of contradictions standing at the epicenter of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century Trans-Atlantic world. Chourio also had to reconcile an emerging consciousness about the value of Africans as both workers and human beings, with a prevailing Eurocentric notion that ascribed them an inferior status. It is clear that the French and Dutch, and to a lesser extent, the Portuguese, had more enlightened views and policies toward Africans and that Chourio looked upon Africans as more than a slave class.

Chourio lived in a n a ge w hen me rcantilism w as d ying o ut. M ilitary t actics a nd engagements on the high seas were giving way to the development and quest for new economic advantages. P owerful f orces o f co mmercial ca pitalism w ere t ransforming t he T rans-Atlantic world, and Chourio was poised to benefit handsomely from this process. His chief obstacle to increased pr ofits a nd t he a ccumulation of wealth, how ever, w ere t he meddling British. Like African slaves, indentured servants and indigenous peoples connected with Britain's acquisition of new commodity markets and commercial expansion, the merchants outside the British sphere of influence found themselves pushed to the margins of the society.

The late seventeenth century and early eighteenth century Trans-Atlantic world appears to have been much less homogenous than previously assumed, and the life of Jean de Chourio e Iturbide epitomizes this.

CHAPTER THREE

AFRICAN ROOTS AND EUROPEAN INFLUENCE IN THE SUR DEL LAGO

Introduction

This chapter examines the African origins of various aspects of the Afro-Venezuelan culture, most particularly its militarization and cultural practices manifest in the Sur del Lago region in Zulia state. Some of the original black inhabitants of this zone have been traced back to various Imbangala peoples in pre-colonial Angola. This chapter, therefore, examines what we know about Angola in the light of those assertions made by Juan de Dios Martínez Suarez that the Afro-Zulian contingent brought to Venezuela by Juan de Chourio originated in Imbangala lands and with Imbangala peoples.

This chapter includes an overview of Angola's geography pertinent to the situation and movement of Imbangala peoples, as well as Imbangala cultural and political influences that may have carried over to Venezuela. Additionally, those connections with Chourio are more intimately detailed. As pre-colonial Angola was primarily under the purview of the Portuguese, how was it possible for a Basque-French slave trader to find his way there? And furthermore, how and why could contact between Chourio and the Imbangala come about? To answer these questions, motivations are sought in all corners of the Trans-Atlantic world: the French penetration of Africa, Imbangala institutions and desire for European contact (to include the conduct of the slave trade in Angola), as well as efforts by the Spanish authorities in the New World to suppress indigenous hostilities and recurring insurrections. This chapter attempts to establish these pertinent connections between the Afro-Zulian contingent of Juan de Chourio and the Imbangala of Angola, thereby lending support, if not vindication, to the claims advanced by Juan de Dios Martínez Suarez.

Martínez states that the first enslaved Africans to arrive in Venezuela were brought over by the German Weslers in 1528, and many thousands more were transported in the succeeding years of Venezuelan history, to include those in the Sur del Lago Maracaibo community. All of the African-derived people brought to the shores of Venezuela form the nucleus of the present and expansive Afro-Venezuelan community. But Martínez, in his work with the Sur del Lago blacks, also asserts that there exists in Northwestern Venezuela a unique Afro-Zulian culture that needs to be recognized both nationally and beyond. To this end, he established the Ajé Group in 1982. He hoped that the group would help to preserve and publicize Afro-Zulian culture through a promotion of, and awareness concerning, the *chimbánguele* and *gaita* drum rhythms, among other cultural, linguistic¹ and religious expressions.

Martínez, born in 1945 in the Sur del Lago community of Bobures, was encouraged to study about his origins from an early age by his grandmother, and has since published seventy books replete with village myths, legends and music. As of 2004, there were more than 9,000 children in 300 schools of the Sur del Lago learning to appreciate their cultural patrimony, due to the groundwork established by Martínez.² Clearly then, Martínez has followed in the traditions of Lévi-Strauss. Like the French structuralist who observed and wrote about the Nambikwara of the Brazilian rainforest, Martínez has meticulously documented as many aspects of the lives of the Afro-Zulians as he could, from sexual relations and the construction of shelters to diets, pets and sundry occupations. From both Lévi-Strauss and Martínez, one gathers that the distinctions between the cognitive processes of the so-called “primitive mind” and its modern and “civilized” counterpart may be fewer than some would care to think. It is always preferable to look at the

¹ Carrillo, “*En la tierra de los hijos de Ajé*,” *Panorama*. “In the daily speech of Zulians, Juan de Dios Martínez has identified 3,000 words of African origin. Among these are *lora* (wound), *bemba* (think lips), *jojoto* (corn), *timba* (stomach), *bululú* (chaos, disorder), and *tufu* (bad odor).”

² Darryn Mijares, *Afro-Zulian preserves black identity symbolized in Chimbánguele drums and gaita*, http://www.vheadline.com/printer_news.asp?id=21761 (27 June 2004).

familiar as if it were foreign, and search for the familiar in what appears to be decidedly foreign.³ That is the basis of structural anthropology, and one of the tenets by which Martínez carried out his life's work. While the theories of Martínez provide anthropological scaffolding with respect to the Afro-Zulian community, this dissertation augments it with needed historical material upon which others can build.

Angola: The Geographic Setting

In order to gain further understanding, it is important to briefly examine what we know about Angola and the regions round about it in Central and Southwest Africa. As the Imbangala culture can trace its origins to the northeastern Lunda regions (*Norte* and *Sul*) of Angola, its significance is highlighted in the rapid territorial Imbangala expansion, especially in a westerly direction to the coast at Cabinda and the mouth of the Congo River, where it was conceivable that they encountered the French and other non-Portuguese Europeans in the time of Chourio's *asiento*.

³ Larry Rohter, "Other Voyages In the Shadow of Lévi-Strauss," *New York Times*, Thursday, 5 November 2009. This article noted the passing of the French structural anthropologist, who lived one month short of 101 years.

Map 3.1: Geophysical map of Angola.

Note the contemporary states of Lunda Norte and Lunda Sul in the northeast. The borders of these two states roughly correspond to the original Imbangala lands.

http://luandamap.com/map/angola/Angola_1.gif

The area of contemporary Angola, including the Cabinda Enclave, is 1,246,700 square kilometers. The country of Angola constitutes an integral part of the Central Africa region, that also consists of all or part of the contemporary nations of Cameroon, the Central African

Republic, the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Zaire, Zambia, and the offshore island republic of São Tomé and Príncipe.

The largest geographic feature in Angola is the Central Plateau, partly edged in the west by mountains that extend out from the coastal lowlands. Altitudes in this area reach more than 2,500 meters, such as in the Benguela-Bié Plateau in its center and the Humpata Highlands in the south. The northern regions of this plateau, dubbed the *planalto* by Portuguese colonists, reach the coastal fringe in a gradual slope. Elsewhere, this descent is more precipitous. The coastal lowlands vary in width from twenty-five kilometers, closer to Benguela, to more than one hundred fifty kilometers in the Cuanza River Valley, which is situated immediately to the south of Luanda, then capital of the country.⁴

⁴ Irving Kaplan, *Angola: A Country Study* (Washington, District of Columbia: The American University, 1979, 2nd ed., orig. ed. 1967), 60.

Map 3.2: Contemporary map of Angola depicts major cities and river systems.

Source: <http://geology.com/world/angola-map.gif>

Because of the cold and north-flowing Benguela Current just off the shoreline in the Atlantic Ocean, precipitation is minimal in the coastal lowlands. This region is quite arid, and especially so in the areas south of the port of Benguela, which forms a northern extension of the

Namib Desert that the locals refer to as the *Moçâmedes*. The average altitude of the *planalto* ranges between one thousand and one thousand eight hundred meters; and vegetation on this plateau is varied. On the savanna, sparsely distributed baobabs and acacias are noted. And in the higher area of the plateau's western perimeter, where the greatest amount of precipitation can be found, an expansive deciduous forest has taken root over the millennia. In the northern reaches of the tropical savanna, however, a plethora of elephant grass can be found, interspersed with yet more baobab trees. But in the Humpata Highlands, no natural forest cover exists. Only in the Mayombe Hills in the northeast of the Cabinda Enclave,⁵ adjacent to the Congo River, are extensive tropical rain forests to be found. Nevertheless, this delicate ecosphere has significantly diminished over time due to heavy commercial logging operations.⁶

As far as climate goes, Angola's differs little from the rest of Sub-Saharan West Africa, having clearly defined and alternate rainy and dry seasons. In the north, the rainy season can last from September or October to April or May. And in the south, the rainy season starts in November or December, but only lasts for three or four months. Rain is usually more intense in the north, especially in the higher interior plateau regions. Temperatures also decrease with distance from the equator and higher altitudes. And they increase with proximity to the Atlantic Ocean. For example, at Soyo near the mouth of the Congo River, the median temperature is approximately 26 degrees C, but drops to 16 degrees C at Huambo in the Central Plateau. The coolest months are July and August, also the driest season, and sometimes frost can even be found in the higher altitudes.⁷

⁵ In both maps in this chapter, the Cabinda Enclave can be identified as the noncontiguous Angolan territory situated on the Atlantic coast to the south of the Republic of the Congo and to the north of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

⁶ Kaplan, *A Country Study*, 61.

⁷ Ibid., 64.

Geography and Political Formation in the Pre-Colonial Era

Apart from those features dealing with various aspects of the physical landscape and climate, there are also elements of human geography to consider. In Central Africa, for example, a diverse array of political formations was organized in the pre-colonial era.

These new structures were based on patterns of land usage. In the northeastern lands of Angola and interior areas immediately south of the Congo River, for example, patterns of land usage proved conducive to the formation of numerous chieftaincies whereby each settlement coalesced and united around a single strongman. Over time, his heirs would rule in his name, which converted into a title of leadership. The people maintained themselves largely through farming and fishing, and also hunted from time to time on the vacant tracts of land between the settlements. Their revenues from the salt and metal trading provided tribute to central governments and cemented economic relations with other chieftaincies to form a vast regional trade network among the sundry Bantu-speaking groups of Central Africa.

One of the kingdoms of particular importance to the political formation of the Imbangala was that of the Luba⁸ in what is now the province of Shaba in the neighboring Democratic Republic of the Congo. In pre-colonial times it was known as Katanga and is strategically placed in the Lualaba lakes region.⁹ Since the fourth century it has been populated by iron-working farmers. The people of the upper Lualaba, who were the ancestors of the modern Luba, were the most proficient smelters of both iron and copper in the region. Luba land was also well endowed with salt, as well as metal resources, and they were always willing to trade with neighboring

⁸ All information on the Luba derived from Thomas Q. Reefe, *Rainbow and the Kings: A History of the Luba Empire to 1891* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), as well as Ndaywel è Nziem, "The political system of the Luba and Lunda: its emergence and expansion" (Chapter 20), in *Africa from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century, UNESCO General History of Africa*, Vol. V, ed. B. A. Ogot (London: Heinemann, 1992), 588-607.

⁹ Ibid., 59. Shaba is sometimes referred to as Katanga; and the Democratic Republic of the Congo is the former nation of Zaire. This is mentioned to avoid confusion with the contemporary Republic of the Congo, which is directly north of Angola's Cabinda extension. See the map at the beginning of this chapter.

kingdoms. This trade, in turn, encouraged the mixing of populations and the emergence of large towns all along the trade routes.¹⁰ Because of the long dry seasons, however, the quality of the soils was marginal and the best lands were confined to the river valleys. Thus, the topography lent itself to patterns in which groups of people dwelt on these limited tracts of fertile land, with vast stretches of uninhabited terrain in between settlements. Most likely, it was the limited availability of suitable lands that led to the formation of Imbangala political structures as groups splintered off from this region, moving north, south and west.

The Imbangala

The Imbangala were communities of nomadic warriors who inhabited the central and northern interior regions of Angola since at least before 1600 and lived by pillage.¹¹ The earliest Western account of the Imbangala dates back to the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Between 1590 and 1610 an English sailor, Andrew Battell, lived in Central West Africa.¹² He was in the Angolan interior until 1607 and on the Loango coast for the remaining three years. In personal accounts related to English scribes upon his return to “civilization,” Battell provided details of his life among a band of the Imbangala known as the Jaga, with whom he claims to have resided for approximately twenty months out of his twenty years in Central West Africa.

Everything that is known about Battell’s chronology, or about Battell himself, comes from the accounts rendered: that as a young man he left England in 1589 on a privateer for South America; that he was captured in Brazil and shipped to Angola the following year; that he

¹⁰ Joel E. Tishkin, “Central Africa: Peoples and States” (Chapter 9), in *African History Before 1858*, Vol. 2, ed. Toyin Falola (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2000), 207-208.

¹¹ Jan Vansina, “The Kongo kingdom and its neighbors” (Chapter 19), in *Africa from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century*, *UNESCO General History of Africa*, Vol. V, ed. B. A. Ogot (London: Heinemann, 1992), 558.

¹² Jan Vansina, “On Ravenstein’s Edition of Battell’s Adventures in Angola and Loango,” *History in Africa* 34 (2007): 321.

escaped to Loango in the Spring of 1607 on a raft he had constructed himself; and that he returned to his hometown of Leigh in England sometime in late 1610 or early 1611.¹³ One of Battell's transcribers, Samuel Purchas, states that Battell referred to the Jaga as a "most warlike people,"¹⁴ and that they had gained a notorious reputation for their overrunning of neighboring countries.¹⁵ No doubt that Battell's accounts of the Imbangala added credence to the myths surrounding their military prowess among the Europeans.

Since Battell, as far as is known, kept no journal or diary, the information gathered about pre-colonial Angola and the surrounding regions was based solely on his reminiscences.¹⁶ What makes his account believable, however, is the plethora of Bantu words that he employed. Despite their atrocious spelling, the majority of these words were recognized as being of Mbundu origin. Most notably, he recalls the ethnic names of "Imbangala" and "Gindes," even though after 1600 nearly all Europeans referred to them as Jagas. Nevertheless, the ethnonym "Imbangala" survived as a self-designator, even to this day, while *Gindes* did not.¹⁷ E. G. Ravenstein's rendering is as follows: "He (Battell) saith they are called *Iagges* by the Portugals, by themselves *Imbangolas*."¹⁸

Central West African historian Joseph C. Miller also attaches a high degree of credibility to Battell's account. He believes that Battell's first contact with the Imbangala took place in 1601, when a Portuguese trading expedition to which Battell was attached encountered a band of the Imbangala moving north, attempting to cross the Kuvo, the largest river situated between the Cunene and the Cuanza rivers. The Portuguese assisted the Imbangala in crossing the Kuvo

¹³ Vansina, "On Ravenstein's," 325.

¹⁴ Ibid., 326.

¹⁵ Ibid., 329.

¹⁶ Ibid., 334.

¹⁷ Ibid., 335.

¹⁸ Ibid., 342. From E. G. Ravenstein, *Strange Adventures of Andrew Battell of Leigh* (London, 1901), 983-984. This is a composite of two accounts of the life of Andrew Battell authored by Samuel Purchas and an anonymous writer in *His Pilgrimage* (London, 1613) and *His Pilgrimes* (London, 1625).

River, in exchange for their assistance in capturing other Africans for the slave trade.¹⁹ It was at this point that the Portuguese assigned Battell the mission of joining with the Imbangala and serving as an aide to their king. Battell thereby became especially close to the king over a sixteen month period, since he was able to secure him fine game with his musket, and also attained some notoriety for his demonstrated marksmanship ability in field engagements against Imbangala enemies.²⁰

Because accounts like Battell's were rare, establishing Central African chronologies is a difficult task for the historian. As a non-Western political and social organization, the Imbangala present some challenges to historians and researchers in related social sciences. In dealing with a society like the Imbangala, whose history is primarily based on oral data, substantial qualifications are imposed on the affixing of dates to Central African events. The single datable occurrence which led to the search for a reliable chronology in early Central African history took place in the early seventeenth century. It was during that time that armies of highly trained Jaga warriors swept westward across the Mbundu regions of northern Angola. The descendants of these invaders, properly known as Imbangala rather than Jaga, maintain that their people first arrived in Angola under the astute leadership of a ruler known simply as Kinguri.²¹ Lunda traditions, however, state that Kinguri originated in the nascent Lunda Empire in Katanga. Therefore, Jan Vansina speculated that an approximate date for the establishment of the Lunda Empire might be made if the year in which Kinguri and the Imbangala first appeared in Angola could be determined.²² However, the lack of fieldwork clarifying the relation between structure

¹⁹ Miller, "Imbangala," 564.

²⁰ Vansina, "On Ravenstein's," 341.

²¹ Presented as Kinguri when referring to a proper name, and *kinguri* when referring to a title holder's position.

²² Miller, "Imbangala," 549.

and tradition among the Imbangala, as well as the growth and expansion of Luba political systems, made determining the arrival at specific or even approximate dates nearly impossible.²³

Scholars in the twentieth century have grappled with the problem of dating pre-colonial African peoples. Joseph C. Miller, for example, traveled to Angola in 1969 whence he was able to draw on sundry traditions throughout the country and show that the figures described in oral histories, like *kinguri*, were actually permanent named titles in systems of positional succession and perpetual kinship. These are fundamental systems derived from the Lunda, with the result that all genealogies describe networks of perpetual titles related to each other by “fictional ties” rather than real, biological families.²⁴

Thus, those “kings” that are mentioned in traditions do not represent particular individuals, but rather dynasties in a named office. Any reinterpretations of the traditions in terms of named positions will significantly alter the dating of not only Imbangala history, but the entire complex of Luba and Lunda states in Katanga as well.²⁵

Both Imbangala and Lunda historians cite similar traditions, that Kinguri left his original home in Katanga after a dispute with his sister, Lueji, regarding the rights and privileges of Lunda royal authority. The sister won, and thence replaced their father as ruler of the Lunda and married a hunter known as Cibinda Ilunga, who came from the neighboring Luba Kingdom. They, in concert, drove out Kinguri, sending him on a long westward journey where he ultimately ran into the Portuguese. The structure of the Imbangala tradition indicates that both Kinguri and his sister were fictitious figures representing Lunda *tubungu* titles. These are the oldest known of Lunda political titles, while Cibinda Ilunga embodied the Luba forms of political authority. Therefore, one could surmise that these traditions are metaphorical in nature,

²³ Ibid., 551.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 554.

portraying Luba influence on the Lunda state while asserting that the *kinguri* title holders left in a state of opposition to the imposition of Luba control. It was in the context of this system that the office of *kinguri* continued to move westward out of the Luba-Lunda complex over a period of several lifetimes, with the title being transferred from one neighboring state to another. Miller declares that the title drifted from the Lunda through the Cokwe and Songo toward the west.”²⁶

Under new leadership, the Imbangala groups moved west and fortified their positions, whence they began to slowly deploy in many directions. The Lunda traditions say that the Imbangala moved at a leisurely pace. They hunted with bows and arrows, as well as snares and traps. Ultimately, Miller states, they planned on returning to their Lunda kinsmen in Katanga, but in the capacity of an army of liberation. The *kinguri* and other newly titled leaders of the western Imbangala bands desired nothing more than to establish a new kingdom as a secure base of operations whence they could launch an attack on the Luba usurpers occupying their traditional homeland.²⁷ That the westward movement of the Imbangala brought them in to closer contact with the Portuguese and various European interlopers in Angola and the Congo ultimately proved fortuitous to their mutual political agendas, as will be revealed in greater detail later in this chapter.

One of the more powerful Imbangala states in northern Angola was that of the Kasanje, imposed in Ndongo territory north of the Cuanza River, probably around 1630.²⁸ According to Miller, Imbangala traditional histories among this group posed an additional problem for researchers, because the Kasanje consistently displayed the tendency to retain only a selected memory of past events. The Kasanje conveniently set aside all of those events that tended to delegitimize the structure of the Imbangala state; and as all of the subsequent Kasanje chiefs

²⁶ Ibid., 552.

²⁷ Ibid., 554.

²⁸ Heintze, “Extraordinary Journey,” 67.

ruled in the Lunda position of the *kinguri*, the Imbangala traditions placed an emphasis on the title role of the *kinguri* in the foundation of the Kasanje state, to the absolute exclusion of all other titles, even those that other seventeenth century sources indicated were just as important.²⁹

Seventeenth century sources about the Imbangala seem to share one common factor: “Virtually without exception they were written by members of foreign, non-African cultures, who came to the area as conquerors, slave traders and missionaries.”³⁰ Naturally, such sources would tend to be biased, but that is not the major problem. Of concern to Heintze is that the vast majority of these source authors never spent any significant amount of time in African courts, or even living among African peoples, where they would have taken advantage of the opportunity of becoming intimately acquainted with sundry aspects of Imbangala culture. Andrew Battell’s case might, therefore, be considered a rare exception. The English sailor was not only able to observe events as they transpired, but experience them on a personal level, directly from the inside of an Imbangala camp. For this reason, Heintze asserts, Battell’s account is afforded much more weight.³¹

Apart from the scarcity of Western insider accounts like Battell’s, early attempts to reconcile Cokwe, Lunda and Imbangala published traditions with respect to the *kinguri* have availed little because they faltered on apparent contradictions. Miller correctly surmised that the “traditions of each ethnic group, those of the Imbangala included, recall only the events which affected their own political systems during the *kinguri* title’s move from Katanga to Angola,” adding that the “Cokwe, for example, remember developments which determined later political relations among their own kings, while the Imbangala emphasize other events which led to later

²⁹ Miller, “Imbangala,” 552.

³⁰ Heintze, “Extraordinary Journey,” 67-68.

³¹ Ibid., 68.

configurations of Lunda, Cokwe, and other titles in the mature kingdom of Kasanje.”³² As a consequence, it can be said that the Ovimbundu and the Songo remember those stories that both the Cokwe and Imbangala have conveniently forgotten.

The politicizing of these stories also makes the task of the contemporary historian a more difficult one; but Miller’s system of dating, as it contains no implicit chronology based on assumed human life spans, may serve to mitigate against the propagandized histories rendered by many groups. And with respect to the Imbangala, the evidence leads one to believe that many years had elapsed since the origin of one Imbangala title in the nascent Lunda Empire and a successor’s appearance on the coast. Despite the fact that some documents establish an Imbangala presence in Angola as early as the 1560s, nothing is revealed concerning those preceding events further to the east in Katanga. Those events that shaped the formation of a later Imbangala kingdom may well have occurred decades or even centuries earlier. As such, Miller contends that by extending the methodological techniques developed for the Imbangala traditions, i.e. applying permanent named titles to events instead of looking for the names of real persons to attach to published Lunda histories, one can logically speculate that the Luba and Lunda kingdoms passed through several periods “before the stage previously assumed to have initiated the development of states in central Africa.”³³

As Imbangala groups began to branch off from this Luba-Lunda complex in Katanga, and move westward, they came into increased contact with Europeans and enhanced possibilities for trade. David Birmingham has even suggested that the opening of the west coast trade with Europeans may have been sparked by the establishment of the Lunda-Imbangala Empire. At first, many Lunda groups began a westward migration. But over time, this pattern was replaced

³² Miller, “Imbangala,” 552-553.

³³ Ibid., 574.

by a new Lunda-Imbangala expansion consisting of centrally-controlled expeditions that established satellite states among surrounding peoples, drawing them into their continually expanding sphere of influence. The most significant area of expansion was toward the northwest. Lunda-Imbangala dynasties were being set up on the middle Cassai, and also as far west as the lower Cuango. Birmingham speculates that this growth was directly proportional to the expansion of Dutch, English and French trade on the Loango coast north of the Congo River. By the late eighteenth century, 20,000 slaves per year were being shipped out by these non-Portuguese European powers. Birmingham declares that this was a “fantastic number which could hardly be coming from the sparsely populated immediate vicinity.”³⁴

Birmingham concludes that this increase in the supply of slave labor must have been linked to a source deep in the interior of Angola, beyond the lower Congo; and that both the expansion of the Lunda-Imbangala and growth of the Loango trade provided an effective stop to the further development of Portuguese slave trading enterprises in the region.³⁵

This assessment agrees with Phyllis M. Martin, who states that the term “Imbangala” derives from an Umbundu root word, “*vangala*,” which signifies that one is “brave” or “wanders widely through the countryside.”³⁶ She explains that in the sixteenth century, Lunda title holders and their families began to migrate westward from their traditional homeland east of the Cuango. Upon their arrival in the lands of the Ovimbundu, these Lunda incorporated sundry Ovimbundu political and social ideals. From this fusion resulted a new historical period, that of the

³⁴ David Birmingham, “The African Response to Early Portuguese Activities in Angola,” in *Protest and Resistance in Angola and Brazil*, ed. Ronald H. Chilcote (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 27.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Phyllis M. Martin, *Historical Dictionary of Angola* (London: Scarecrow Press, 1980), 52, 73-74. Umbundu is the language of the Ovimbundu, whose important subgroups include the Bailundu, Bieno, Dombe, Ganda, Huambo (a.k.a. Wambu), Caconda, Chiyaka, Sambu and Sele. The Ovimbundu are contemporary Angola’s largest ethnic group, and the name probably derived from a word applied in the Kongo for both the Mbundu and Ovimbundu. The Ovimbundu traditional lands are situated in the fertile highlands of central Angola. They are traditional agriculturalists and noted as excellent blacksmiths.

Imbangala. This Lunda-Imbangala society organized itself into highly militarized, mobile bands that roved freely through the region of Benguela and north to the Cuanza, pillaging and terrorizing all they encountered. Before the arrival of the British, Dutch and French, the Imbangala also found it convenient to work with the Portuguese. In 1612 they even formed an alliance with them, and for the next ten years the Portuguese and the Imbangala went about attacking and enslaving the sedentary Mbundu.³⁷ This brought the Ndongo and neighboring states to the point of total collapse; and by the seventeenth century, the resulting Imbangala conquest of, and fusion with the Mbundu, led to the rise of yet a new group of states in Angola, the Kasanje and Matamba. These endured until the nineteenth century.³⁸

As a result of these movements and conquests, the Imbangala acculturated some of the ways of the Ovimbundu, Mbundu, and other groups along its path of westward expansion. Miller also concurs with both Birmingham and Martin with respect to the westward expansion of the Imbangala, and further explains that the near-total centralization of authority within these various Imbangala groups, held intact throughout the westward drive, made alliances with Europeans an attractive possibility for subordinate Imbangala holders of permanent titles. Based on limited information, Miller surmises that the Imbangala political structure of the early seventeenth century probably conformed nicely to the *kulembe*³⁹ type, whereby a single king held the only permanent and autonomous position of power within a band with all of the other

³⁷ Martin, *Dictionary of Angola*, 61. The language of the Mbundu is Kimbundu, and its subgroups consist of the Ambundu, Kisama, Libolo, Hako, Ndembu, Hungu, Jinga, Mbondo, Songo and Imbangala. The Mbundu occupy an area of north central Angola, and are principally situated in the districts of Luanda, Malanje and the North and South Cuanza. Today, the Mbundu constitute the second largest ethnic group in Angola. They are mainly agriculturalists, craftsmen and traders.

³⁸ Martin, *Dictionary of Angola*, 52.

³⁹ Joseph C. Miller, *Kings and Kinsmen* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 89. The *kulembe* is a shadowy line of kings who claimed authority over portions of the Benguela plateau several centuries before the Ovimbundu kingdoms in that region were established.

chiefs being appointed in accordance with the *vunga*⁴⁰ model. Therefore, Miller believes that the formal structure of the *kilombo* divided the members of each Imbangala band into about a dozen sections, with each under the leadership of its own captain. These regiments usually lived and fought separately from each other, although there were separate entrances for each group into the war camp. The clustering of regiments in the same *kilombo* was for the purpose of defense augmentation, although distinctiveness within each regiment was preserved.⁴¹

These militarized groups of the Lunda-Imbangala were considered the major purveyors of slave labor in the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, and also served as mercenaries for the Europeans at various times in Africa and abroad.⁴² The sundry Imbangala groups were intensely focused on a cult of war. Any survivors would be taken as prisoners of war. The young men in good health would be kept and trained as Imbangala fighters, while the others would be sold off to other African kingdoms or villages, whence the Dutch, French, Portuguese or other slavers could purchase them.

By 1600 some of the Imbangala groups are believed to have gone as far west as to reach the shores of the Atlantic Ocean, and some historians suggest that one group, the Kasanje, may have even reached the Luanda area before 1576. After 1600, however, the Imbangala became well entrenched throughout the entire Cuango Valley. It was here that they became tenacious middlemen in the growing trade between Lunda and the Portuguese coastal settlements up and down the length of Angola. The principal and legal slave trade was through Mbundu territory to the Imbangala controlled states of the middle Cuango region, Matamba and Kasanje, which, in turn, traded with the Lunda domains further to the east. The most serious threat to the

⁴⁰ Ibid. The *vunga* embodied a concept of authority structurally opposed to the hereditary titles awarded to the lineages of the *ngola a kiluanje* as it introduced for the first time a type of position situated outside of the control of the descent groups.

⁴¹ Ibid., 183.

⁴² Martin, *Dictionary of Angola*, 59.

Portuguese trade was the northern route starting from the Middle Congo through Congo territory to the ports, such as Cabinda, where Dutch, English and French slave traders predominated.⁴³ The Imbangala were fiercely opposed to Portuguese penetration and their trade monopoly of the interior, and sought European allies in their struggle with them. The Kasanje kingdom was able to hold itself together until the period of 1911-1913, when it was finally subdued militarily by the Portuguese. It is from this historical foundation that the Imbangala remained a significant factor in both the history of Angola and the New World.⁴⁴

Encounter with the Europeans

The westward movement of the Imbangala brought them in contact with the interventionist activities of the Portuguese, whose contact with the people of sub-Saharan West Africa began in 1443. Their initial forays to Africa were made with the purpose of obtaining gold, slaves and other valuable commodities for trade in European markets. The first few expeditions were essentially nothing more than raiding parties of coastal settlements. The Portuguese soon learned, however, that in order to maximize the profitability of further African ventures, they would need the assistance of at least some of the local chiefs. Their permission and cooperation with the Portuguese would not come cheaply; but the cementing of these alliances early on gave the Portuguese a distinct advantage over other European powers seeking commercial expansion in Africa. Henceforth, the British, Dutch, French and Spanish had to deal directly with the Portuguese if they wanted to conduct any kind of business in Africa. And to legitimize these operations and also to contain the trade within the context of a royal monopoly, the Portuguese monarchs negotiated treaties with accessible African sovereigns, such as the king of Kongo. This also enabled the establishment of trading factories under the purview of royal

⁴³ Martin, *Historical Dictionary*, 84.

⁴⁴ René Pélissier and Douglas L. Wheeler, *Angola* (New York : Praeger Publishers, Inc., 1971), 23, 25.

factors. These individuals served as agents and represented both the diplomatic and economic interests of the Portuguese crown. By the close of the fifteenth century most of the Western European nations had recognized Portugal's sovereignty in all matters pertaining to West African trade, especially since the signing of a Castilian-Portuguese accord over Africa in 1479 that gave Portugal uncontested control in that continent.⁴⁵

The Portuguese knew that if they wanted to maintain control of Africa they would have to begin a process of settlement. Thus, they began to populate the Cape Verde Islands in the 1460s, and, just twenty years later, initiated the colonization of some islands in the Gulf of Guinea. The Portuguese crown encouraged the settlers in agricultural pursuits. By the first quarter of the sixteenth century, sugar processing was underway in São Tomé, as well as the production of cotton and the manufacture of cloth in the Cape Verde Islands for trade with the West African mainland. Both of these commercial ventures met with some success, and this served to spur on further trade with the African mainland. The Cape Verdians soon crossed over to the continent to conduct trade with Africans in the rivers of upper Guinea, while Portuguese from São Tomé founded a trading post on an island off the mainland that would later become the site for the city of Luanda, later the capital of Angola.⁴⁶

It was not until the establishment of Luanda in 1567, and the promising reports on Angola emanating from the expeditions of the Portuguese navigator Paulo Dias de Novais, that those lands south of the Congo River occupied some interest in Lisbon's royal court. By 1600, the territory known as Angola eclipsed the Congo as the most important area for the Portuguese on the African continent. But whereas the Portuguese felt obligated to follow peaceful policies of alliance and cultural assimilation in the Congo, they came to believe that in Angola direct

⁴⁵ Malyn Newitt, *Portugal in Africa: The Last Hundred Years* (London: Longman Group, Limited, 1981), 1.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

military action would be required in order to impose Lisbon's authority over the *sobas*, or chiefs. In the Congo, the ruler known as the *manicongo* reigned supreme. Since he embraced the customs, religion, slave trade and traditions of the Portuguese, no further diplomatic or military initiatives were needed on the part of Portugal. On the other hand, the Angolan chiefs could never arrive at a consensus. Many were opposed to the southward expansion of the slave trade. There was already some inkling of the horrors that this peculiar institution would wreak on their society. And inasmuch as the chiefs could not be co-opted, direct Portuguese governance would have to be imposed by force of arms if the emerging Trans-Atlantic slave trade was to receive protection and prosper.⁴⁷

By the beginning of the seventeenth century, however, the Portuguese-Spanish monopoly of the African slave trade was starting to break down.⁴⁸ Recalling the Castilian-Portuguese African accords reached in 1479, it is remarkable that this Iberian monopoly lasted as long as it did. The British, Dutch and French were all seeking to expand both their economic and territorial dominions, and obtaining a foothold in Africa would provide the means of accomplishment. While the Dutch tried to mimic the Portuguese in establishing coastal fortifications, the British and French positioned themselves as interlopers. Both British and French slavers would maneuver their ships clear of the large Portuguese fleets; or, if necessary, fight their way through smaller Portuguese convoys. Upon arriving in African waters, they anchored offshore just long enough to sell their goods, as well as to barter for or purchase gold, ivory or slaves.⁴⁹ These African trading enterprises were either sponsored by a European government or financed by wealthy European merchants.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ James Duffy, *Portuguese Africa* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), 49.

⁴⁸ Basil Davidson, *Black Mother: The Years of the African Slave Trade* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1961), 52.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 53.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 54.

From the start, however, African coastal peoples did not know what to make of these often warring newcomers from Europe. They were not sure of either their methods or their motives. They also did not understand how any of the profits garnered by the Europeans were realized and distributed. Nevertheless, the coastal Africans soon came to terms with the strangers, working out an intricate system of business protocol, currencies, taxing and trading jargon. “The slave trade,” according to Basil Davidson, “was grafted little by little into a living nexus of commercial needs and appetites and habits.”⁵¹

Therefore, by the seventeenth century, Portugal’s dominance of the West African slave trade was slipping away, being crowded out by these other Europeans. Miller believes that Portugal’s grip on the slave trade started to slip for the following reasons: 1) Brokers of higher quality foreign goods began trading for slaves in Angola and other parts of the Portuguese African empire; 2) The waning process accelerated when the Portuguese prime minister, the Marquis of Pombal, undertook nationalistic efforts to develop more domestic industries and trade, thus diverting attention and investment from Portugal’s overseas dominions; 3) What Portuguese investments were being made in overseas ventures were now mostly relegated to Brazilian development; and 4) What little Portuguese capital remained for slaving operations was also being transferred to Brazil, where the Crown still enjoyed some success in limiting contraband slaving activities.⁵²

And during this same period, Spanish power in the West Indies was also starting to wane. In the cases of both the Portuguese and the Spanish, it was the British, Dutch and French who were projecting the major counterforce to their influence and control on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. The loss of islands in the Caribbean to other European powers suffered by the

⁵¹ Ibid., 55.

⁵² Joseph C. Miller, *Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade, 1730-1830* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), xx.

Spanish throughout the timeframe of the seventeenth century was quite extensive.⁵³ For example, Great Britain acquired Bermuda (1609), St. Christopher (1623), Barbados and the Leeward Islands (1625); France acquired Guadeloupe (1626), and Martinique (1635); the Netherlands acquired Curaçao, St. Eustatius and Tobago (1630s); and Denmark acquired St. Thomas (1671).

Of greater significance, this intensive European penetration of the New World gave a new impetus to the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Prior to the seventeenth century, the interloping nations' sole interest in Africa had been the conveyance of slaves from coastal areas of that continent to Spanish possessions in the Caribbean or to the Portuguese controlled colony of Brazil. While they continued to supply slaves to these areas throughout the seventeenth century, they henceforth had to fill any and all demands for slaves made by their own respective nation's countrymen, a new settler class on the aforementioned Caribbean islands.⁵⁴

On these islands tobacco, rum, coffee and cotton were important exports; but the greatest generator of profits from these new colonies was "King Sugar."⁵⁵ Of course, the new planters could never produce enough sugar to satisfy the ever-increasing demands for it emanating from Europe; and so they developed an extreme dependency on the African slave trade. And according to Davidson, sugar production was such a labor intensive operation that whole slave populations had to be replenished "time after time."⁵⁶

And of all the European powers invested in sugar production in the Caribbean, France was foremost. Sugar was first introduced into the French West Indies in 1640, and by 1660, France was importing so much West Indian raw sugar and had established such an extensive

⁵³ Davidson, *Black Mother*, 58.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 58, 59.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 59.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

network of refineries for it, that they were able to export this product to the rest of Europe. The demand for more African slave labor was so great that the French government felt obligated to break the slavery monopoly of its own sponsored French West Indian Company, and in 1670 issued a royal order that opened up the African slave trade to any Frenchman who wished to engage in it.⁵⁷ It was the desire of the French king, declared the order, to advance in every way possible “the trade in blacks from Guinea to the islands [of the Caribbean].... There is nothing that does more to help the growth of those colonies.... than the labor of blacks.”⁵⁸

This was quite a turn about for French policy respecting slavery, for up until the early 1600s, the French stayed clear of the slave trade. In fact, French crown policy specifically condemned it. According to a royal proclamation issued in 1571, “France, the mother of liberty, permits no slaves.” In addition, a French legal dictum of 1607 reinforced the previously cited proclamation, declaring that, “All persons are free in this kingdom: As soon as a slave has reached these frontiers, and become baptized, he is free.” Insofar as France and some of the states of coastal West Africa were concerned, a profitable and thriving maritime exchange was developing in gold, ivory, pepper and palm oil, free of the undue influence of the Portuguese and the slave trade.⁵⁹ The European lust for sugar changed all of this, and the resulting demands for the importation of more black slaves from Africa to work the plantations in the Caribbean.

Therefore, as a result of the French royal order of 1670, the French enslavement of Africans grew by leaps and bounds of intense enterprise. From 1670 to 1672, French ships carried African slaves across the Atlantic Ocean at an unprecedented rate of more than three thousand per year. Nevertheless, Basil Davidson asserts that this was still far less than during the

⁵⁷ Ibid., 59, 60.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 60. Davidson obtained these partial quotations from Gaston-Martin, *Historie de l'Esclavage dans les Colonies Françaises* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1948), pages not specified.

⁵⁹ Davidson obtained quotations from Gaston-Martin, *Historie de l'Esclavage*, pages not specified. Ibid., 43-44.

years of tremendous commercial expansion in these endeavors that would begin for France, and hence for Juan Chourio, in the eighteenth century.⁶⁰

The Africans transported to the New World during this second wave at the close of the seventeenth and beginnings of the eighteenth centuries were of more diverse origins, and the number reaching the South American mainland increased exponentially. According to Leslie B. Rout, Jr., a historian of the African Diaspora, the following regions of Africa were exploited as sources for slave labor on the South American continent: Upper Guinea, Lower Guinea, the Congo River Delta and Angola, and Mozambique.⁶¹ The Upper Guinea region consists of the contemporary nations of Senegal, Gambia, Guinea, the Republic of Guinea Bissau, Sierra Leone, Liberia and the western part of Mali. The Lower Guinea consists of the lands fronting the Gulf of Guinea, including the Bights of Benin and Biafra. This territory was formed by the present-day African states of Ghana, Togo, Benin, Nigeria and the northern part of Cameroon. The Congo River Delta and Angola region consists of all the land encompassing the mouth of the Congo River that now belongs to the nations of the Congo, Gabon and Angola. And lastly, the Mozambique region consists of the contemporary nation of Mozambique, an ex-possession of Portugal on the southeast African coast.

And of all the regions noted above, the greatest source of Africans for South America was Angola. Rout states that, “Juan Rodríguez Cutiño, the second major Portuguese *asentista*, was governor of Angola, and thus there was little question of the origin of the blacks he shipped to the New World. Especially after 1600, these *castas* [ethnicities] of Angola, subcategorized as *loandas*, *bengueles*, *congos* and *manicongos*, were shipped in quantity to almost every area of

⁶⁰ Ibid., 60.

⁶¹ Leslie B. Rout, Jr., *African Experience in Spanish America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 28.

the Spanish Indies.”⁶² Therefore, those Africans of the Congo River Delta and Angola regions of Africa apparently constituted the most numerous population group among all black ethnicities of African origin in Venezuela.⁶³

The Activities of the French Guinea Company

The demand for African slaves in the New World in the eighteenth century was so great that quotas could never be reached by the various chartered monopoly companies. As noted in Chapter Two, the *Compagnie Française de Guinée* (French Guinean Company) was awarded the *asiento*, or monopoly contract, to deliver 4,800 Africans annually to Spanish America for ten years, starting in 1702; and the British Royal South Sea Company won a contract with Spain in 1713, at the signing of the Treaty of Utrecht, to supply African slaves to Spanish colonies in the Americas and the Caribbean for the next thirty years. Neither of these contractual obligations was fully met. However, between these two *asiento* companies, 89,031 African slaves were transported to Spanish America by 1739. The Anglo-Spanish contract would have continued for another four years, but the so-called War of Jenkins Ear effectively ended the British *asiento*’s trading activities.⁶⁴

Just one year after the signing of the Treaty of Utrecht, representatives of the British Royal South Sea Company began to complain about the French Guinea Company’s trading activities with the Spanish. Colin Palmer estimates that the French Guinea Company had at least twenty-seven ships trading with the Spanish in 1714.⁶⁵ Of this situation, one British company

⁶² Ibid., 30.

⁶³ A detailed summary of Afro-Venezuelan ethnic origins is found in the following chapters.

⁶⁴ Colin A. Palmer, *Bondage Studies in Slavery and the Slave Trade* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1986), 27.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 29.

official noted that, “the French lower the prices of goods and carry the riches of the whole Indies into their domains.”⁶⁶

The French Guinea Company, for the most part, succeeded in satisfying at least the minimum needs for African labor by the colonists in Spanish America, having brought 19,269 Africans there from 1703-1715.⁶⁷ It accomplished this by creating a bureaucratic machine in the Spanish colonies that facilitated the conduct of the slave trade. The French Guinea Company established factories in Santo Domingo, Cartagena, Porto Bello, Panamá, Havana and Buenos Aires. Also, the company appointed agents for Maracaibo, Caracas, Río de la Hacha, Santa Marta, Cumaná, Puerto Rico, Puerto Bello, Vera Cruz, Margarita and Guatemala. These factories were staffed by a president or governor, an accountant, one or two agents and a secretary. The agent(s) usually deployed with the ships to watch over and conduct the company's business, but all the individuals involved shared in the responsibility of receiving and selling the African slaves to the Spanish, and insuring that the contraband trade was minimized.⁶⁸

Up until the War of the Spanish Succession, France was comfortable in her control of these vast slave trading operations. And even after the decreed loss of the *asiento* by the French and its transference to British control following the Treaty of Utrecht, the French Guinea Company still carried on its role of introducing African slaves into Spanish America, albeit sporadically. The officers of the French Guinea Company insisted that their organization was not in violation of the treaty because it had not met its annual obligations in the previous ten years, and therefore retained the right to sell African slaves to the Spanish until its entire contract

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 34.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 29. Ships from the *asiento* companies were frequently stocked with goods for the contraband trade. Says Palmer: “One widespread practice was to put a few slaves on board a ship to ‘qualify’ it as engaged in the slave trade, thereby assuring its admission to a Spanish port. Once the ship had sold its slaves and the other goods it introduced illicitly, it would then purchase Spanish commodities with the proceeds from the sale.” The Spanish crown tried, with little success, to end this contraband trade and even appealed on occasion to the companies for help in these matters.

had been fulfilled. And according to Palmer, Porto Bello received most of the French Guinea Company's slaves, followed by Cartagena and Buenos Aires.⁶⁹

To understand this expansion of French slaving activities on both sides of the Atlantic, the origins of the French Guinea Company need to be examined. From 1643 on, French slaving activities in Africa, both legal and otherwise, steadily increased, and mostly in the Senegambia region. The illegal slave trade was growing at five times the rate of the legally sanctioned trade. Therefore, in order to empower the French crown to collect revenues from this activity, the king's controller of finance, Jean-Baptiste Colbert (1619-1683), created a new organization in 1672. Bringing together a consortium of four Parisian entrepreneurs (Maurice Egot, François François, Claude d' Apougny and François Raguenet), Colbert facilitated their founding of the French Senegal Company, the function of which was the purchasing, ownership and operations of all French facilities in northwest Africa, then mostly consisting of some fledgling forts and trading posts on the Senegal River. By controlling these stations on African soil, France's position in the slave trade was strengthened and a steady supply of African labor to her New World colonies assured. From 1675 to 1700, Martinique took 40,000 slaves, Guadeloupe 8,000, Saint-Domingue (Haiti) slightly over 7,000 and Cayenne (French Guiana) on the South American mainland, approximately 2,000. Best of all, the French crown reaped its share of the profit on each African slave sold in these parts. And to insure the success of this new enterprise, French forces seized the island of Gorée, just south of Cape Verde, from the Dutch in 1677, as well as the Portuguese fort at Arguin in the following year.

⁶⁹ Palmer, *Bondage Studies*, 34. Palmer explains that the French Guinea Company's participation in the slave trade dipped following the Treaty of Utrecht, but when hostilities broke out between Britain and Spain from 1719-1722, French involvement momentarily spiked to pick up the slack left by the British Royal South Sea Company. Hostilities recurred between these two European nations from 1727-1729, and therefore the French once again revved up their role in the trade. The War of Jenkins Ear, in 1739, dealt a death blow to *asiento* trading.

Map 3.3: Political map of the contemporary Caribbean and circum-Caribbean. Present-day Haiti was known as Saint-Domingue in the eighteenth century.

Source: <http://learninglatinamerica.wikispaces.com>

Because of the huge profits being raked in by the Senegal Company, it was enlarged and granted new responsibilities in 1678. It would hence exercise a monopoly over the whole African coast. However, much like many of the smaller French *asientos* that preceded it, the Senegal Company soon became top-heavy with too many officials in Paris and bogged down in squabbles over the extension of bureaucratic authority. Thus, the company declared bankruptcy. It was then reorganized twice by Colbert who, most likely because of his penchant for imposing bureaucratic structures, never was able to resuscitate it. The enterprise was continually plagued by the sinking of its ships by pirates, fresh debts resulting in unpaid crews, and the death of too many slaves in transport to the New World from Africa. Because of these problems, the

ambitious plans of Colbert for the monopoly of the African slave trade by the French Senegal Company had to be laid aside.⁷⁰

Convinced, however, that tremendous profits lay in wait for France by expanding further down the coast, the Senegal Company was split in two in 1684. The original company would continue its operations north of the Gambia River, but the new *Compagnie de Guinée* (Guinea Company), would conduct all trade south of that river. To head the Guinea Company was Colbert's son and successor Jean-François, the Jesuit-educated Marquis of Seignelay. The son was most likely involved with his father in the company's prior reorganizations, and so he was at least familiar with its operations. And as far as selling slaves in the New World, the two companies were supposed to cooperate. Nevertheless, the old Senegal Company continued to perform poorly. It failed to attract investors. It also relied too much on subsidies from the French crown just to stay in business. For activities north of the Gambia, investors backed various private interlopers. The Senegal Company was sold yet again, this time to one of its directors, Claude d'Apougny, but soon came to ruin.⁷¹

On the other hand, the French Guinea Company proved itself quite formidable in advancing French commercial interests south of the Gambia River. The company dispatched a contingent led by Jean-Baptiste de Gennes to expel the British from Fort James on the Gambia River, and then another contingent led by André Brûe, to build a French fort at Abreda on the northern bank of the Gambia River, thus consolidating the French position in that strategic zone.

⁷⁰ Hugh Thomas, *The Slave Trade: The Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1440-1870* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1997), 192-193. The company's best years were 1682-1684, when its ships were carrying 1,520 enslaved Africans annually from the Senegal River area.

⁷¹ Ibid, 193.

Now the company held a sure base of operations in Africa to further spearhead its southern push.⁷²

The French advance down the African coast was of great concern to the Portuguese authorities in both Angola and Lisbon. By the late seventeenth century, the Portuguese found themselves in a weak position in Angola, so much so that they postponed any further attempts at inland penetration in favor of strengthening their coastal defenses, particularly from Luanda north to Cabinda. It was in this area, particularly, that interloping slavers, British and Dutch as well as French, succeeded in smashing Portugal's monopoly of the slave trade. Despite the attempts of the Portuguese to fortify their position in this area, however, British, Dutch and French ships were pushing further south down the coast, all the way to Benguela; and in all the area in between, including Luanda, they were buying slaves from Angolan chiefs right under the nose of the Portuguese. While the Portuguese did construct a few forts and settlements in this strategic zone in the latter half of the eighteenth century, it was too little and too late.⁷³

The success of the French, British, and Dutch in penetrating Portuguese West African coastal domains as far south as Cabinda, Luanda and Benguela was based on the sale of high quality manufactured goods that were more economically produced than by the Portuguese back in Europe or those established in Africa. Africans from the interior, primarily Lunda-Imbangala, migrated to the coastal areas in order to trade ivory, dyewoods, minerals, gum, and, most importantly, slave labor with these interloping Europeans.⁷⁴

At this point, it is important to provide some connection with the French Guinea Company to transactions with the Lunda-Imbangala peoples on the Angolan and Congo coast. Of course, the agents of both the British Royal South Sea Company and the French Guinea

⁷² Ibid., 194.

⁷³ Péllisier and Wheeler, *Angola*, 46, 47.

⁷⁴ Birmingham, "African Response," 22-23.

Company were seeking productive blacks between the ages of fourteen and twenty-five years, and free of any physical disabilities, and they would be pleased to accept such from wherever they could find them. However, most of the agents preferred to purchase their slaves from private traders on the islands of the Caribbean and then to resell them to the Spaniards. It was simply more economical than dispatching ships all the way to Africa and back. Nevertheless, as was noted in the two previous chapters, the French Guinea Company purchased a goodly portion of their slave labor force from the Dutch on the islands of Curaçao and Bonaire, from the Danes on Saint Thomas, from the English in Jamaica or Barbados, or from French traders in Martinique. The British relied primarily on their markets in Jamaica, but also purchased slaves from Barbados, Saint Christopher, Curaçao and Saint Eustatias.⁷⁵ It is remarkable how little attention was paid by the agents to the political and military conflicts that were taking place between their respective countries of origin back in Europe, so long as the profits kept rolling in. But while the two companies continued to obtain the majority of their slave labor force from the islands of the Caribbean, they also brought a portion directly from the African coast. Palmer relates numerous instances where the French Guinea Company transported Africans from Cape Messurado, Loango and Cabinda to ports in the New World, such as Cartagena or Buenos Aires.⁷⁶ While Cape Messurado was situated at the mouth of the Saint Paul River in Liberia, not far from that country's contemporary capital of Monrovia, it should be kept in mind that both Loango and Cabinda were strategic points in the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, where the French and other interlopers had contact and dealings with various elements of Imbangala society.

In Angola, moreover, the key to successfully engaging in the slave trade was the development of close ties to the Imbangala. Political constraints on the slave trade in the

⁷⁵ Palmer, *Bondage Studies*, 32.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 33.

eighteenth century Caribbean were compelling the Europeans to revitalize their operations in Africa. This represented a significant shift in policy for the officers of the French Guinea Company, who previously acted upon the assumption that those slaves that were purchased from Caribbean islands, generally speaking, arrived in a much healthier condition than those transported to the New World direct from Africa. Most of those Africans stopping over in the Caribbean at least had the opportunity of recovering from any illnesses contracted during the Atlantic passage, or even, prior to departure back in Africa. Chourio and other company traders were astute in this regard, realizing that healthy slaves would definitely fetch a higher price than those physically incapacitated. Therefore, it was always in the best financial interest of the *asiento* company agent to purchase slaves direct from the Caribbean islands, or in the case of those coming immediately from Africa, to allow the ships transporting them to dock at an island port in order to allow the African cargo time to refresh or permit the slaves to sufficiently recover from sundry infirmities before proceeding on to markets in the Spanish Main.⁷⁷ This continued until the War of the Spanish Succession. For it was around this time that competing European colonial powers began to expel foreign slaving operations from those Caribbean islands under their control, as Chourio's enterprise in Curaçao was closed by order of the Dutch. Recall that they placed Chourio under a cloud of suspicion, believing that he was acting as an agent of France.

Thus, with Chourio's inability to obtain the more physically-fit, African-derived blacks from the Caribbean, he had to turn to Africa. And according to the records of the French Guinea

⁷⁷ Ibid., 30, 31. Chourio worked for the French Guinea Company's branch in Cartagena, from there he was further deployed to Maracaibo. According to the company's guidelines from Cartagena, an African in perfect health was counted as one *pieza* (piece). Fractional values followed for various physical disabilities, such as gray hair being 1/3, each missing toe 1/6, one eye 1/2, ringworm covered body 1/4, partially ringworm covered body 1/6, too old 1/4, etc. The application of such reductions often resulted in "acrimonious" disputes between the Spaniards and agents of the *asientos*. At least with a lower measurement there was some compensation for the company as it was not required to pay as burdensome a tax.

Company, just such a shift in the geographic area of operations is noted. Palmer states that between 1703 and the signing of the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, the French Guinea Company diverted at least three, and maybe up to six of its fleet of twenty-four ships operating in the Caribbean to the importation of slaves to Cartagena directly from the Central West African coast.⁷⁸ This process could only have accelerated after that, with the ascendancy of the British as the chief slave trading power in the New World.

The British were vigilant in protecting this newly acquired monopoly. As noted in the previous chapter, Chourio's continued involvement with the French Guinea Company inspired a stream of protests by the representatives of the British company addressed to the Spanish king, his court and Spanish colonial administrators in all of those areas of Nueva Grenada (Colombia) and Venezuela where he was operating. At first, the king ordered Chourio to cease and desist, but later on changed his mind, and even commended him for the outstanding job he had done in both suppressing rebellious Native Americans and promoting the Roman Catholic faith in the Sur del Lago Maracaibo region. Why this change of mind with regard to Chourio?

There were two reasons for this reversal. First, the Spanish settlers of Perija benefited immensely from the presence of a military contingent in their village. They felt safe and secure from any future forays that might be launched against them by the Mutilones or any other Amerindian renegades. In the hearings conducted against Chourio, many of these affected individuals came forth to voice their support of his endeavors to the Spanish judges.⁷⁹ And second, it was clear that the acquisition of the *asiento* by the French Guinea Company served as an indication of the Spanish Crown's approval of French commercial expansion in areas of the

⁷⁸ Palmer, *Bondage Studies*, 33.

⁷⁹ Findings of the Royal Commission at Maracaibo in favor of Juan Chourio de Iturbide, signed and sealed by Joseph Moreno de Santisteban, the public scribe and clerk of court, 5 September 1732. Archivo Histórico Nacional de Colombia (Ciudades de Venezuela), Catálogo R-6:66-84, Public Library, Mérida, Venezuela.

Americas and Caribbean under its jurisdiction. The Crown was apparently willing to tweak those rules of international trade that granted a British monopoly of the slave trade when and where it suited its purposes. And if not for the special royal allowance granted Chourio to import blacks directly from Africa, the existence of a distinct Afro-Zulian community would be in doubt.

Afro-Zulians

This section investigates some of linkages of the Afro-Zulians to Angola and other regions of Africa. Interestingly, the blacks of the Sur del Lago still maintain much of the music, customs, words and even religious forms of African origin. It can be determined that there were actually three waves of Africans to arrive in the Sur del Lago region. As an academic researcher of the Afro-Zulians, Martínez concludes that the first wave of Africans came as the result of a forced exodus from Angola, Burkina Faso, the Congo, Zaire, and other countries during the period of 1598 through 1611, and that these were largely concentrated in what is now the Sucre district.⁸⁰ According to Palmer, it can be surmised that a second wave began with the era of the *asiento*, where the majority of slave labor arriving throughout Venezuela was either later generation African from various islands of the Caribbean or somewhat recently arrived from Africa but processed through factories on the islands.⁸¹ The Africans imported to the Sur del Lago Maracaibo by Juan de Chourio constitute the spearhead of a third wave of black infusion. With the war of the Spanish Succession, inter-Caribbean and circum-Caribbean trade was severely restricted. Most of the slaves arriving in Venezuela were then coming direct from Africa. In addition, Chourio's contingent was brought over for the express purpose of military augmentation, and not for work in the fields or mines.

⁸⁰ Carrillo, "*En la tierra de los hijos de Ajé.*"

⁸¹ Palmer, *Bondage Studies*, 33.

In this region, the name of “Chourio” is also quite common, keeping in mind that Juan Chourio had ordered that his last name be branded on the bodies of all the Africans he brought there. Also, when one enters a populated area in the Sur del Lago, the music of Angolan drums [*chimbángueles*] can immediately be heard. This drum is made of white balsa wood and hide. It serves to keep alive a spirit of attachment to Africa among all the residents of the Sur del Lago, but more so in the somewhat isolated villages of El Batey, Bobures, Gibraltar, San Antonio and Santa María, which tend to be less culturally impacted by the overall Venezuela *mestizo* population. In addition, all of the drummers come together in celebrations in honor of the patron black saint of the Sur del Lago, San Benito, which will be examined more thoroughly in the next chapter. It will also be seen how the African cultural identity of the blacks in the Sur del Lago is manifest in the daily life and routines of the people, and how it is thereby transmitted to future generations.⁸²

In establishing linkages between the contingent of Juan de Chourio and the Imbangala of Angola, Martínez closely examined the origins of the *chimbángueles*. According to Martínez, it was in San Pedro where the special drums first were seen and heard. In this locale the Africans formed an extended family centered on the brotherhood of the Father Drum, who obliged them to unite so that each man could be wrapped in the power of the community and defined as a social being. There was continuous support for what each man was, or wanted to become. This order of unification established the basis for what each man would receive, and take back to his own village. With each strike of the *chimbángueles* new elements would be fused in the panorama of the Venezuelan mosaic, carried over from the heart of Africa.⁸³

⁸² Carrillo, “*En la tierra de los hijos de Ajé.*”

⁸³ Martínez Suárez, *Como Bailar*, 5.

And apart from the cultural contributions of Africans to the development of Venezuelan society, there is little doubt concerning the economic impact of slavery.

One fact cannot be denied. Venezuela was built on the back of slave labor imported from Africa. And to be sure, there was a sharp division in that labor. There were slaves dedicated to the work in the homes of the masters, and these were the ones who never sullied themselves with the tasks of the field. These slaves received better instruction, to include an impartation of knowledge concerning the cultural values of the European elite. But these were also the ones with some time on their hands. Some retained vivid memories of the far-away Motherland, while others heard the stories of the elders sitting around the campfire at night. Somewhat cognizant of both the African and the European way of life, they were in a capacity to compare and contrast all that they could see and hear. Realizing that the Europeans were never going to consider any black man to be their equal, they placed a great value on the retention of African knowledge and wisdom. This was something which could be passed on to future generations, so that they would forever know and understand that they came from a race of kings. This was certainly a great advantage over those who toiled from sunup to sundown on the vast plantations. These Africans and their descendants were always being monitored by the master's henchmen. These are the unfortunate blacks who rarely could find some personal time. They lived short lives, but never ceased to dream of being free. It was the black in the master's house, the black involved in domestic work, who found the time to orient him or herself to the tasks of finding an identity. It was important for these slaves to define just what role they were going to play in the establishment of the New Africa in Venezuela.⁸⁴

Religion also played a significant role as a tool for the cultural survival of the Afro-Zulians in the life of colonial Venezuela. La Universidad de Zulia anthropologist and

⁸⁴ Ibid.

musicologist Martínez explained that the enslavers thought of all African belief systems in terms of “witchcraft.” It is for this reason that the image of the black saint (Benito) was adopted by the Afro-Zulians, having been introduced to them by the Capuchin fathers brought over by Chourio to staff the mission at Perija. This exclusive devotion to San Benito by the African-derived peoples of the Sur del Lago Maracaibo region is one important factor that has allowed them to preserve a “rich, cultural enclave, forever apart from the rest of Zulia.”⁸⁵

Religion, however, proved to be one of the more important of the African cultural links retained by the blacks of the Sur del Lago. It carried with it elements such as language, music, and traditions that helped keep memories of Africa, and especially Angola, alive in the hearts and minds of the Afro-Zulians. Because these elements were more intimately connected with religion, they are discussed at length in the next chapter. But another factor in cultural survival and the forging of an Afro-Zulian identity is found in the strategic deployment of the Africans in the region as the vanguard of Spanish settlement on Native American lands. In the next section, the military aspect of Afro-Zulian history is explored.

Military Aspect of Afro-Zulian History

Besides the cultural and societal factors previously considered, it is important to examine some of the military aspects of Afro-Zulian history. The Spanish American Empire spanned parts of North America, the Caribbean and most of Central and South America. In order to maintain economic and political control over so vast a territory, a large military presence was required. As there were not a sufficient number of Spaniards to place under arms in defense of the realm, the Crown looked to other sources.⁸⁶ This section examines the deployment of

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Jane Landers, *Black Society in Spanish Florida* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999). In the somewhat remote region of Spanish colonial Florida, and taking into account the corporate nature of Spanish society, Spain's medieval tradition of integration and assimilation, and the almost constant threat to Spanish sovereignty, multiple

Chourio's Africans in the Sur del Lago for the dual purpose of pacifying the Native Americans and establishing prosperous Spanish colonial settlements there.

According to the official records of the City Administration of Rosario de Perijá, the need to import manpower and other materiel in order to carry out the pacification of some of the indigenous peoples in the area is what prompted Chourio to continue in his endeavors.⁸⁷ Upon hearing sundry complaints from the owners of the estates of Santa María, Santa Isabel and Santa Inés, about the problem with local *indios* attacking their property, Chourio decided to initiate a counterinsurgency program on his own accord. The aforementioned estates had to be abandoned in 1707 due to a series of attacks carried out by the Motilones groups of the Cuyamos and Macoes. Some colonists had died as a result of these hostilities, and the lands were left unattended. Chourio took advantage of the situation and purchased three abandoned estates in 1717 with the purpose of soliciting permission from King Philip V to establish a small town on the land and to augment it with 100 Spanish settlers, 600 slaves, and four ships of 100 tons each containing dry goods, wool, silk, wine, rum, gunpowder, and wrought ironworks, to include armament, guns, and other munitions. Chourio returned to Spain to make this happen, and the license was granted him by King Philip V on 9 May 1722. When he returned, supposedly on 27 September 1723, Chourio was greatly esteemed by the local inhabitants for having taken on such a difficult task of subduing the intransigent Motilones.⁸⁸

generations of Africans leveraged artisanal, diplomatic, linguistic and military skills into citizenship and property rights. Hence, Afro-Floridians could become homesteaders, property owners, and entrepreneurs. They would not again enjoy such legal and social protections until almost two hundred years of Anglo history had passed.

⁸⁷ *La Alcaldía Rosario de Perijá, Historia: Su fundador*, <http://www.alcaldiarosariodeperija.com/ve> (27 April 2009). This is the official city of Rosario de Perijá website. The information posted here was garnered from a discourse, "*La Villa de Nuestra Señora del Rosario Pacificación y Fundación*," (The Village of Our Lady of the Rosary: Pacification and Foundation), delivered by the Catholic priest and Venezuelan historian from the Archdiocese of Caracas, Marcelino Laurens, on 9 May 2006, to commemorate the 284th anniversary of the municipality's establishment. The discourse was delivered at the church in the town plaza.

⁸⁸ *Historia del Municipio Rosario de Perijá*, <http://tuzulia.com> (27 April 2009).

With regard to this situation, Deglis Atilano Herrera Chourio, a direct descendant of the aforementioned 600 Africans, stated that the oral tradition of the Afro-Zulians affirms that Juan de Chourio did arrive in 1723, but with three ships, and that one of these, known as “*La Diáfana*,” later wrecked in Lake Maracaibo. He also stated that the other two ships were called *La Fenicia* and *La Nueva Orleans*. Herrera Chourio said that the Afro-Zulian elders did not know about a fourth ship.⁸⁹ In any event, some of what Herrera Chourio imparted was confirmed in the archives of the Mérida, Venezuela, public library, whence we discover that one of Juan de Chourio’s ships did sink in the year 1725 while transporting 120,000 pesos worth of merchandise and produce back to Spain in exchange for more Spanish armament and munitions to be used in the on-going battle against the Motilones.⁹⁰ In the cited document, a witness argued that Chourio be allowed to continue with his mission of Native American pacification, but that the loss of 120,000 pesos be charged to his *asiento* account with no interest due.⁹¹ These documents are important because they confirm Chourio’s mission to the Sur del Lago and placed the arrival of the Angolans in the region.

While some question the exact date that the town of Perijá was established, it is generally supposed that it is 27 September 1723, a little more than one year and four months after Captain Chourio received the royal order from the Spanish king to found it. That is when Chourio arrived back in Venezuela with 600 Africans, 150 of whom he took with him on an expedition to clear a highway with machetes and axes all the way down to the Palmar River, on the banks of which he erected the first of several forts to protect European settlers from Native American attacks. Seeing as how the first year was most likely devoted to fighting off indigenous tribes, the actual

⁸⁹ Deglis Atilano Herrera Chourio, interview by author, San Antonio, Zulia State, Venezuela, 31 May 2004.

⁹⁰ Findings of the Royal Commission at Maracaibo in favor of Juan Chourio de Iturbide, signed and sealed by Joseph Moreno de Santisteban, the public scribe and clerk of court, 5 September 1732. Archivo Histórico Nacional de Colombia (Ciudades de Venezuela), Catálogo R-6:77, Public Library, Mérida, Venezuela.

⁹¹ Ibid.

work of constructing the first of many European settlements was probably not underway until 1724.⁹²

As far as the Native Americans are concerned, it is interesting to note that even toward the end of the nineteenth century various bands of the Motilones continued to impede the construction of settlements in the Sur del Lago of Zulia State. A news item datelined 12 March 1894 from Washington, D.C. states that the American Consul at Maracaibo reported to the United States Department of State, that the “Motilones Indians, who are noted as the most barbarous people on the American continent, have resumed atrocities.”⁹³ The article further explains that the Motilones inhabit areas along the banks of the Catatumbo River and that “they have resorted to such measures that civilized persons have been driven from the rich districts recently settled.” The prior inability of the Spanish Crown, who empowered Chourio, and at a later time the Republic of Venezuela, to pacify the Motilones and open the Sur del Lago for settlement, prompted the consul to declare that “no alternative seems to remain but for the [Venezuelan] Government to inaugurate a war of extermination, showing no quarter, without regard to age or sex.” As harsh as this measure may appear, the consul believed it was necessary because “these savages have proved utterly unsusceptible to civilizing influences, and it seems as though there was nothing left but to treat them as ordinary beasts of prey.” All of this is important because it seems as though the Motilones had not changed their tactics or staging grounds since Chourio’s time. According to the consul’s report, “they have occasionally disappeared in the depths of the forest for a year or two, only to return and destroy the new

⁹² Tulio Chiossone, *Diccionario Toponímico de Venezuela* (Caracas: Monte Avila Editores, 1992), 490. According to Chiossone, the oldest church record in the chapel at Perijá dates back to 19 October 1724, when a European settler was buried on the grounds there. See also *Historia del Municipio Rosario de Perijá*, <http://www.perija.com/elcorreodelasierra/html/rosariodeperija.htm> (27 August 2009).

⁹³ “Worst Indians in America: Venezuela Thinks of Exterminating the Motilones, Root and Branch,” *New York Times*, 13 March 1894.

settlements in their absence, practicing the most horrible cruelties and leaving no vestige of the pioneer posts except the mutilated bodies of their victims.” Apparently, the uproar over these atrocities against the settlements was so great, that the consul felt it was important enough to report back to Washington, D.C., that “the whole country is now insisting that the Government [of Venezuela] shall adopt drastic measures to address the evil.”⁹⁴

The Motilone, or Bari, are names assigned to this Native American ethnic group that constitutes an important branch of the Chibcha family. The Motilones are remnants of the Tairona culture. They are presently concentrated in northeastern Colombia and western Venezuela and have resided in the Catatumbo River basin since at least the seventeenth century. The term Bari, besides referring to an indigenous group, also signifies the Chibchan language currently spoken by an estimated three thousand people in the aforementioned region. Although both the Bari and the Yukpa_tribe are commonly known as "Motilones" and their languages are both frequently called "Motilon," the two languages are entirely unrelated to each other. The term *Motilon* means "shaved head" in Spanish. It has been used since colonial times to refer to several different South American tribes who maintain this appearance, to include the Bari groups of the Coyamos and the Macoes that Chourio and others tried to subdue.⁹⁵ Andres Marquez Correro, an authority on indigenous groups throughout northwestern Venezuela, asserts that the Motilones also extended their influence to the entirety of neighboring Mérida State, to include the black populated area of the Sucre Department, whose political jurisdiction has long been in dispute with Zulia State.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ *Bari Language*, <http://www.native-languages.org/bari.htm> (15 December 2009).

⁹⁶ Andrés Márquez Carrero, *Introducción a la Emeritología: El caso específico de las áreas indígenas del Estado Mérida* (Mérida: Centro de Investigaciones Lingüísticas “Julio Cesar Salas,” La Universidad de Los Andes, 1986), 11.

The history of relations between African derived and Native American peoples in areas of Latin America under European colonial rule is a complex one. Matthew Restall, a historian who focused on various aspects of this situation, has surmised that the relations of blacks and Native Americans throughout colonial times can be circumscribed within a fluctuating dialectic of “hostility” and “harmony.” This interchange, in turn, can be articulated within the three arenas of community, culture and identity.⁹⁷

Restall and the other contributors to *Beyond Black and Red* provide many excellent examples where identity has become more fluid. When original group boundaries break down, new communities are created. Both blacks and indigenous peoples in colonial Latin America cannot easily be categorized in terms of birthplace, ethnicity, legal status or even race by ethnographers, historians or sociologists. For example, not all of those of African descent arriving in colonial Latin America were African born or enslaved. Some were free-born from the Iberian Peninsula or, as noted in this dissertation, free-born Caribbean creoles of the second or third generation, perhaps mixed with European or indigenous over time. Even from the earliest epoch of conquest in the Americas, free blacks worked side by side with the Spanish and Portuguese conquistadores, earning reputations as highly skilled horsemen. Some of these later became *encomenderos*, the owners of vast estates and all the attached Native American labor.⁹⁸ Restall's book also provides some insight into the manipulative actions of the Europeans in setting the blacks and Native Americans at odds with each other. This tactic allowed the outnumbered Europeans to hold onto their tenuous positions of power for as long as possible. In those cases where blacks actively fought against Native American populations, Restall and

⁹⁷ Matthew Restall, “Black Slaves, Red Paint,” introduction in *Beyond Black and Red: African-Native Relations in Colonial Latin America*, ed. Matthew Restall (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005), 4-5.

⁹⁸ Mieko Nishida, “Review of *Beyond Black and Red*, by Matthew Restall,” *American Historical Review* 114:5 (October 2006): 1228-1229.

Vinson point out that they did so only out of their own self interest.⁹⁹ This military regimentation of the Africans in the New World accomplished more than a reorganization of their individual psyches.

Moreover, military service for blacks proved central in the formation of their group identities. The black militiamen were aware of the privileges negotiated by other black soldiers throughout European realms in the Americas. They were cognizant that their military service provided them access to the legal tools necessary in the negotiations for the improvement, both specific and overall, in their own conditions. The African derived soldiers, according to Restall and Vinson, did not view their military service to a European crown as a “burden of race nor as a colonial privilege,” but rather as a “medium through which privileges could be won and individual group identities consolidated.”¹⁰⁰

A good example of this could be found in those lands under control of the Portuguese Crown. Black soldiers were utilized on both sides of the Atlantic, principally in Angola and Brazil, throughout the seventeenth century. The Imbangala, a.k.a. Jagas, were known as fierce warriors in Central Angola, and had allied themselves for a season with the Portuguese in fighting as their proxies in those interior areas to the east of Luanda. They were exclusively male groups whose members lived in militarized camps, called *ki-lombos*. Interestingly, the counter-conquistador maroon communities which later sprang up in Brazil were called *quilombos*, so named because of their alleged Imbangala leadership and military structure. The *ki-lombos* in Angola constituted an alliance among young warriors who rejected traditional kinship structures and the supremacy of the elders, much as the *quilombos* of Brazil rejected traditional Portuguese colonial structures and the supremacy of the Portuguese Crown. In

⁹⁹ Matthew Restall and Ben Vinson, III, “Black Soldiers, Native Soldiers,” in ed. Restall, *Beyond Black and Red*, 46.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

Angola, the Portuguese military adopted the tactics and organizational forms of the Imbangala, reconstituting their force into small contingents, allied in operations with a variety of local African forces, to include private armies of regional authorities (*sobas*). Imbangala armed groups allied with the Portuguese as mercenary troops and slave regiments to form the so-called *guerras pretas* (black troops), with each *guerra preta* considered a small infantry force. In fact, the Portuguese military leader, Henrique Dias, himself of the Imbangala, was proclaimed by King João IV of Portugal as “Major of All Black Troops in Angola and Brazil” on 16 November 1644.¹⁰¹

In the Portuguese conquest of Brazil, Imbangala fighters were brought over from Angola precisely because they inspired fear in even the most hostile Native American opponents of European settlement. Schwartz explains that, “When the Central African Imbangala, the Jagas of the Portuguese campaigns of the seventeenth century, wish to terrify their opponents and demonstrate that before their might the usual conventions of behavior were worthless, they effectively used cannibalism as a way of ritually and psychologically overpowering their opposition.”¹⁰² Therefore, it is no wonder that Chourio would seek out the Imbangala in helping him to carry out the formidable task of subduing the Mutilones. Since the Imbangala accomplished so much in Brazil, why could they not replicate the same results in Venezuela’s Sur del Lago region? The mythos of the Imbangala super soldier was one that the *kinguri* and subsequent Imbangala leaders would perpetuate to their advantage, and one that Chourio would latch on to as well.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Mattos, “Black Troops and Hierarchies,” 15-16.

¹⁰² Stuart B. Schwartz, “Brazil: Ironies of the Colonial Past,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 80:4 (2000): 681.

¹⁰³ Just how Chourio employed these Africans is more fully developed in the following chapters.

Conclusions

The assertions and anthropological research of Juan de Dios Martínez Suárez, building on the cultural patrimony of the Sur del Lago blacks, were afforded an historical vindication. By going back to what is known about Africa in general and Angola specifically in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, similar aspects between Afro-Zulian and the Angolan Imbangala cultures were established. This chapter also demonstrated how geographic factors were responsible for the push westward by the Imbangala from their homes in the lower Congo and northeastern Angolan regions, and how this same westward trek brought them into contact with sundry Europeans, but particularly the French at Cabinda, who under the auspices of the French Guinea Company had been moving steadily south down the West African coast from Senegal for at least a century. It was also explained how some of the provisions of the Treaty of Utrecht impacted Chourio, forcing him and others in the French Guinea Company to shift a goodly percentage of their operations from the Caribbean and back to Africa. Furthermore, this chapter delineated the needs of the Spanish Crown to suppress the insurrections of indigenous peoples throughout Central and South America, and showed that their recruitment of black soldiers, mostly from Angola, served to accomplish this mission. Taking into account that the theories advocated by Martínez are largely anthropological, this chapter at least succeeded in providing a basis for further historical inquiry into the origins and expansion of the Afro-Zulian community in Venezuela. The legacy of the Sur del Lago Africans will be explored in the remaining chapters.

CHAPTER FOUR

RELIGIOUS FACTORS

Introduction

The view that history is primarily about the contemporary social relations of those who relate it has important repercussions for the way in which any group defines itself in relation to another. The same holds true for enslaved Africans and Europeans. Elucidating on this point, Raymond Williams penned that “much of the most accessible and influential work of the counter-hegemony is historical; the recovery of discarded areas or the redress of selective and reductive interpretations.”¹

In the academy of Africana Studies, this would be referred to as the *Sankofa* principle. The *sankofa* is an Akan ideogram or *Andinkra* symbol from Ghana representing a long necked bird that is reaching back into its own feathers to “seek, and take, or recover.”² In the context of Africana Studies, the *Sankofa* principle highlights an Afrocentric methodological practice of historical recovery; and with regard to the emergence of syncretic forms among the Afrozulians, a critical retrieval and reclamation of the African past is evident.

The *Sankofa* principle especially applies to religious matters, where the hidden, denied and undiscovered truths of the African presence, initiative and experience in the New World contribute much to the spiritual empowerment of black people. There is perhaps no example for which this observation could be truer than the experience of the African-descended population of the Western Hemisphere. Transported to these shores under severe conditions that immediately severed them from most of their ethnic, linguistic and familial ties, the Africans were systematically denied their histories that most other peoples accept as their birthright.

¹ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 116.

² Maulana Karenga, *Introduction to Black Studies*, 555.

Nevertheless, many of these Africans and African-derived peoples developed brilliant and resourceful strategies of survival and adaptation, proving not only that their past is recoverable, but that it contains proud and autonomous histories that bolster the world patrimony of the African Diaspora. One such group that has demonstrated this is the Afro-Venezuelan community in the Sur del Lago. For these Afro-Zulians, the dramatic vehicle providing the means to relate and affirm their history have been the performances and festivities dedicated to the syncretic melding of Ajé and San Benito.

The questions related to African religion in the Americas encompass numerous concerns: areas of influence, doctrine, dogma, epistemologies, identifiers, liturgy, persecutions, priesthood, transformations, values, etc.³ This chapter examines ways in which religious aspects of African culture allowed the Angolan blacks and their descendants to fight the process of dehumanization in the Sur del Lago and the rest of Venezuela. The religious beliefs and rituals of the Mbundu, Ndembu, Kongo and Imbangala, for example, survived in various forms throughout the African slave trade diaspora, and beyond.⁴ And most importantly, these beliefs and rituals provided the strongest forms of resistance against the hardships of enslavement by allowing the Africans to maintain at least a modicum of their cultural legacy and institutions.

In the context of both cultural survival and preservation, both African and African-derived religious belief systems were important for all black people in the New World. The amalgamation between religions (syncretism) was one process by which blacks of Africa and the Americas (to include the Caribbean) were able to maintain and enhance some elements of their African identity. However, in Latin America slaves needed to be baptized in to the Roman

³ Deoscoredes M. Dos Santos and Juana Elbein Dos Santos, “*Religión y cultura negra*,” in *África en América Latina*, ed. Manuel Moreno Fraginals (Paris: UNESCO, 1977), 103.

⁴ Rachel Dowty, “Review of James H. Sweet, *Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship, and Religion in the African-Portuguese World*,” *Journal of World History* 16:3 (September 2005): 375.

Catholic Church either before leaving Africa or immediately upon their arrival in the New World. They were also required to undergo a course of religious instruction. So how did any African religion, or semblance of one, not only survive but prosper in the New World?

To answer these questions, the status of blacks in Africa and the New World needs to be examined in the light of Christian doctrine from the beginnings of the slave trade. From the end of the sixteenth century onwards, the idea that a Christianized African could remain a slave began to gain some currency with European leaders. They reasoned that the imposition of a servile régime upon African peoples might actually be good for them in that while their bodies were enslaved, their souls would be liberated. Nevertheless, the extent of this religious indoctrination in Portuguese and Spanish areas of Catholic America was not as intense as one might presume. Because religion was viewed as more social than mystical in these Catholic colonies, a recently arrived, enslaved African only needed to memorize a few short prayers or ritual gestures in order to be granted baptism, supposing he or she had not already been baptized at the port where the slave ship took him or her aboard, or even prior to that in the African interior. Because both the Spaniards and the Portuguese made social access easier for those acquiring a “white soul,” the acceptance of Roman Catholicism by Africans was looked upon as a tool to make life for themselves and their families a little easier by opening the doors for more opportunities. It was not seen, therefore, as a betrayal of their African beliefs. As the proselytizing was much less forceful, generally speaking, than in Protestant areas of the New World, it was easier for African cultural and religious forms to endure in Latin America. Surviving beliefs in African deities, for example, fused with Catholicism and took the form of an emerging syncretism.⁵

⁵ Roger Bastide, *African Civilizations in the New World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 152-153.

In this chapter the evolution of both inter-African and New World syncretism is examined. Among the Africans, a fusion of Yoruba and sundry Angolan and Congolese belief systems was already underway before the arrival of the Europeans; and in the Americas and the Caribbean an integration of African, European and Native American religions took place, with the process continuing up to the present time. Of particular note, the relationship between the African Ajé and the Catholic San Benito in the Sur del Lago Maracaibo is established within the parameters of spiritual syncretic phenomena in both Africa and Venezuela.

Inasmuch as syncretism manifests through a cumulation (such as magic spells, songs, etc.), ecologically, ethnically, institutionally, and sociologically, the limited scope of this chapter will only allow for an examination of ethnic factors (Yoruba and Bantu-speaking Africans), as well as institutional considerations such as *inter alia* phenomena, whereby a system of correspondences between African deities is drawn and linked to a plane of events dependent upon a collective awareness, or reinterpretation of the associated phenomena.⁶ In the case of drawing connections between the Imbangala of Angola and the Yoruba of Nigeria, determining the areas of influence in Africa for the *orisha* Ajé assumes primary importance in the bolstering of some assertions by Juan de Dios Martínez.

Clash of Belief Systems

As the Europeans experienced problems in the interpretation of the meaning and significance of African religious practices based on deep-rooted and pervasive cultural biases, they attempted to squash these same in the name of stamping out “paganism” or ritual “witchcraft.” It is unfortunate that the Europeans used such pejorative terms to describe African religious belief systems, for they implicitly reduced the African spiritual expressions to their

⁶ Ibid., 153, 154.

potential for evil. Therefore, any positive aspects of African religious belief systems remained hidden behind a cloak of “evil.” In attempts to view this situation with a semblance of balance, a contemporary historian could recognize the African’s ability to control evil as just one aspect of a more intricate assemblage of religious power. The existence of supernatural forces was a given. These forces were seen as neutral in character. However, a Central African understanding of religious malevolence was directly linked to temporal bad luck, especially any misfortune caused by hidden human powers. Those Africans endowed with religious powers could do both good and evil at the same time, but it was the seventeenth and eighteenth century westerner’s inability to see this that kept him from imparting any value to the African belief systems.⁷

Because of this limited European view, the powers of African religious leaders were somewhat stifled once they were traded into slavery and removed from their ancestral homelands. The Europeans attempted to force new cultural and religious roles upon the enslaved Africans. Nevertheless, these were not simply adopted without question or resistance by the Africans. As Rachel Dowty points out, the understandings of the Africans “were always mediated by ways of knowing and living that were familiar to them.”⁸

If one attempts to analyze the religious practices of any element of the African slave diaspora based on the process of creolization, then colonialist misunderstandings are perpetuated because the cultural and ethnic norms associated with these observances cannot be assessed with regard to the viewpoint of the enslaved Africans. In other words, historical viewpoints are not the sole propriety of those who maintain the historical records. While the enslaved were rarely the authors of most historical records, they nevertheless exerted a voice that carried over in the

⁷ James H. Sweet, *Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship and Religion in the African-Portuguese World, 1441-1770* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 162.

⁸ Dowty, “Review of James H. Sweet,” 375.

oral traditions passed on in their respective communities, as well as in the records maintained by their colonial masters.⁹ In the case of the latter, an effective cultural filter would surely be required.

Those Africans enslaved by the Europeans found ways to demonstrate the power of their traditional religious ritual practices and belief systems as a matter of resistance to their forced “conversions” to Christianity. Those enslaved who were taught traditional African beliefs as children most likely retained them as adults, regardless of the numerous attempts made by their European masters to change their religious affiliations. Therefore, we see case after case in the Caribbean and Latin America where the enslaved may have claimed whatever religious affiliation their masters imposed, but this was merely a ruse to avoid unpleasant repercussions. In many instances, those Africans left to their own devices, such as freed slaves and maroons, returned to the religious affiliations of their childhoods.¹⁰

The Brazilian maroons in the *quilombos* of Palmares and surrounding areas, for example, drew much from the traditional African beliefs and practices of the Kongo, Imbangala, and other West African peoples.¹¹ According to the traditional religion of the Kongo, which was also adopted by some of the northern bands of the Imbangala, the creator of the universe is known as Nzambe. He dwells above and presides over a world of ancestor spirits.¹² Many Africans believe that when a family member dies a normal death, he or she joins this spirit world (or village) of the ancestors. It is these spirits who look after the living and protect the descendants to whom they have bequeathed their lands. Those spirits of those who die violent and untimely

⁹ Sweet, *Recreating Africa*, 115-117, 227-230. Sweet provides a critique of the Creolization process.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 230.

¹¹ Dowty, “Review of James H. Sweet,” 375-376.

¹² Carter G. Woodson, “Notes on the Bakongo,” *Journal of Negro History* 30:4 (1945): 423, 430. The Kongo lands and peoples were repeatedly invaded and subsequently occupied by the Jagas from 1565 through the end of the seventeenth century, whence many elements of their religion were assimilated by this Imbangala group.

deaths, however, are believed to be without rest until their deaths have been avenged. A spiritual medium, known among the Kongo and Imbangala as a *nganga ngombo*, was employed to discover through the use of fetishes or charms called *nkisi*, who was responsible for the death. In their theology, there is no such thing as an accident or coincidence. Also, healing practices and traditional religion go hand in hand, as the *nganga* may be consulted for herbal treatments or to root out *kindoki* (witches practicing black magic, who are thought to cause illness through ill-will, and to eat the souls of their victims by night).¹³

Our understanding of these rituals has been enhanced thanks to the evangelizing outreach of the Capuchin fathers, who kept some records concerning the religious practices of Imbangala spirit mediums, or *xinguilas*, highlighting their importance to the community.¹⁴ The Italian Capuchin priest, Antônio Cavazzi (1621-1678), detailed the possession ritual of an Imbangala in the following paragraph:

The man or woman stands in the middle of the multitude and orders that all obey him, since the function is promoted not by caprice, but by the interior impulse of the consulted spirit. Meanwhile, the musicians play their instruments and excite those present with appropriate songs and shouting, capable of frightening even the wild beasts. They sing some diabolical songs with invocations, judged efficacious for persuading the Devil to enter into the body of the person. The person, for his or her part, swears an oath to the Devil and invites him to take possession of his or her. At the sound of these supplicants, the Devil gives himself to the intervention.... Then the *feiticeiro* (witch) gets up with much seriousness, and remaining still for several moments, immediately begins to agitate, moving his eyes in their sockets, laying himself on the ground, contorting furiously, bending all of his members.... The *feiticeiro* then begins proffering extravagant words, confused and metaphorical, not without previously having forewarned those present that they are not his words, but of the spirit of such deceased Jaga, whose name he then assumes, conserving [that name] until the end of the function.... The Jagas go to this possessed person because they judge that he knows everything that happens in the other life, and they use the forms of respect and reverence that they would use with a demigod, interrogating him and receiving answers as if he were the consulted spirit. The possessed threatens

¹³ Sweet, *Recreating Africa*, 142.

¹⁴ Ibid., 140-141.

misfortune, predicts misadventure, curses, reprimands the avarice of the relatives, requests new sustenance, new foods, new human blood and new victims.¹⁵

Figure 4.1: The Italian Capuchin priest, Antônio Cavazzi, depicted an Imbangala spirit possession ritual in this water color.

Source: James H. Sweet's *Recreating Africa*, page 141.

Father Cavazzi illustrated his manuscript with watercolors depicting religious rituals carried out in both the Congo and Angola. In the above reproduced water color, seventeenth century Imbangala *xinguilas* are depicted as being possessed by the spirits of deceased ones.¹⁶ In

¹⁵ Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi da Montecuccolo, *Istorica Descrizione de' tre regni Congo, Matamba ed Angola*, 1665-1668, 2 vols., ed. and trans. Padre Graciano Maria de Leguzano (Lisbon: Junta de Investigações do Ultramar, 1965), 1:204-205. Original ed. published in Bologna, Italy, in 1687, followed with a 2nd ed., 1690.

¹⁶ Sweet, *Recreating Africa*, 141. This Cavazzi reproduction courtesy of Manoscritti Araldi, *Papers of the Araldi Family*, Modena, Italy.

the original water color, it should be noted that both spirit mediums had red taffetas tied around their arms, waists and legs and were marked with white clay. Also note the axe-wielding *xinguila* in the background. Immediately upon being possessed, this spirit medium grabbed the nearest axe and began swinging it around in all directions. This axe served as a visual representation that identifies the warrior spirit who entered the body of the *xinguila*. The man kneeling in the water color is a soldier client, beseeching counsel from the spirit mediums before going off to war.

It becomes apparent, therefore, that religion was also an important factor in the military life of the Imbangala. Many of the religious practices of the Imbangala were centered on the preparation for war or war itself. But the Imbangala and other Central Africans also employed a variety of charms, talismans and rituals to protect themselves from sundry illnesses and ward off other misfortunes in their daily lives. Cavazzi also discussed some of the strange dietary laws among the Imbangala and other Angolan and Central African peoples, with certain foods believed to empower and protect them in many ways.¹⁷ However, as we noted in the previous chapter, the Jagas, on occasion, effectively utilized cannibalism as a military stratagem to terrify their opponents. They openly employed cannibalism as a way of ritually and psychologically overpowering their opposition.¹⁸ This practice was quite effective, as most Africans associated it with witches who both symbolically and actually “ate” their victims, thereby draining them of wealth, luck and power. All the while, the Jagas and other Imbangala engaging in this practice were never to reveal any signs of disgust. They also lived parasitically, passing through the countryside and consuming everything in their path. They cut down the crops that others had planted, including palm trees. Rather than merely tapping the trees, the Imbangala employed an

¹⁷ Ibid., 176.

¹⁸ Schwartz, “Brazil,” 686.

ecologically short-sighted but effective policy of cutting and draining them. The religious implication exists here for a spiritual transition of power from the conquered lands and peoples to the Imbangala. And over time, they abandoned various adopted cults of territorial deities in favor of a strict propitiation of their own ancestors. These were the ones who set the stage for the Imbangala's militarized and seeming ruthless existence.¹⁹ Therefore, purely based on the observations of harsh practices carried out by the Imbangala, it is not difficult to understand how the Portuguese and other Europeans came to fear and grudgingly respect them, as did their African neighbors.

African and New World Syncretism

Although the Portuguese valiantly tried to Christianize various Congolese and Angolan peoples from as early as 1485, the Africans either resisted entirely or simply incorporated the Christian iconography into their own pantheon, as they had done with other *orishas* from neighboring West African kingdoms in the Niger-Benue region, beyond their northern frontiers.²⁰ This process even carried over to Brazil. For example, whenever Angolan or Congolese *candomblés* (syncretic belief structures) were created, their own rituals were grafted on to those of the Yoruba or Fon peoples. And all of this served to establish a double series of correspondences between their own spirits and the Yoruba *orishas* on one hand, and the Roman Catholic saints on the other.²¹ In the New World, Bastide explained that Angolan and Congolese spirits were still preserved through a direct correspondence with Yoruba deities, “just as though there were some standard dictionary that sanctioned a reciprocal transfer between one religion

¹⁹ John K. Thornton, “Religious and Ceremonial Life in the Kongo and Mbundu Areas, 1500-1700,” in *Central Africans and Cultural Transformations in the American Diaspora*, ed. Linda M. Heywood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 82, 83.

²⁰ Sweet, *Recreating Africa*, 114.

²¹ Bastide, *African Civilizations*, 106, 107.

and another.”²² But the West Central African deities were not completely sublimated in the Americas and the Caribbean, for Angolan and Congolese influences do assert themselves in some of the music and ritual of various *candomblés* and other syncretism.²³

In examples taken from throughout the Americas and the Caribbean, a repositioning of archaeology and anthropology in terms of “ethnogenic bricolage” has shed new light on this process.²⁴ Scholars of the African Diaspora can now move away from the dated generalizations of “Creolization” and toward this newer concept that recognizes the key interaction between agency and structure. By shifting the focus of African diaspora studies beyond debates over cultural retentions and continuities to an emphasis on multi-linear cultural developments, new theoretical and interpretative frameworks can be established and applied to the analysis of archaeological and historical data. Such investigations of African diasporas within the process of ethnogenesis make powerful contributions to interdisciplinary studies of ethnicity, race and cultural dynamics in the numerous histories of the Western Hemisphere.²⁵

New World religious experiences exhibit cultural influences from a vast array of West, West Central African, European and indigenous peoples. Kevin M. Bartoy, an Africana studies professor and archaeologist from The Hermitage in Nashville, Tennessee, directs the researcher towards Christopher C. Fennell, the anthropologist responsible for reemphasizing the place of archaeology within anthropology, and making a strong argument for an analysis that crosscuts artificial disciplinary boundaries to more holistically study the African Diaspora through the

²² Ibid., 109.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Christopher C. Fennell, *Crossroads and Cosmologies: Diasporas and Ethnogenesis in the New World* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007), 8.

²⁵ Ibid., 7.

medium of ethnogenesis.²⁶ Fennell's work is important because he employs anthropological theories concerning modes of symbolic expression, the formation and maintenance of social group identities, and the roles of individual creativity and innovation in the context of group dynamics. Core symbols within particular groups impacted by diasporic movements across the Atlantic are keys to Fennell's work. These core symbols reflect the fundamental aspects of a group's cosmology and sense of identity within the world. These symbols can be conveyed through spoken words and ritual performances and are often depicted in tangible, graphic forms (emblematic communications).²⁷

In many parts of Latin America and the Caribbean, highly embellished symbolism has developed out of the blending of diverse African cosmologies. Some anthropologists refer to this development as a general process of cultural admixture, while others use the term "creolization" to indicate this cultural blending. Evidence of diverse antecedent cultures are manifest and the patterns and contours of new cultures can be defined. Where a problem exists is in making those determinations of what happened in the interim period. Ethnogenic bricolage can fill this gap nicely, as it entails a creative process whereby individuals raised in different cultures interact in new settings. These persons are often found to be at the geographic crossroads of multiple diasporas where individuals tend to cease displaying emblematic expressions of the core symbols of the former cultural groups from which they were abducted or compelled to depart. Nevertheless, instrumental expressions of those same core symbols continue in force and are employed in private, individual spaces as part of prayers for healing or self-protection. Instrumental expressions of the same core symbols are abbreviated in their

²⁶ Kevin Bartoy, "Review of *Crossroads and Cosmologies: Diasporas and Ethnogenesis in the New World*, by Christopher C. Fennell" (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2007) in *African Diaspora Archaeology Network Newsletter* (December 2008): on-line only, <http://www.diaspora.uiuc.edu/news1208/news1208-33.pdf>, 1-5.

²⁷ Fennell, *Crossroads*, 8, 9.

composition. An example might be a Catholic making a sign of the cross. These instrumental expressions take on a p ersaic appearance that can easily be recognized by members of other cultures. The varied instrumental symbols, new core symbols and emblematic designs are configured in such a way as to convey the new culture's sense of identity, and Fennell utilizes this process of ethnogenic bricolage to emphasize the creative combination of diverse cultural elements into new configurations for the dual purpose of perseverance and self-determination.²⁸

In exploring ethnogenic bricolage in the New World, the Kongo in West Central Africa provides an excellent case study for Fennell and others. First, a plentitude of information about the Kongo people, their culture, and religion, can be garnered from the accounts of the Portuguese dating back to their arrival in the region in the 1480s. And the second consideration would be that unlike other African cultures further to the north, the Kongo peoples remained largely free of Islamic proselytizing efforts. And because the Kongo culture endures to the present, a significant amount of ethnographic accounts have been amassed, all ending a tremendous body of detailed, credible knowledge concerning their economic, political and religious traditions.²⁹

The Kongo kingdom also covered a vast expanse of territory, exercising effective control over much of the west central region of Africa from at least the fourteenth century onward. That kingdom included lands that are now incorporated into portions of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Gabon, the Republic of the Congo and Angola. While the Kongo were the first in their region to adopt Christianity, they most likely did so with the pragmatic purpose of enhancing their political power and placating the Portuguese.

²⁸ Ibid., 7-9.

²⁹ Ibid., 51, 53.

With the increased intervention of the Portuguese and other Europeans in West Central Africa, the Kongo kingdom began to fragment with the continued loss of territory. The kingship structure was replaced by a system of local chiefdoms, with each one negotiating separately with a European power. And what was left of any political cohesiveness surely came to an abrupt end with the expansion of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the decimation of their subject population as a direct result of this nefarious business. But despite all of these factors, the Kongo people evidenced not only a survival of their material culture, but also of their Kongo language and the central facets of their religion and spiritual outlook. The degree to which artifacts directly related to Kongo religion and culture have been discovered and cataloged in West Central Africa and other parts of the world lends credence to Fennell's investigations. He also explores expressions of Kongo cultural heritage through the transformation of their religious beliefs and practices over time in different locations. Fennell demonstrates that the Yoruba and Fon diasporas and New World symbolism intersected with the belief systems of the Kongo and other West Central African ethnicities in terms of private ritual observances, carvings, pottery markings, ironworks, symbolic expressions affixed to homes, and the perseverance of magic.³⁰

In the New World, a strong trend towards ritual magic is exhibited in the Afro-Brazilian syncretism of Quimbanda. Inasmuch as many thousands of Kongo and Imbangala were transported across the Atlantic to the Americas, and especially to Brazil, the rise of Quimbanda religion can properly be viewed as a manifestation of West Central African religion and spirituality. As in Africa, it is practiced in the course of sessions reserved for works aimed at doing or undoing evil. It is characterized by the sacrifice of animals, namely edible ones such as kids, chickens and pigeons. These are the offerings that can be used to invoke the spirits in the

³⁰ Ibid., 24, 53, 54, 62, 65-70, 78.

liturgies; and these spirits, in turn, act as sacramental emissaries.³¹ While Benedictine and Jesuit priests in Brazil perceived these rituals as various types of idolatry and witchcraft, the Afro-Latino historian James Sweet saw them as representing “desperate attempts to resist the hardships of slavery.”³² In the next section, the mythology and rituals pertaining to the deity known as Ajé in sundry parts of Africa and Latin America is examined, with a particular emphasis on Venezuela’s Sur del Lago and how keeping a remembrance of Ajé alive helped the Afro-Zulians establish and perpetuate a New Africa on the shores of Lake Maracaibo.

Ajé

The Kongo and Imbangala peoples transported to Brazil had much in common with the Afro-Zulians of the Sur del Lago, including a devotion to the African deity Ajé and the Black Saint San Benito.³³ Martínez claims that in the Sur del Lago, one of the domestic slaves was knowledgeable in the rituals and ways of Ajé.³⁴ He brought this important knowledge over to the New World from his village in Africa, from whence he had been taken against his will. This slave began to pay homage to Ajé, the African deity of his natal village; and soon other Afro-Zulians began to join with him.

In conversations that took place on the grounds of the grandmother of Martínez, one afternoon some of the elderly were talking about this domestic slave, a one-armed man that caused quite a stir in old San Pedro. The grandmother related that:

One morning they got the new slave from the big *ranchón* (hut). They tied him down with ropes to try and tame him. They wanted him to work with those slaves

³¹ Carlos Luconi, *Magia Brasileira*, http://www.carlos-luconi.com/in/Conde_Luconi_Brazilian_Magic.htm, (13 March 2010).

³² Sweet, *Recreating Africa*, 187.

³³ Mattos, “Black Troops,” 15-16.

³⁴ Martínez, *Como Bailar*, 5.

³⁵ Juan de Dios Martínez Suárez, *Antecedentes y orígenes del Chimbángueles* (Maracaibo: La Universidad de Zulia, 1983), 79.

already trained in different plantation tasks. Already they had taught him to harvest sugar cane in its due season. He began to work with the machete cutting with good, accurate strokes the stalks of cane. In one of many swings, however, he didn't cut the center of the cane and the machete went to separate part of his arm from the rest of his body! They succored him and began to apply known remedies, but they did not succeed in stopping the bleeding that ran from his veins like a river that flowed down from the mountain to inebriate with its nectar the heart of the lake. They carried him to the abode of the village *curandero* (witchdoctor), José Ignacio, a slave in one of the plantations on the outskirts of San Pedro, who as a last resort applied a *pañó* (wet cloth), made from the web of a spider, and the bleeding stopped. Later, he prepared him a dose of *espadilla* (ground swordfish), leaves of *carubombo*, *cañafistola* and other herbs. It saved him. In view of his advanced age, and having only one arm, the masters let him help in the house with the chores to be done there. And thus, with time, they called him 'el mocho' (the "Stub") of San Pedro. With patience, he started the cult of Ajé, a god of his African land. His cult is called to order with the drum, accompanied by a dance and offerings of fruit to the god. Little by little more followers and drummers were incorporated.³⁵

The mystique that developed around Ajé in the Sur del Lago, proved overpowering for most Afro-Zulians. As this cult began to incorporate more and more followers, it appears that the corpus of knowledge concerning Ajé began to expand as well, and this local man referenced by Martínez soon was accorded the title of high priest by an acclamation of the people. According to the Afro-Zulian chronicler, this intermediary between Ajé and the masses was born in the Angolan kingdom of Imbangala and he was about 30 years old when he arrived in the New World. The Zulian professor correctly believes that the Imbangala had reached the northwest coast of Angola, whence they carried their devotion to Ajé with them to the New World.³⁶

In *Como bailar....*, for example, Martínez relates an oral history given to him by an elderly resident of the Sur del Lago region regarding the high priest of Imbangala at old San Pedro:

One of the first strikes of the *Chimbángueles* that existed was called Imbangala, pronounced 'Aibangala' as one would blow the *i* in order that it would not have a forceful sound. The ancient one who started the cult of Ajé in San Pedro, as he

³⁶ Martínez, *Como Bailar*, 5.

had the liberty to visit of ten plantations making ‘*mandaos*’ (deliveries) to the masters, little by little he was uniting with various slaves who were also born in the Imbangala Kingdom. Because of this, and the playing of their drums when they got together, the people began to call them ‘*aimbangaleros*,’ and with the passing of time they were just called *Chimbangaleros*, and at every fiesta, *Chimbángueles*.³⁷

In the above-cited narration are the elements of linguistics, musicology and oral history that serve to reestablish cultural and religious connections between the Imbangala of Angola and other African nations with the blacks of the Sur del Lago. The resurrection of these elements by Martínez helps explain the origins of the cult in honor of Ajé and the genesis of the *Chimbángueles*.

But who was Ajé? And why was he so deserving of the honors bestowed upon him both in Africa and the New World? In his research, Martínez concluded that Ajé was the son of one of the first kings that resided in Abomey³⁸ and of a maiden that, after being violated by him, retired to live with her parents in a village of the kingdom. When she gave birth to a son, they sent him to the king so that he could be well cared for and properly educated. Ajé, upon becoming a man, left the palace and went into the world in search of his mother. He hoped that he could garner some love, brotherhood and goodness living among his mother’s people. He believed that he would feel better, having been given over to help those who were suffering from hunger or lack of shelter. Upon dying, the people made him a demigod and incorporated him into their religion.³⁹

In the Yoruba religion, Ajé is recognized as one of 429 deities.⁴⁰ In the mystery of his ritual, the devotees took the blue of the waters as a sacred, purifying element of his holy

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ This was the capital city of the kingdom of Dahomey that encompassed what is now the territory of contemporary Benin, as well as the northwestern corner of Nigeria.

³⁹ These were mostly of the Fon ethnic group.

⁴⁰ Carrillo, “*En la tierra de los hijos de Ajé*.”

condition, and they delighted with the “rocking of the waves”⁴¹ that carried him through the world in search of his mother. Upon the arrival of the rains, they invoked his presence with a flurry of drum beats. These soundings would calm any thirst that the ground and the crops of his devotees had suffered. It also symbolizes how Ajé interrupted the search he was conducting for his mother to be with and care for his mother’s people.⁴² They believe that Ajé, upon his death, was inseparably reunited with his mother in the spirit world.

Among the Yoruba, Ajé is known as Aje Shaluga, and is identified as the god of wealth who confers riches on his worshippers. The name appears to mean either "the gainer who makes to recur," or "the sorcerer who makes to recur." (*Aje*, sorcerer; *aje*, earner, or gainer, and *shalu*, to recur.) His emblem is a large cowry shell. One Yoruba proverb says, "Aje Shaluga often passes by the first caravan as it comes to the market, and loads the last with benefits;" and another, "He who while walking finds a cowry is favoured by Aje Shaluga." The large cowry, emblematic of Aje Shaluga, has no value as a medium of exchange. However, the small white cowries could be exchanged for goods and services. Aje Shaluga is the patron of dyes and of colors generally and is believed to have originated in the body of Yemaya.⁴³

A similarity seems to exist in the following account provided by Ellis of Ajé’s birth with the oral tradition passed down from generation to generation in the Sur del Lago of Venezuela:

In some time Odudua, who was the Earth, bore by Obatala, who was the Heavens, a son and a daughter. The son, Oganju, who was dry and barren land, married the daughter, Yemoja, who was the life giving water. They had a son, Orungan, who was the sky between heaven and earth. One sad day when A ganju was far from home, O rungan r avished hi s m other, Y emoja. S he s prang f rom hi m a nd r an

⁴¹ In Venezuela, this motion of the sea is referred to as the “*bamboleo*.” It is enacted in some dance movements transferred to the fiestas and processions in honor of San Benito.

⁴² Martínez, *Antecedentes*, 81.

⁴³ Alfred Burdon Ellis, *Yoruba-Speaking Peoples of the Slave Coast of West Africa: Their Religion, Manners, Customs, Laws, Language, Etc.* (London, 1894; republished online, www.forgottenbooks.com, 2007), 43-46 (14 April 2010).

quickly, blindly away. He pursued her and was overtaking her and about to touch her, when she slipped and fell, striking her head against a stone.

The impact sent jets of water gushing up from her huge breasts. These streams joined to form a sweet lagoon. Her huge belly burst open and many *orisas* (*sic*) sprang from her. There was Dada, god of vegetables; Shango, god of lightning; Ogun, god of iron; Olokun, god of the sea; Olofin, goddess of lagoons; Oya, goddess of the Niger; Osun, goddess of the river Osun; Oba, goddess of the river Oba; Olofin, god of agriculture; **Aje Saluya, god of wealth**; Sankpanna, the smallpox god; Orun, the Sun; and Osu, the Moon.⁴⁴

The account of the ravaged Yemoja and the resulting son Aje is widely known in Africa, Brazil and Venezuela. In most of Spanish-speaking Latin America, to include Venezuela, Yemaya is the proper name for the Divine Mother, while she is known as Yemoja in Bahia and the rest of Brazil.⁴⁵ This powerful female *orisha* also carries out many different functions and plays many roles in both Afro-Portuguese and Afro-Hispanic belief systems. All of the sundry manifestations of Yemaya go by various spellings and pronunciations in accordance with the Portuguese or Spanish influence on the Yoruba language,⁴⁶ with Bastide estimating that there may be at least eight names for her.⁴⁷ The Divine Mother of the Yoruba peoples is analogous to the Roman Catholic Mary, who also operates in many modalities such as Our Lady of Sorrow, Our Lady of Grace, Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament, Our Lady of the Rosary, etc.

In the syncretic belief systems (Christian-Yoruba mix) prevalent throughout the Caribbean and Latin America, Yemaya or Yemoja, symbolizes the sea and is indeed equated with Mary, the virgin mother of Jesus Christ.⁴⁸ This clearly indicates the supreme holiness attached to Ajé, establishing him as a demigod in the African pantheon. And that he emerged from the sea lends added significance to a people geographically torn from Mother Africa and

⁴⁴ Ibid., 64. See also the account given by Martínez, *Antecedentes*, 81.

⁴⁵ Pierre Verger, *Notes sur le Culte des Orisa et Voudun à l'Ancienne Cote des Esclaves en Afrique* (Dakar : Institut Français d'Afrique Noire, 1957), 294.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 293.

⁴⁷ Roger Bastide, *Le Candomblé de Bahia (Rite Nagô)*, (Paris, Mouton, 1958), 146.

⁴⁸ Lizette Alvarez, "After Years of Secrecy, Santería is Suddenly Much More Popular, and Public," *New York Times*, 27 January 1997.

transported against their will across the Atlantic Ocean. They now have a guardian and protector in Ajé while they dwell as strangers in strange land.

That the Ajé attributed to the Imbangala by Martínez was of Yoruba origin poses some problems for the researcher of religion and African culture as it was transported to the Americas and the Caribbean. The Yoruba were centered in what is now the nation of Nigeria at the confluence of the Niger and Benue rivers, much further north than the areas inhabited by the Imbangala from the sixteenth through the twentieth century. This researcher, therefore, needed to find further linkages between the Imbangala and the Yoruba.

In addition to the Imbangala Ajé and the Yoruba Aje Shaluga connection, consider the following commentary from Roger Bastide, a noted French sociologist who specialized in Afro-Brazilian culture: “Thus the Yoruba thunder-god, Shangô, is identified by the Angolans with Zazé, Kibuko, Kibuko Kiassubanga; and by the Congolese with Kanbaranguanje. Similarly, Omolú, the Yoruba god of medicine and healing, is identified by the Angolans with Cavungo, Cajanja, and by the Congolese with Quingongo....”⁴⁹

This observation by Bastide suggests that it was not unusual for non-Yoruba peoples to adopt Yoruba deities as their own. Veneration of Yoruba *orishas* extended a long way most of Africa’s west coast, from the Senegambia region in the north to Angola in the south.⁵⁰ As for the name of Ajé, among many of the Fon-speaking peoples of West Africa, mostly situated in and around the Bight of Benin, it is pronounced *Ashé*, and is loaded with meanings.⁵¹ Fon is, like Yoruba and Ewe, a Gbe language that was, and continues to be, commonly used among believers

⁴⁹ Roger Bastide, *African Civilisations in the New World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 109; originally published in the French language as *Les Amériques noires* (Paris: Editions Payot, 1967).

⁵⁰ Kiva Fall Mahkete, interview by author. Morgantown, West Virginia, 26 January 2010. Fall Mahkete is a native of Senegal, as well as a colleague and doctoral candidate in the West Virginia University Department of History. He has studied the origins and rituals associated with sundry *orishas* in Africa and Brazil.

⁵¹ D. M. and J. E. Dos Santos, “*Religión y cultura negra*,” 121. The authors make mention of Nago, which is a language based on the retention of some aspects of the Fon vocabulary in parts of Latin America. Nago is spoken during the ritual observances of many syncretic religions in the Western Hemisphere, most notably Santería.

of the Yoruba religion in what is now the contemporary African nation of Benin, as well as in parts of the Cameroon, Ghana, Nigeria and Togo.⁵²

Ashé carries out an important role as a spiritual force in the theological structure of the Yoruba religion. One of the defining aspects of the Yoruba religion shared throughout West Africa is its initiation process. The Yoruba religion was acquired, transmitted and developed in very specific ways. Adherents participate in rituals whereby they establish a direct relationship with the *orishas*, from whom they gradually receive, absorb and develop mystical and symbolic powers. The acquisition of these powers allows them to integrate and identify with the elements of a dynamic religious system. The adherents are now capable of going out into their respective communities and mobilizing these spiritual powers on behalf of the people. The *orishas*, like the Catholic saints, provide a bridge between the spirit and temporal worlds, as well as the past, present and future.⁵³ The Ajé/Ashé power is vital to carrying out all the rites of the Yoruba religion. It is a force that can only be acquired through infusion or contact and can be transmitted to both objects and human beings. Essentially, Ashé is an invisible force, magic and sacred, imparted to the adherents of the Yoruba religion by the *orishas*.⁵⁴

Among some female practitioners of the Yoruba religion, sometimes referred to as “witches,” the name *Aje* is still retained for this power. A witch, employing *Aje* power, can morph into a screeching bird and also possess the bodies of others, providing they are not strong and in good health, in so far as the potential victims have more resistance. When the witches wish to employ the *Aje* force, they must first gather in secret and work collectively. They can identify the other witches by coating their eyes with a special herbal medicine, thus giving them

⁵² Paul E. Lovejoy and David V. Trotman, *Trans-Atlantic Dimension of Ethnicity in the African Diaspora* (London: Continuum, 2003), 21.

⁵³ D.M. and J. E. Dos Santos, “*Religión y cultura negra*,” 120.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 121.

unique powers of visual discernment. If they turn to the dark side of this force, in the form of birds they can attack men and kill them by sucking their blood.⁵⁵ The draining of a victim's blood corresponds to the cannibalistic tendencies of the Imbangala.

On the other hand, the exercise of magic power by the men is known as *Ashé*. These “wizards” are associated with wealth. They are noted for living in large houses without ever having to work for them. They are believed to have amassed their wealth by stealing it from hiding places that they were able to detect with their magic powers.⁵⁶ This also adheres to the Imbangala ethos of pillaging their neighbors' lands for anything usable in their war camps.

Like the Imbangala, peoples up and down the West African coast enjoyed some familiarity with Yoruba religion and traditions. Olabiyi Babalola Yai, an ambassador from Benin to the United Nations, asserts that, “Yoruba religion became global by sharing its *orisha* with the immediate, West African neighbors of the peoples who have come to be collectively designated as Yoruba, and by adopting some of their deities.”⁵⁷ He adds that avatars of almost every Yoruba *orisha* can be identified in the pantheon of nearly any given West African ethnic group. Also, with regard to the diffusion of Yoruba religious traditions, he thinks that more attention and study of Yoruba encounters with Central Africans is sorely needed.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Teacher in Abeokuta (Yoruba), as told to J. P. Crazzolara, “The African Explains Witchcraft,” *Journal of the International African Institute* 8:4 (October 1935): 548. Contemporary anthropologists would refer to the practitioners of traditional African religions as shamans rather than “witches” or “wizards,” as they were often called back in the 1930s, even in the above-cited translation from the Fon language provided by this esteemed academic journal, now published simply as *Africa* by the same organization.

⁵⁶ Teacher in Abeokuta, “African Explains Witchcraft,” 548.

⁵⁷ Olabiyi Babalola Yai, “Yoruba Religion and Globalization: Some Reflections,” *Cuadernos Digitales: Publicación Eléctrica en Historia, Archivística y Estudios Sociales* 15 (October 2001), *La Universidad de Costa Rica*, <http://historia.fcs.ucr.ac.cr/cuadernos/c15-his.htm> (28 January 2010).

⁵⁸ Ibid.

As noted, the work of establishing these connections has already begun, especially concerning the extensive transfer of Yoruba religious systems and traditions to the Kongo,⁵⁹ a group that encountered the Imbangala on numerous occasions.⁶⁰ To take another example, Queen Nzinga of the Mbundu peoples of Angola, for example, beseeched a “spiritual Àjé force” to assist in her kingdom’s battles with the Portuguese invaders, against whom she also contracted and deployed a contingent of Imbangala warriors.⁶¹

As evidenced by Queen Nzinga, there is a certain practicality to traditional African religions, whose followers, like the Yoruba peoples, place an emphasis on the “here and now rather than the afterlife,” and tend to focus on “natural forces.”⁶² According to a *New York Times* correspondent, “Each (Yoruba) deity represents an aspect of nature, like thunder, and a human characteristic, like power.”⁶³ As a spiritual force, Àjé manifested as both male and female avatars throughout sundry West African kingdoms.⁶⁴ Therefore, it was noted that the Yoruba priests of Àjé in Africa⁶⁵ and the Santería practitioners of Ajé in America⁶⁶ could be of either sex. These priests helped people to resolve their day-to-day problems by consulting with Àjé. The priests of Santería and other syncretic sects, as they have come to evolve, are not Catholic priests, and are not endorsed in any way by the Roman Catholic Church. Their rituals, for the most part, are held in homes rather than chapels, churches or temples.⁶⁷

⁵⁹ Teresa N. Washington, *Our Mothers, Our Powers, Our Texts: Manifestations of Àjé in Africana Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 57, 58, 67, 80, 84, 85, 88, 298.

⁶⁰ Woodson, “Notes on the BaKongo,” 423, 430.

⁶¹ Washington, *Our Mothers*, 58.

⁶² Lizette Alvarez, “After Years of Secrecy,” (*New York Times*).

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Washington, *Our Mothers*, 56-57.

⁶⁵ Teacher in Abeokuta, “African Explains Witchcraft,” 548.

⁶⁶ Washington, *Our Mothers*, 56-57.

⁶⁷ “The Lure of Santería,” *Awake!*, 8 July 2000. This is a publication of the Watchtower and Bible Tract Society of New York, Inc., M. H. Larson, President.

This harnessing of Yoruba rituals for application in the New World formed the basis of a new theology that permitted continued efforts at worshipping the *orishas* in accordance with ancient African beliefs. African slaves assigned to Catholic saints dual identities. Each Catholic saint corresponded to an African deity with particular characteristics and powers. Once the Africans were situated in the New World, the French, Portuguese and Spanish colonial administrators and clerics tried to force them to abandon their traditions completely. In order to circumvent this, the Africans opted to create new forms of worship out of elements taken from both the Catholic and Yoruba religions, and this melding of religious practices became known as syncretism.⁶⁸

The Africans put the faces of Catholic saints to all of their own deities, including Ajé. Therefore, all of the anti-African philosophy and ploys of the Roman Catholic Church failed to bury Ajé. He lives on in hearts of the Afro-Venezuelans and other black South Americans and Afro-Caribbeans, while the image that these same people venerate is that of San Benito. One follower of Santería expressed this idea succinctly when he explained that, “Syncretism allows us to worship the Catholic god on the altar, but what we see is the African god behind it.”⁶⁹ Therefore, Ajé is seen as the authentic power that makes possible the miracles, at least in the eyes of most Afro-Zulians. In the next section, both the historical and mythic personage of San Benito are examined, and the linkages between Ajé and San Benito are further explored.

San Benito

Long before his devotees ever referred to him as “San Benito,” he came into the world of humble station. His story begins in the first quarter of the sixteenth century, when a man child came into the world near the then small Italian town of Manassari, situated on a Mediterranean

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ “Lure of Santería,” *Awake!*

island to the south of the boot. He was black, the son of some slaves that served a rich estate owner, Señor Vicenzo Manassari, or some say Manasseri, in whose family's honor the town was named. Even though San Benito's parents, being of Ethiopian descent and the property of Señor Manassari, were legally not entitled to keep their son, the estate owner felt pity on the couple, and because of their pleadings and honest service to him, allowed the family to keep and care for their son on the condition that his life be devoted to the service of God and the Holy Church.⁷⁰

There are also some other legends. One says that while San Benito's father was Ethiopian, his mother was an Italian queen. And yet another states that San Benito was white, but that he had asked God to blacken his skin in order to escape the temptations of women.⁷¹

It has been established that his parents, Cristóbal and Diana Larcán, did not want to have any children because they would end up as slaves, like they were. Upon knowing that this slave couple had made up their mind concerning this matter, the master swore to them that at least the first of their children would not be born a slave. And then, in 1524, Benito, or Bendetto in Italian, came to see the light of the world. His name means "blessed one."⁷²

The small child of Cristóbal and Diana lived the life of a campesino and pastor of sheep. In his late teens, he became spiritually awakened, and decided to join the Franciscan religious order. There, he worked as a cook in a convent. While he wasn't a slave, we have to keep in mind that his parents continued to work under the orders of Señor Vicenzo Manasseri. The little money that Benito would receive for his services as a cook he would keep because he thought that if he saved enough, perhaps his luck and the luck of his parents would take a turn for the better. Nevertheless, as he grew in stature and wisdom, he began to feel closer to the work of the Franciscans, and he wanted evermore to live a life of solitude and penitence. He was beginning

⁷⁰ Crespo, *Venezuela: Tierra Mágica* (pamphlet).

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

to lose interest in money, as well as other material things. At the same time, as he continued in the field and the convent, engrossed in his labors and metaphysical contemplations, there passed by one day a friar. This religious brother stopped to chat in frankness with Benito, and convinced him to leave and to live in the mountains with him as part of the Brotherhood of the Monks of San Francisco de Assisi. Much time passed as Benito dedicated his life to the order. There is no doubt that he enjoyed the religious life.⁷³

Nevertheless, there was some political turmoil in the group. It was self-destructing, but Benito did not want to wait around for the brothers to disband. Instead, he joined up with the Little Observing Brothers, another organization in the Franciscan order. That was in Palermo, Italy, and it was also there, because of his charitable work, that Benito became well known for enormous generosity. First, he was known as Fray Benito de Palermo and later, when the Pope Pío VIII declared him a saint, San Benito de Palermo, the name that he has come to be known as forevermore.⁷⁴

He has also, in some circles, come to be called San Benito de Fratello, San Benito el Moro or San Benedito. In spite of carrying on a life of privations and sufferings, he always flashed a brilliant smile. Nobody, or almost no one, knew of his physical pain. He died at the age of 65, on the 4th of April, 1589, at 7 p.m. All of Palermo came to pay their last respects before his open coffin. With his habits and his few possessions they fabricated religious relics and keepsakes of his glorious past for the world to remember his smile. So innumerable were his miracles, they are uncountable. And he was most well known for the curing of the sick, alleviating the afflicted, providing hospice for the dying, protecting the harvests and making

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

businesses prosper. But while he worked so many miracles, he was also apt to castigate those who failed to keep the promises they made to him.⁷⁵

The Spanish brought San Benito to the Americas along with dozens of other prominent Catholic saints, but right away San Benito became recognized as the patron of the Spanish colonial blacks because this sacred personage was as black as they were.

The Venezuelans believe in him with great fervor. The slaves invoked his power through the religious rites and ceremonies in those days that their masters would allow them to celebrate with their African dances in order to at least feel “temporarily free,” until they had to go back to work. Thus, San Benito is equated with liberty among the Afro-Venezuelans. His fiestas keep kindled the memory of African ceremonies, dances and traditions veiled in a cloak of Catholicism. In the colonial times, the black slaves continued to celebrate San Benito through processions, candlelight vigils, and special prayers on his saint day of 29 December. These celebrations constitute a mixture of sacred and profane religious ritual: European, African, Native American, Christian and Animist all at the same time. The celebration in honor of the Black Saint begins with the first rains and ends in the summer, from the first Saturday in October until the first of January.⁷⁶

The non-sanctioned liturgical cycle of San Benito celebrations actually closes on *El Día de los Reyes Magos*, or Day of the Astrologer Kings, on the Sixth of January. *Chimbángueles* sound throughout the entire day as the saint bids farewell to all of his devotees. In Gibraltar, after the saint is resituated in his chapel, the assembly is initiated in sacramental plays, where all of the people serve as both actors and spectators. While this last activity is relatively recent as

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Martínez, *Como Bailar*, 7-9. Details of all the activities pertinent to San Benito, profane and sacred, are explained based upon an interview conducted by Martínez with Encarnación Estrada, the director of San Benito festivities in the village of Palmarito in 1956.

far as being allowed to take place in the Catholic Church, being instituted about one hundred years ago, it has been tolerated by the church because it served as a channel for directing pagan souls back in its direction. In order to fully appreciate the meaning of these closing activities, Martínez has studied the *Chimbángueles* in the context of four aspects: Divinity, Governance, Orchestra and the Human Aggregate. The last category represents the vassals or devotees of San Benito that by their African heritage and enduring faith have assumed the responsibility of watching over and taking care of the basic elements needed to complete the rituals.⁷⁷ These include such activities as constructing the drums, flutes, maracas, and batons, as well as recruiting and forming new vassals.⁷⁸

Speaking of the importance of the San Benito festivities for the people, Martínez stated the following:

The religious fervor to which the people celebrate the First of the Year and their testimonies given permit me to affirm the following: The *Chimbángueles* of the First of January soar to the heavens on the day that Mawo-Lisa created the world, there in Africa, and it represents the resumption of time, when life began for our ancestors. With these *Chimbángueles* “pure time” is restored, that which existed in the moment of the creation of the world. It is not a pagan time in which routinely we can return to. Therefore, the regression to pure time invites us to renew everything that in the previous year had been poorly used or defective. Man and all things are created anew, reborn each First of January. We are freed from times past, reconstructing ourselves as more pure in creative power and free, as men ought to be, before the supernal presence of Ajé or San Benito, to whom the *Chimbángueles* sound out in their honor.⁷⁹

Martínez further explained the significance of these celebrations to the Afro-Zulian community, noting that it was considered by all of them as an obligation of the African celebration of “Passing Time.” In other words, the festivities represent the nullification of poorly

⁷⁷ Martínez, *Como Bailar*, 10. Martínez views the Angolan drums as the heart of the festivities, seeing them as “sacramental elements” of the living practices of the Imbangala ancestors. He explains that the very word, *Chimbángueles*, is an Hispanic term applied to the name in which the Imbangala of Angola refer to themselves, *Aimbanglé*.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Martínez, *Como Bailar*, 8.

used time, as well as the faults and failings of men. In this period of Passing Time, the followers of the saint take advantage of the opportunity to renew their search for a more dignified society. They believe that not only Ajé/San Benito, but other African *orishas* are working together to help them create a better society, or to one day dismantle it completely and reconstruct it in the image of a New Africa. Martínez qualified this by declaring that on the First of January, “we make of ourselves new and more dignified universal beings.”⁸⁰ In the next section, the ease at which this syncretic process of the melding of Ajé with San Benito was carried out is examined in the context of the European efforts directed towards the evangelization of blacks back in West Central Africa.

Propagation Efforts of the Capuchin Order

Historical records indicate that Christianity in West Central Africa was introduced from the top down. The African King of the Kongo, Garcia Alfonso II, in an effort to reassert his independence from Lisbon, in 1646 sent a letter to the Pope inviting more non-Portuguese Catholic missionaries, Italian and Spanish Capuchins, to take up residence in his domains.⁸¹ Duffy points out that the shortage of Portuguese missionaries was always a problem in Angola. Even when Portugal had a surplus of missionaries, few were willing to commit to a term of service in Africa; and of those that did, few could be counted on to complete their tasks.⁸² Said the Bishop of Angola in 1773 regarding Portuguese missionaries in his ecclesiastical jurisdiction: “Some come to seek their fortunes and pursue their own interests.... others satisfy their passions.... others flee from the discipline of their prelates.... And from these greedy, expatriate, rebellious, and libertine men what else can be expected than the spread of vice and scandal in

⁸⁰ Ibid., 8-9.

⁸¹ Duffy, *Portuguese Africa*, 67.

⁸² Ibid., 106.

which this land is already buried.”⁸³ The dedication of the Italian Capuchins was most notable, however, and put to shame the weak efforts of evangelization put forth by the Portuguese clergy.⁸⁴

The history of the Capuchin order in the Congo and Angola dates back to 1608. In that year, the Manicongo Dom Alvaro II requested that missionaries be sent to his realm to introduce his subjects to the Christian religion. By 1620, the Pope had sanctioned the creation of the Apostolic Prefecture of the Congo. The oversight of this prefecture was trusted to the Italian Capuchin friars, who would report to the Bishop of Angola. The first mission was dispatched to Africa in 1640, but was blocked by Lisbon authorities. Then, in just five years, another mission was dispatched to the Congo from Spain, thus bypassing Portugal altogether. This mission of the Italian Capuchins met with phenomenal success. By 1648, over 45,000 Africans had been converted and baptized into the Roman Catholic Church.⁸⁵

The evangelization work of the Capuchins in the Congo and Angola continued, despite protests by King João of Portugal that the activities of the Italian order were undermining both his authority and sovereignty by their consorting with other Europeans in the area. In 1649, for example, the Portuguese king ordered the Capuchins to declare their fidelity to him and to Portugal or be expelled from Africa. Under duress, they did so swear, and were then allowed to take up residence in Luanda and Massangano to further the mission work in Angola. Within a relatively short time, eight missions were established. However, relations with the Portuguese remained tenuous. One of the factors that put the Capuchins under intense Portuguese scrutiny was their expressed desire to expand the priesthood through the recruitment of Africans. Christian communities were being established at an ever increasing rate, but many of the white

⁸³ Quoted in J. Alves Correia, *A dilatação da fé no império português*, 2 vols. (Lisbon, 1936), II:40-41.

⁸⁴ Duffy, *Portuguese Africa*, 106.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 115.

missionaries sent to manage the parishes there were weakened or dying off from malaria and dysentery. In addition, the ravages of the slave trade impeded their work, and by the start of the eighteenth century, the order in Angola had begun to wane.⁸⁶

Duffy does state, however, that the Capuchins were “diligent men, usually selected with care by their superiors for West African assignments.” He adds that although they preferred working in coastal Angola, the Capuchins were willing to serve for long years of isolation in the heart of the Congolese interior. “Although they were known to deal in slaves and to work with them,” asserts Duffy, “their record was probably the best of any mission order working in Africa until the present century.”⁸⁷

In light of this remarkable history, it comes as no surprise that Chourio chose Italian Capuchins for the chapel he was constructing at Perijá. Thus there remains a high probability that his contacts with the Imbangala may have come about through his connections with the Capuchin order in Angola. The Imbangala contingent that went with Chourio to Venezuela may well have been Christianized by the Capuchins, at least to a limited degree. But because the Capuchins did not operate any catechism schools in the interior regions, and because there were no missionary sisters to educate the women, the Imbangala, like other Africans in contact with the Europeans, may not have been sufficiently grounded in the Roman Catholic religion to resist the infusion of African beliefs into their newly emerging theological perspectives, thereby providing an account for the evolution and diffusion of the Ajé/San Benito syncretism throughout Venezuela.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Ibid., 116.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 117.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 131.

Diffusion

It was in the oppressive environment surrounding slavery in Venezuela in which Africans in the Sur del Lago Maracaibo region found themselves turning to San Benito for relief, and with the later infusion of an Imbangala contingent (third wave) with an affinity for Ajé, it is easy to understand how this syncretic belief system evolved and flourished. Around the beginning of the seventeenth century, in Gibraltar, a small Venezuelan pueblo in the Sur del Lago Maracaibo, the owners of the big plantations (*hacendados*) began to take an interest in the importation of African slaves. The slave traffic was being carried out in the Americas since the first quarter of the sixteenth century, primarily in Cartagena, Nueva Veracruz, Portobelo, La Habana, Puerto Rico, Carúpano and La Guaira.⁸⁹ Because of the early work of the Capuchins in Africa, it is highly probable that these early Africans in the Sur del Lago shared some knowledge of San Benito, but not necessarily making a connection with Ajé, at least until the importation of Imbangala in the area by Chourio.

The big land owners of the Sur del Lago district looked at the huge profits their Latin American neighbors were garnering because of the slave trade, and also wanted to participate it. To begin with, they imported just three hundred slaves, but wanted to be assured that these came from different regions of Africa. They did this in order to lessen the probability of conspiracies and uprisings among the slave class. They wanted to put these Africans to work in the big houses (*haciendas*) and fields of the great cacao and coffee plantations of northwest Venezuela. They also did not want any of the new slaves to be speakers of Spanish or Portuguese. They feared that the new ones might be infected with seditious ideas by those already acculturated slaves on the plantations.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Balza Santiago and Rangel, "*Mucuchíes honra a San Benito*," 79.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

Great pains were also taken to see that new slaves were kept far away from other slaves already on the plantations who were suspect of speaking the same, or similar, African languages, or that might pertain to the same or similar indigenous African culture. It was also in the minds of the big *hacendados* that the Africans were somehow “less lazy” than the Native American field workers and that the blacks were, by and large, more suitable for the rigors of work that would have to be done in the humid and hot lands of the tropics. The black people were much more capable of resisting disease than the Native Americans; and besides, the Africans were not entitled, under Spanish law, to enjoy the same legal protections that had come to benefit the Native Americans, in good part due to the auspices and intervention of the Roman Catholic Church.⁹¹ In the midst of these stifling conditions, the Afro-Zulians appropriated San Benito as their own. They did this because the Imbangala arrivals succeeded in organizing most of the Sur del Lago blacks from various plantations and imparting to them an African identification with Ajé and associated magic powers. In addition, San Benito was the only saint who could give some spiritual meaning and sustenance in their lives. For although San Benito was black, his veneration was at least tolerated by the Europeans.

The further development of the Ajé/San Benito connection in Venezuela is explored by Martínez, who provides various oral recitations passed on by elders in the Sur del Lago. One of these is Olimpiades Pulgar⁹², a.k.a. “Pía,” who on various occasions gave an account to Martínez of how the priest López of Gibraltar⁹³ was the one who initiated him into the faith, i.e. to love and believe in San Benito. This priest related several accounts to Señor Pulgar of the legends and rituals surrounding San Benito that have emerged throughout Venezuelan history, who in turn passed the information on to Martínez and other interested parties.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Martínez, *Como Bailar*, 7.

⁹³ A predominantly black community in the Department of Sucre in the Sur del Lago district of Zulia State.

For example, the festivities in honor of San Benito in the Sur del Lago village of San Pedro, little by little, and over the years, have managed to extend to other communities in the municipalities of Sucre and Baralt of Zulia State, and Justo Briceño of Mérida State. And by the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, San Benito celebrations even extended to communities in the states of Trujillo, Lara, Falcón and Portuguesa. This diffusion of the sect of San Benito followed various natural paths that included contact and/or commercial relations within the area of the *chimbángueles*. These contacts and/or relations were varied, but mostly carried out through the activities of fishermen and peasants.⁹⁴

The case of the fishermen of the northern and eastern coasts of Lake Maracaibo is particularly illustrative of this point, for during certain times of the year they go to the southern portions of the lake in search of special fish, i.e. *cardúmenes de manamanas*, *bocachicos*, *armadillos*, *bagres* and *doncellas*, whence they come in close contact with Afro-Zulian communities in the region. The contacts thus engendered over the centuries with the black people of the municipality of Sucre have allowed these fishermen to gain an intimate knowledge of the fiestas in honor of San Benito. These would include not only the *chimbángueles*, but also the *gaita* of Tambora⁹⁵ and the *Tamolargo* or *Guariré* (the dance of San Pascual Bailón).⁹⁶ In spite of being mostly *mestizos*, a mixture of Native American with Canary Islanders and some *peninsulares*, the fishermen were generally considered to be a poor and oppressed people. Their situation oriented them to become followers of Santa Lucía and San Benito, saints that according to Catholic tradition were the protectors of paupers and slaves. Little by little they began to venerate these saints, based on the customs and traditions of the black slaves they came into close contact with on the southern shores of the lake. Many of the fishermen erected altars in

⁹⁴ Martínez, *Como Bailar*, 20.

⁹⁵ Folkdances set to an early type of “rap,” accompanied with African drumming.

⁹⁶ It takes 32 people to carry out this street dance, apart from the drummers who walk behind them and play.

honor of Saint Lucía and also began to play drums in honor of San Benito. Examples of this diffusion by the fishermen are found in Santa Rosa de Agua, where Saint Lucía and San Benito are venerated; in Caño Sagua in the municipality of Páez; in Concha, Ologa, El Congo Mirador and other pueblos of the municipalities of Colón and Catatumbo, in Barranquitas and Potreritos in the municipalities of Perijá and Urdaneta.⁹⁷

Another area of intense cultural diffusion is among the peasants of Trujillo. Generally, the agricultural and livestock production of the peoples of the southeast of Zulia State, by tradition from the earliest of colonial times, left by the port of Gibraltar, and at the start of the twentieth century, by Bobures. This contact was equal to that of the fishermen in getting close to San Benito, and little by little the people in these regions began to play their drums. Also, it is necessary to point out that La Ceiba is the port of Trujillo that in the colony belonged to the *cantón* of Gibraltar, where the custom existed of making the *chimbángueles*. From here, one goes up to El Muro, Santa Isabel, and Dos de Febrero, among other pueblos. Also, the legend and adoration of San Benito persists from colonial times to the present in the area round about Río Poco.⁹⁸

Thereby, the diffusion of the cult of San Benito by fishermen and peasants allowed for the legends and rituals surrounding this black saint to extend to all areas of Venezuela. Even indigenous peoples (Native Americans) incorporated San Benito into their already expanded pantheon of deities. In the next section, this inclusion of San Benito into a mix of African, European and Indigenous beliefs structures is examined, along with the emergence of other multicultural syncretism.

⁹⁷ Martínez, *Como Bailar*, 20.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 21.

African-European-Indigenous Syncretism

The African-European religious rituals were carried out while some of the Catholic authorities turned a blind eye. To assure the penetration of Christianity among the recently arrived Africans in the Sur del Lago, the missionaries permitted them to incorporate some of their traditional ceremonies into the Catholic feast days. An equal complacency was shown toward Native American rites, without strict compliance to the ecclesiastical rules and regulations established beforehand on the Iberian Peninsula. In the sixteenth century with the arrival of the Spaniards, the socio-cultural habitat of the people of Mucuchíes underwent a significant transformation of its religious practices. The Spaniards imposed a new doctrine that while intending to abolish the older belief systems, unconsciously, and over time, served to meet the spiritual needs of the indigenous Timotes. New gods came to replace the autochthonous gods, who remained a matter of worship and hope for the new society that developed in the colonial period until today. Mucuchíes, like the entire Rangel Municipality, possesses a rich cultural heritage. Within the context of its customs and traditions, both religious and folkloric, the feast in honor of San Benito came to form the focus of a comprehensive program of religious activities in which other saints were also venerated. The festivals for the black saint have turned out to be an economic boom for Mucuchíes, in addition to providing an excellent excuse for the people of the area and the rest of Venezuela to visit and spend their money in typical tourist activities. Thus, it is noted that even in the remote Andean village of Mucuchíes in Mérida State, by the last days of the eighteenth century the custom of dancing before the sacred images of the *orishas/saints*, and of taking these images out of their temples in great processions had already been well established.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ Balza Santiago and Rangel, “*Mucuchíes honra a San Benito*,” 73, 74.

Examples of such syncretism are to be found in various theocratic organizations which delineate the responsibilities for carrying out sundry ceremonies in the societies of the saints. In the societies dedicated to San Benito, assignments are made for the chief organizer (*mayordomo*), the first captain, the captain of the plaza, the captain of the brigade and the local commanders (*mandadores*).¹⁰⁰ These individuals were charged with directing the religious festivities, whereby the drums, the maracas, the dust that is kicked up, the joy of the dancers, the marches, the bright uniforms and the songs of praise added great color. But all of this did not just happen spontaneously. There is a government, theocratic if you will; and it is known as the Government of San Benito. It began with the so-called *cofradías*, religious societies created by order of the king of Spain, whose membership was open to all, including those from all of the marginalized groups, like the slaves, free blacks or even the runaway blacks (*cimarrones*). They come together united under the protection of San Benito and the Catholic Church. Today, the vassals of San Benito not only secure limousines and organize processions and pilgrimages, but take care of the sick and the burying of the dead in their respective communities. They assist at funerals and special prayer sessions (*novenarios*), as well as in confronting together with the people the unresolved issues of their respective communities, exasperated by poverty.¹⁰¹

The patron saint days are well heeded. The celebrants pay particular attention to every detail. They are celebrated with pomp and circumstance. The statues of the saints, or images, are dressed up in the clothing indigenous to the area of the celebrants. Some of the vassals are wielding whips. Everything is leading to a big blowout manifested in banquets and the various functions of agricultural and religious collectives. The pagan origins of some of these activities

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 84.

¹⁰¹ Miguel Acosta Saignes, *Vida de los esclavos negros en Venezuela* (Valencia, Venezuela: Vadell Hermanos, 1984), 224, 225.

are, of course, shrouded in pre-Christian times of a remote past, both African and indigenous. Nevertheless, they continue to generate a lot of excitement.

The *cofradías* that manage these celebrations were very numerous once upon a time in Europe, and especially in Spain. From these *cofradías*, the societies sprang up. These *cofradías* were more like small trade unions than anything else. Miguel Acosta Saignes is one Venezuelan historian with a distinct interest in these religious groupings that abounded in the colony as well as in Latin American folklore. According to this historian, the church would intervene only in the naming of the *cofrades*, or leading members of the societies.¹⁰² The *cofradías*, for the most part, permitted Africans to establish ceremonies based on their heritage in far-away lands, in honor of their idols, utilizing the Catholic rituals. To amplify this point, Acosta Saignes wrote:

The colonial authorities allowed, since the sixteenth century, for the slaves to celebrate certain (liturgical) holidays, even permitting them to take part in organizational and lavish parades. This was not done for the purpose of pandering to the blacks, but to facilitate the illusion that they possessed true, free will and to cultivate the feeling that they could perform certain activities unhindered. Therefore, they could keep their drums, along with some dances and songs that were gradually modified to contain only reminiscences of their African origins. Over time, however, the African words used in the various celebrations lost their spiritual meaning and significance; with most Afro-Venezuelans only cognizant that the words derived from other lands and other times, whence their ancestors were free and happy.¹⁰³

The duty of preserving what could be salvaged of the African heritage of Venezuela's blacks and its significance fell on the leadership of the *confradías*. In all of the larger cities *confradías* were organized. These *confradías* were governed by general provisions outlined in their own regulations that took into account any special circumstances of their location, church or conditions(s) of their constituents.¹⁰⁴ Acosta Saignes believes that the diffusion of the cult of

¹⁰² Ibid., 224.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 215.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

San Benito throughout the entirety of Venezuela helped to maintain a greater degree of African acculturation in the Bolivarian country. Said Acost Saignes:

In the west, San Benito was honored with the drums of the *chimbángueles*.... His devotees were dancing from the lowlands of the south of Lake Maracaibo to the peaks and valleys of Mérida and Trujillo. They sang songs, kept promises they made early, played strange music with the nose flute, and performed long pilgrimages to the sound of Angolan drums (*chimbángueles*). Also, western communities trembled in unison. Both free and slave sectors were impressed by the power of San Benito, and the scope of his influence was greatly extended.¹⁰⁵

Because of the work of these societies, a good deal of ritual has been salvaged over time. The fact that some of this material lives on in the folklore of the people, such as that encountered in the camps and factories of working class Venezuelans, is encouraging. And by the societies bringing these traditions of the black saint to the masses, they have especially reached and galvanized another oppressed minority in Venezuela, the Native Americans. States Alexi Peñañoza Torres, a researcher on Native American customs and traditions in the Venezuelan Andean village of Mucuchíes,¹⁰⁶ there was “one good day, in those years of the foundation and re-foundation of the village,¹⁰⁷ where there appeared a small statue of the Black Saint in the ruins of a house situated on the plateau of Balza.” The people, upon seeing this, became enamored to such an extent, that in the place of the statue’s appearance they built a chapel. But afterwards, they moved the black saint out of the chapel and put him in a regular church building, dedicated to “Santa Lucía de Mucuchíes,” the blessed lady to whom it was San Benito’s consecrated duty to forever serve as guardian and protector.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 219.

¹⁰⁶ Alexi Peñañoza Torres, *Mérida: Alcaldías del Estado Mérida y Entidades Culturales* (Mérida, Venezuela: Gobierno del Estado Mérida, Dirección de Cultura del Estado Mérida, 1993), 14.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. In 1568 Mucuchíes was named by its founder, Bartolomé Gil, as “San Sebastián.” This initial Spanish foothold in the area was tenuous, as some rogue members of the local Timotes/Mucuchíes tribe soon pushed the Spaniards out. But in 1626 it was reestablished under Spanish control by Fray Bartolomé Díaz, who renamed it “Santa Lucía de Mucuchíes.” It was so named because a partial structure remained of a house that once contained a small family altar dedicated to Santa Lucía.

¹⁰⁸ Balza Santiago and Rangel, “*Mucuchíes honra a San Benito de Palmero*,” 75.

Concerning the miraculous condition of the black saint, Peñaloza Torres writes about the history of a group of rogue Timotes bandits that lived only to perpetrate bad deeds against the people of Mucuchíes. He recounts how one day this renegade band of Timotes entered the village and started to wreak havoc on their fellow indigenous brothers and sisters, as well as the Spanish, when all of a sudden, over a hilltop appeared a great army of defenders commanded by a small black man. This black commander raised a banner high over his head and the bandits fled, never to return.

Another history, also referred to by Peñaloza Torres, describes the actions taken by the Colonel of the Patriotic Army Rafael Salas, under the command of General Campo Elías, in the 1816 *Campaña Admirable* (Admirable Campaign), during the terrible times of the revolution in defending Mucuchíes against the Spanish imperial forces. Being in torment over the horror of the war and the loss of good men under his command, the colonel got down on his knees before the statue of San Benito and prayed that the black saint would make a miracle happen. If the saint would answer his prayer, and turn the tide of battle, the patriot officer promised that “forevermore a military tribute would be rendered to the honor of San Benito.” Suddenly, his remaining men got the upper hand in the battle and the Spanish were in full retreat from the Andean village. Apparently, San Benito heard the earnest prayer of Colonel Salas, and to this present time, military honors are rendered not only in Mucuchíes, but in many other parts of Venezuela and even Colombia, to the black saint on his special church day(s).¹⁰⁹

In this same tradition, the appearance of San Benito resuscitated the hopes of the local patriot forces that valiantly fought against the Spanish tyrants. Ever since that near mythic day, the Festival of San Benito has been annually celebrated in various sites throughout Venezuela

¹⁰⁹ Belis Araque de Silva, “*Calendario Folklórico*,” *Revista Bigott* 16:42 (March-June 1997): 62-63.

until a general agreement was reached to fix the date on the 29th of December of each year. Colonel Salas himself designated Raphael Albarrán as the first captain and chief of the holiday festivities. Later came Lucas Rangel, Lucio Espinoza, David Espinoza, Ismar Quintero, Abad Antonio Espinoza, etc. From the beginning, the men who participated in these activities colored their faces black in honor of San Benito with ink obtained from mixture of soot from kerosene lamps with Vaseline and oil. They wear brown uniforms. *Novenas* (special prayers extended over nine days) begin with processions from house to house, with local musical accompaniment and dancing.

Initially, the locals carried the famous *chopos*, colonial-style rifles no longer in common usage. These weapons were first donated by Colonel Salas. In the beginning, these activities were somewhat disorganized and even dangerous, as many of the participants had no special training in these weapons and some were marching with the arms under the influence of alcohol. Sometimes soldiers or spectators were burned, hurt or killed. Therefore, in 1980 the Archbishop of Mérida, Monsignor Miguel Antonio Salas, intervened with the issuance of a decree declaring the elimination of San Benito festivities on the grounds that they bordered on paganism and did not agree with Catholic tradition insofar as respect in the proper veneration of saints. The devotees, then, promised that they would carry out the San Benito festivities in a more respectful and organized manner, thus avoiding any accidents with firearms. The devotees promised that if the Catholic hierarchy did not think that the San Benito festivities went well, they would respect the decree of the Archbishop to abolish said festivities forevermore.¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ Balza Santiago and Rangel, "*Mucuchíes honra a San Benito de Palmero*," 79.

Other Venezuelan Religious Syncretism

In Venezuela, other African-European-Indigenous belief systems to consider are the cults of the Black Panther Woman, Maria Lionza, and San Juan Bautista. Like the veneration of San Benito, the activities surrounding these other forms of syncretism have become more profane over time, and their diffusion has become just as wide. But there are some differences. The centers of focus for these varied religious modalities fall in distinct geographic areas of Venezuela apart from Zulia state. Also, the degree to which indigenous groups have impacted these structures is significantly higher than the case of San Benito, where the African influence was the stronger one, overpowering the indigenous.

The first of the African-European-Indigenous cults to be examined is that of the Black Panther Woman, called *La Pantera Negra* by the residents of the village of Aripao in Venezuela's Bolívar State. Aripao was established during colonial times by runaway slaves (maroons) and local indigenous people. Today there are only 300 inhabitants in the village.¹¹¹ Based on extensive interviews with them, a composite account of their origins and that of the Black Panther Woman was put together by anthropological researcher Berta Pérez:

A couple from the Spanish Crown had a daughter who fell in love with a black slave and became pregnant. They were afraid of being reprimanded for making the European blood impure, so they fled with all their people and came to the Caura River where they founded Corocito. The couple had a *mulata* baby girl, who was known as *Pantera Negra*. She was raised there and became very powerful. When she grew up, the Queen Pantera Negra was very beautiful. The old people used to say that she attracted a lot of men, who would fight for her. She used her feminine qualities to entice and enchant men. But she also mercilessly killed anyone who crossed her or who she did not like. She was always armed. She did atrocious things, and that is why she was called Pantera Negra. She was evil. The Spaniards killed her mother and Pantera Negra wanted to take revenge. She became evil for her hatred against the Spaniards. She... had her own kingdom with blacks and indigenous slaves. She was the ruler (*cacica*) and richest woman in the Caura region. She had diamonds and gold.

¹¹¹ Berta Pérez, "Pantera Negra," in Arlene Torres and Norman E. Whitten, editors, *Blackness in Latin America and the Caribbean*, V. I (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 225, 227.

Pantera Negra was a loner who lived in an underground hut in Barrancas across from Corocito, her colony. She used to come out, through a tunnel, to bathe in her river pond, known as Castillo de Piedras....”¹¹²

Of interest, locals still keep a distance from both the alleged locations of her bathing pool and dwelling.¹¹³ The Black Panther Woman is believed to have appeared on numerous occasions. This is especially the case when the descendants of her colony are menaced by outside forces, for she must defend her people and repel the invaders. In fact, during the Venezuelan war for independence and afterwards, the legend of the Black Panther Woman took on added significance as the patriotic forces could appeal to her in seeking the aid of both blacks and indigenous people in the Caura River basin and its environs, enlisting them in fight against Spanish rule. She continues to be both a culturally historic and symbolic force, providing a continuity that transcends time and space via the importance, potency and power imputed to her. The continued existence of the Arípaños in the extensive Bolívar State could, in itself, be construed as “proof of the living legacy of *La Pantera Negra*.”¹¹⁴

Another powerful female figure in the mythology of Venezuela, encompassing multicultural African-European and Indigenous legacy, is that of María Lionza. The cult of María Lionza is focused on a woman who can assume two forms. When appearing as a Native American, she is powerful and sexy. She is nude and riding a tapir, and holds between her outstretched hands a human pelvis. In this guise, she is sometimes known as “Yara,” which is purported to be her authentic indigenous name. She can also morph into the form of a young,

¹¹² Ibid., 224.

¹¹³ Ibid., 235.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 240.

white virgin. In this guise, she is known as “María” and wears a blue mantle over her head and shoulders, bearing a striking resemblance to the Virgin Mary.¹¹⁵

This remarkable woman reigns over a kingdom of spirits dwelling in the heart of Venezuela. The mountain of Sorte is only a six hour drive from Caracas, in the María Lionza National Park. Most of the pilgrims who flock to her mountain home on weekends and holidays are from the low and middle classes, urban Venezuelans. For the most part, they are *mestizos* who consider the mountain to be an “autochthonous sacred place.”¹¹⁶

The spirits who dwell in Queen María Lionza’s realm are historic and legendary figures from Venezuelan history. They include “*El Libertador*” (the liberator Simón Bolívar); “*El Negro Felipe*,” an African who is said to have fought at Bolívar’s side in the War for Independence; “*El Indio Guacaipuro*,” who fought against the conquistadores; and José Gregorio Hernández, a popular and much-loved Venezuelan doctor who is currently being considered by the Catholic Church for sainthood. These and other spirits, including Lionza herself, are intimately associated with the protection and advancement of a free and multicultural Venezuelan republic, and frequently possess the bodies of various mediums known as *materias*. Those mediums who only channel messages from the spirits but who cannot be possessed by them are known as *bancos*. The *bancos* work with the *materias* in making the spirits feel comfortable in their temporary bodies, and also in interpreting the messages passed from the spirits to the audience. Such interactions between humans and spirits usually take place at night, and the indwelling of the spirits is accomplished to the incessant beating of African drums.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Barbara Placido, “An Analysis of Spirit Possession in the Venezuelan Cult of María Lionza,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 7:2 (June 2001): 210.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 211.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

When María Lionza appears as a white virgin, accompanied by El Negro Felipe and El Indio Guaicapuro, they are referred to as “*Las Tres Potencias*” (the Three Powers). They collectively become an emblem of the Venezuelan nation and its people. Those participating in the cult of María Lionza understand the words imparted to them from the spirits as critical to Venezuela’s future and status. Those possessed or highly involved in the cult appear to be engaged in an ongoing dialogue with anthropologists, historians, the media and the state.¹¹⁸

An excellent example of the power that María Lionza has over her followers was demonstrated in Caracas after humidity and corrosion weakened a statue of the goddess situated in a city park, causing her to lean backward from her mount on the tapir. Margot Tejada, an alleged *materia* for the goddess, claimed that the damage affected on the statue meant that María Lionza herself suffered the wound on behalf of her people. María Lionza was absorbing all the negative energies surrounding Caracas so the people themselves would not be hurt in riots and civil unrest. Many of her devotees participated in day and night vigils around the cordoned-off statue, carrying white candles and gifts to deposit at its base, until such a time as it was completely restored.¹¹⁹ A French-Yoruba medium in Caracas also claimed to receive messages from María Lionza, stating that “her spirit had flown to the Sacred Isle of the Orisha in the Caribbean to consult with the High Council of Babalawo and receive powers to help the Venezuelans overcome evil in their midst,” and that she would return only after the statue was repaired.¹²⁰ These and other purported revelations received full coverage in *El Nacional* and other major Venezuelan newspapers.

The next Venezuelan spiritual cult is that of San Juan. Like San Benito, but unlike the Black Panther Woman and María Lionza, San Juan is a legitimate Catholic saint (Saint John the

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 208.

¹¹⁹ Garnica, “*Humedad y corrosión*,” *El Nacional* (Caracas), 7 June 2004.

¹²⁰ Luis Chumaceiro, “*La venganza de la reina*,” *El Nacional* (Caracas), 9 June 2004.

Baptist). But while San Benito is celebrated during the Winter Solstice, San Juan is celebrated during the Summer Solstice. Most likely, San Juan replaced Janus Bifrons as the protagonist of Summer Solstice celebrations not long after the vast majority of Romans had converted to Christianity.¹²¹ As the Summer Solstice corresponds to the arrival of rains and hence the most important time of the agricultural calendar in the same latitudes that pass through the northern tier of South America and the tropical regions in and around the Bight of Benin, one can understand how San Juan became associated with fertility and good harvests. So in San Juan we see not only an African and New World syncretism, but also one illustrative of religious mixing between pagans and Christians in the old Roman Empire.

San Juan is also celebrated throughout Venezuela in a venue of fire and water, reminiscent of the religious observances carried out by some West African peoples.¹²² The saint is treated like a fetish, bathed and neatly dressed, before going to battle against Satan and his minions. Like San Benito, he is carried through Venezuelans towns in processions, accompanied to the music of African drums and revelry. His festivities begin on June 23 and usually last for three or four days. San Juan passes from the procession to spend the nights in the homes of leading members of his *confradía*. For the most part, San Juan celebrations take place in the more populous central coastal regions of Venezuela. The most notable events in his honor are held in Aragua, Barlovento and Carabobo, and attract visitors from all over Venezuela, if not the world. Some lament the degeneration of the San Juan celebrations, and those surrounding other spiritual figures as well, into more profane assemblies.¹²³ The gatherings are now largely viewed as excuses for people to dance, drink and party. Whether or not this trend can be halted, or even reversed, remains to be seen.

¹²¹ Juan Liscano, *La fiesta de San Juan el Bautista* (Caracas: Monte Avila Editorial, 1973), 46.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Angelina Pollak-Eltz, *La negritud en Venezuela* (Caracas: Lagoven, 1992), 62.

Conclusions

What can be gleaned from a study of how Africans and African derived peoples pay homage to their deities is that, in either case, the *orishas* are not that distant from their devotees. A *santero*, or devotee of an orisha/saint, can interpret the will of the deity through divination. He or she can allow the *orisha* to possess their body and mind. In this way, the *orisha* can voice their counsel to the devotee. Followers may also petition an *orisha* through prayers, music, proper behavior and offerings, much as a Catholic can appeal to a saint.¹²⁴ Understanding this difference between Catholicism and the Yoruba-derived religions is crucial to the theology of San Benito, for his devotees attain a high level of spiritual awareness that is frequently interpreted as pagan. For this reason, the Catholic Church has not given its *imprimatur* to any of the festivities that have blossomed around San Benito over the centuries, even though it recognizes the legitimacy of his sainthood.¹²⁵

In this chapter a brief survey of Kongo and Imbangala belief systems was also presented. Linkages of these systems to Yoruba religious traditions were highlighted. It was further demonstrated how various systems of syncretism emerged in sundry parts of the New World. One such syncretism that came forth in Venezuela was the fusion of the African *orisha* Ajé with the Catholic San Benito. The alleged origins of both of these spiritual personages were explored, respectively, along with their historical significance to Venezuelan history. This included an encapsulation of the cultural events and festivities accompanying the homage to these important figures.

It is not difficult to understand how an adoration of Ajé and San Benito became fused in the Sur del Lago Maracaibo. Most importantly, of all the saints in the Roman Catholic pantheon,

¹²⁴ “The Lure of Santería,” *Awake!*

¹²⁵ Balza Santiago, “*Mucuchíes honra a San Benito*,” 79.

San Benito was black. His mere presence in such an august forum of white, historical, and spiritual stalwarts, allowed both San Benito's African and New World devotees to create, define and name their own religious structures, that in Venezuela is generally referred to as "*La Cultura San Benitera*" (San Benito Culture). Maulana Karenga, the black nationalist from California who introduced *Kwanzaa* as an alternative to the gross materialism that characterizes the American approach to the Christmas holiday season, would most likely define the adoption of San Benito by the Sur del Lago Africans and African-derived peoples as a clear example of *Kujichagulia*, or self-determination.¹²⁶ *Kujichagulia*, the second principle of *Nguzo Saba*,¹²⁷ asserts that Africans have the right to speak for themselves, and therefore should speak on their own behalf, rather than allowing others to speak for them. In the case of blacks in the Sur del Lago, the veneration of San Benito has permitted them to recover lost historical and racial memories that they can employ as a basis for the reshaping of the world in their own image and interests. They can thereby speak their own special religious truth to power and raise images above the Earth that reflect their capacity for human greatness and progress. Karenga has stated:

The principle and practice of self-determination carries within them the assumption that we have both the right and responsibility to exist as a people and make our own unique contribution to the forward flow of human history.... So it reminds us of the fact that African people created and introduced the basic disciplines of human knowledge- science, technology, geometry, math, medicine, ethics, advanced architecture, etc. And it urges us as a people not to surrender our historical and cultural identity to fit into the culture of another. Openness to

¹²⁶ Maulana Karenga, "From the *Nguzo Saba* (The Seven Principles): Their Meaning and Message," (1988), in *Modern Black Nationalism: From Marcus Garvey to Louis Farrakhan*, ed. William L. Van Deburg (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 279.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 276. *Nguzo Saba* was developed and offered by Karenga as an Afrocentric value system which would serve the interests and aspirations of African-derived peoples of the diaspora by organizing and enriching relations with black people on both the personal and community level. This system also attempts to establish standards, commitments and priorities that enhance the human possibilities of blacks, both individually and collectively; aid in the recovery and reconstruction of lost memories and cultural, Afrocentric paradigms; contribute to a communitarian core system of ethical values, especially for children; and assist in the formulation of a new black persona for the new millennium and beyond.

exchange is a given, but it presupposes that one has kept enough of one's culture to engage in exchange, rather than slavishly follow another's lead.¹²⁸

In the Sur del Lago, one need not travel far to find evidence of such an African cultural legacy, referred to by Karenga. The adhesion of the music of the *Chimbangaleros* to the San Benito festivities in the towns and villages of the Sur del Lago are clearly of African¹²⁹ and, specifically, Imbangala origin.¹³⁰ The multiple drum rhythms for San Benito are much more pronounced than those for any other saint celebrated in Venezuela. The songs in honor of the black saint are sung in a chorus or solo, and the dances are frenetic. Almost all the singers shake maracas to the beat of the *chimbanguelles*, and in some villages they blow whistles, or *pitos*, as they march in procession.¹³¹

Within Venezuela, the slaves arrived from many different regions of Africa. This diversity is reflected in the great variety of drums that can be seen in both religious and secular celebrations. But because the enslaved Africans could not bring their own instruments from Africa, they had to create new ones after their arrival in Venezuela. Sometimes they even had to construct them out of different materials than those they worked with in Africa. Nevertheless, the ethnic origin of most African drums and other musical instruments can be accurately determined by their design, sound, and proper names, much like Martínez did in determining the Imbangala roots of the *chimbanguelles*.

It also came to light that Juan de Chourio was a devotee of the Virgin Mary bent on spreading the virtues of Roman Catholicism and western civilization to the farthest reaches of the then known world. And due to the propagation efforts of the Capuchin Fathers both in Angola and Venezuela, Chourio may have been influenced by them in making the decision to bring some

¹²⁸ Ibid., 280.

¹²⁹ Pollak-Eltz, *La negritud*, 36.

¹³⁰ Martínez, *Como Bailar*, 5.

¹³¹ Pollak-Eltz, *La negritud*, 38.

of the Imbangala with him to the Sur del Lago region. In the remaining chapters, the fate of the Sur del Lago blacks in the pageant of Afro-Venezuelan history will be revealed, in both the context of resistance to enslavement and the legacy of racism in Venezuela.

CHAPTER FIVE

RESISTANCE AND SURVIVAL

Introduction

The survival of the Afro-Zulians was contingent upon the way that they defined themselves as a community in relation to the larger Venezuelan and trans-Atlantic society, of which they were unquestionably a part. When the Afro-Zulians attempted to survive with their Imbangala-Angolan culture intact, this was dependent upon their being able to strike a subtle balance between not allowing themselves to be wholly absorbed by and integrated into the larger Venezuelan and Eurocentric trans-Atlantic society on one hand, and not permitting themselves to be totally isolated from it on the other hand. This is to say that the Afro-Zulians consistently found themselves walking a tight rope between integration and isolation.

Probably more so than other Afro-Venezuelans, Chourio's Afro-Zulians were able to hold on, survive and flourish because they developed and enhanced a historical consciousness that dated back to a time before colonization and conquest. Thus, while the Afro-Zulian identity can be seen in the context of a culture based on more than just struggle and resistance, there is little doubt that these two elements were key factors in its preservation and perpetuation.

This chapter will also attempt to demonstrate that the history of the Sur del Lago belongs to the Afro-Zulians. Their presence in this area, like the presence of other Africans and African-derived peoples throughout Venezuela, contributed to both the rise and fall of Spanish dominion in the northern tier of South America. Ultimately, however, this served to significantly alter the balance of power in the trans-Atlantic world, whence it shifted from the colonizers to newly independent American republics. This chapter, therefore, places the struggle and resistance of the Afro-Zulians within a context of the trans-Atlantic world.

While the Afro-Zulians, like other peoples of African descent in the Americas, can be seen as subjects of oppressive social, political and economic structures, a more complete panorama emerges with an acquired understanding of this population as subjects of their own history. The Afro-Zulians, in this framework, were not the mere pawns of the economic and political situation in which they once found themselves. Rather, the Afro-Zulians are products of the interaction between these conditions and efforts to develop their own sense of what they are and what they want to be. They negotiate life, and history, in their own ways. They live life as they transform it.

The Afro-Zulians devised their own mechanisms of resistance and survival. This chapter will examine some of these, especially their ideological tools and social networks that served as vehicles of struggle over time and space. For the Afro-Zulians, their culture can be defined as the dynamic synthesis of their experiential knowledge, beliefs, values and norms that express and have their derivation from the conflicts encountered at each stage of their development in the search for survival and progress.¹ In this chapter, therefore, the fate of Chourio's Imbangala party and their Afro-Zulian descendents in the Sur del Lago will be examined, up to the end of the eighteenth century and the start of Venezuela's struggle for independence from Spain, and all within the historical context of the aforementioned cultural criteria for struggle, resistance and survival.

In general terms, the struggle of blacks in Venezuelan colonial society can be interpreted as a manifestation of the contradictions inherent in a colonial system that placed at odds the interests of a mostly white landowning class and a manual labor force, largely enslaved. For the most part, Venezuelan historians of the European positivist school, led by Arturo Uslar Pietri since 1937, have created a false impression that some slaves, representing but a small fraction of

¹ Amílcar Cabral, *Selected Speeches* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973), 39-56.

the overall mass of blacks in the colonial Venezuelan population, rose up sporadically and only as a reaction to harsh penalties and cruel punishments imposed on them by their so-called “masters.” Uslar Pietri and other positivists reduced Africa’s contributions to Venezuelan history mainly to drums and “witchcraft.”² If the positivists had their way, the black racial strains in Venezuelan society would be greatly diluted. According to Uslar Pietri, “This means that if we cannot substantially modify the ethnic composition of our population, it will be virtually impossible to change the course of our history and to make our country a modern nation.”³

By imposing these Eurocentric, hegemonic positions onto Venezuela’s historical discourse and compulsory school curricula, all Afro-Venezuelans were negatively impacted. These Eurocentric positivist historians have failed to take into account the bigger picture of blacks, both free and enslaved, forming strategic alliances with other factions of the colonial Venezuelan society for the purpose of either subverting or overthrowing it. Therefore, an Afrocentric perspective is important, because its infusion will help ameliorate this situation by providing for a deconstruction of Eurocentrism, and thus permitting Afro-Zulians to see themselves as agents of their own destiny.

By blacks fleeing into the interior and joining with Native American peoples, new, alternate and viable socio-economic communities (*cumbes*) were established. These were located far from the control and influence of the domineering white, Spanish society; and those

² Jesus Garcia, “Demystifying Africa’s Absence in Venezuelan History and Culture” (15 January 2004), www.venezuelanalysis.com, accessed 19 August 2004, quotes Uslar Pietri paper, “Identidad nacional,” presented at a meeting of the Grupo Santa Lucia in August 1983.

³ Arturo Uslar Pietri, *El país necesita inmigración* (Caracas: Boletín de la Cámara de Comercio de Caracas, February 1937) 235. Uslar Pietri (1906-2001) was the winner of many prizes in history, and his influence continues to exert itself in Venezuela’s history academy. He served on the prestigious and conservative Polar Foundation as an executive consultant on the council responsible for the publication of the four-volume, 1,076 pages, *Diccionario de Historia de Venezuela*, and chaired the Political Sciences department at La Universidad Central de Venezuela in Caracas.

who remained in the more populated coastal areas took advantage of every opportunity to learn about resistance in other areas of the New World as well as monumental socio-political movements emerging in France and the British American colonies. Armed with this information, Venezuelan blacks joined with Creoles in both planning and carrying out acts of insurrection and rebellion with the purpose of abolishing slavery and transforming the northern tier of South America into a free and independent republic based on liberal ideals.

Therefore, the last section of this chapter dealing with the abolitionist and anti-colonial, Haitian-inspired movement of José Leonardo Chirino, will attempt to show that conspiracies and rebellions of the Venezuelan blacks had, from the start, the objective of the abolition of slavery and the near total transformation of colonial society. This is historically important because it raises the perception of the black insurrections from mere protest reactions to that of a well organized and orchestrated political and social movement. The blacks of Venezuelan colonial society are historically vindicated through this process. Acting as agents of their own destiny, the Africans and African-derived peoples of colonial Venezuela carried out rebellions and uprisings conditioned by their class structure and economic circumstances, as well as their ideological development and formation. In other words, the blacks in colonial Venezuelan society did not hesitate to take whatever actions their leaders deemed appropriate to secure their economic and political interests. The Afro-Venezuelans were quite pragmatic. When it was convenient for them to serve the Spanish Empire, they would. But they always kept their gaze fixed on the star that led to freedom, and they would turn on the Spaniards if so doing could speed the day of their liberation.

Certainly, the typical Spaniard worried little about the plight of black slaves in the New World; and by the mid-eighteenth century, there was no pretense among the Spaniards in Europe

or the Americas that their vast colonial empire existed for any other purpose than enriching the mother country. The Spanish Crown decreed policies seeking to control all of the trade to and from its American and Caribbean colonies. And while thanks to the promptings of the Roman Catholic Church, the enslavement of Native Americans had been abolished by royal decree, they actually remained in virtual bondage to an onerous system of peonage that kept them indebted to the owners of the big estates.⁴

Africans fared little better, with the majority in the Americas and Caribbean suffering under the yoke of enslavement. Although both the Native American and African populations in the New World were treated with a barbaric cruelty, they were not without means in challenging the established order. By the end of this chapter, it is hoped that some of the questions pertaining to the history of resistance in the cultural, political and military spheres of the Afro-descendent peoples in western Venezuela will be answered. This would include the descendants of those Africans brought to the Sur del Lago region by Juan de Chourio, swept up in the tide of new and revolutionary ideas that would ultimately usher in an end to slavery and the general acceptance of more liberal ideas among all Venezuelan and Latin American peoples.⁵

The Afro-Zulians, 1723-1757

The Afro-Zulians swung between initial attempts at integration (1723-1757), and seeking to isolate themselves from an oppressive and increasingly anachronistic colonial regime (1758-1811). This section examines the Afro-Zulian assimilation into colonial Venezuelan society. As noted in various royal orders, Chourio's blacks actually served as compatriots in the conquest of the Motilones. This may not necessarily be seen as something out of the ordinary. It is estimated that roughly fifty years after the first landing of Columbus in the New World, Africans

⁴ Gerard Helferich, *Humboldt's Cosmos: Alexander von Humboldt and the Latin American Journey That Changed the Way We See the World* (New York: Gotham, 2004), 20.

⁵ Ibid., 21.

serving as gun bearers, soldiers and scouts had been deployed to all of the areas under Spanish control, and usually appearing simultaneously with the Iberian conqueror. Indeed, many Africans in Spanish colonial America had garnered fame and fortune for themselves, but “no matter how important he (the African) might become, there was always a Spaniard ready, willing and able to put him in his place.”⁶ This is important inasmuch as Chourio never manumitted any of the Africans he brought over to the Sur del Lago. However, from the Africans’ arrival in 1723 until Chourio’s death in 1757, they were certainly granted an unprecedented amount of de-facto and lateral freedom within the confines of Chourio’s domains in the Sur del Lago, albeit more out of a pragmatic motivation on the part of the Basque captain and trader rather than any altruistic feelings Chourio felt about the welfare and ultimate fate of his black contingent.

Because Chourio failed to bestow freedom outright on any of the 600 Africans he transported to the shores of Venezuela, in retrospect it appears as though his approach to the Italian Capuchin fathers in Angola was less inspired by a desire to spread Catholicism among Native Americans in Venezuela than using the clerics to help him garner an African military contingent sufficient to counter the power of the Motilones in the Sur del Lago region that were blocking his life’s dream of establishing a fruitful cacao colony in the Province of Maracaibo. Although he failed in his lifetime to pacify all of the insurgent Motilones in the region, he did manage to accomplish at least some of the task, and that which went undone was assigned to his son-in-law and others.

From the following order of disposition, it can be ascertained that Captain Chourio’s property, including control of the Africans, went to Manuel García Peña, as his successor, to continue the work. Juan de Chourio passed away quietly in his sleep at the ripe old age of 81, on

⁶ Rout, Jr., *African Experience in Spanish America*, 77.

5 November 1757, at his home in Perijá. García Peña, besides being Juan de Chourio's son-in-law, had also been his Creole business associate and liaison with the Spanish colonial authorities.

Don Francisco de Ugarte to Don José de Solís Folch of Cardona.

Hereby I give account of those events surrounding the death of Don Juan Chourio and the duties that he had accomplished insofar as the inventory and securing of his goods as an obligation to the royal treasury (customs house) as a consequence of the work he began in pacifying and populating the area of Perija, Maracaibo, the 28th of November 1757.

Most Excellent Sir.

Sir:

Having died this same Don Juan Chourio the 5th day of the current month, leaving an enclosed power of attorney to testify and declaring as his heir Don Manuel Garcia de la Pena; and in the case that he is not found to be within the requisites to receive this inheritance, it shall be given to Doctor Don Pedro Joseph de Leyba, as one being empowered to accompany Crown officials to make an inventory of the goods that have been found pertaining to Don Juan Chourio in this city, and carrying out this duty under the supervision of the royal treasury (customs house) to be held on the 11th day of the following month, in which it is agreed keeping in remembrance the contract... (broken) of May 1722. This was made with His Royal Majesty (of Spain) to pacify and populate the territory of Perijá, establishing there a village of at least one hundred inhabitants within a period of four years.

These settlers should manifest good qualities and conform to the conditions stated in the contract. As this endeavor was financed in the sum of twenty thousand pesos by the royal treasury, resulting from the mortgaging of those cacao plantations extant in the Valle de Santa Maria, along with one hundred slaves (both sexes), an inventory and inspection of the established village and its fortifications would satisfy this government.

It was conceded to him (Don Juan Chourio)... (broken) six slave ships of up to one hundred tons for this port, free of all duties (entry and exit). This equally applies to Cádiz (Spain) and this port (Maracaibo). This included several extensions given because of the pacification effort and conditions of war. One extension, for six months, was made by the real *cédula* (royal order) of the 11th day of September 1743. It was made in the hope that conditions of peace would prevail before the conclusion of the extended contract. Unfortunately, as peace has not yet arrived in the region, in this port of Maracaibo be it known that the extension of 1743 was still in effect, and yet another extension was made on the 22nd day of January 1750 that was supposed to be for another six months, yet did not end until the 22nd day of July 1752. In view of this, on the 14th of July of next year, based on what was ordered by the king, a military protective unit would be

placed around the Capuchin Fathers, missionaries in the area of Perijá to its native inhabitants. This military escort is to be paid from the properties of the same Chourio, and if these do not garner sufficient funds, from his private account with the royal treasury house.

On the other hand, on the 26th of January of this same year, a detachment of two guards was ordered to complete the requirement of defending the aforementioned missionaries. Thus, the reason for reimbursing the value of the property of Don Juan Chourio rests in the cost of this venture. In addition, an embargo of his goods obtained through a contract with His Majesty (that was never completed) was declared. Also, keeping in mind the Laws of the Indies (Municipalities), specifically Law VI, Title V, Book IV, in the case that a contract is not fully adhered to, the deficient party could lose all that he has built, to include farms and ranches. Since the agreement was not kept in totality, an inventory was initiated, followed by an embargo on all of the properties of Don Juan Chourio. This was essential in order to provide a proper accounting for His Royal Majesty and his officials, and thereby to await His Majesty's royal determination in the matter.

In the meantime, the properties of Don Juan Chourio remain in trust. For all of these duties, Don Joseph Conejero y Borbua is appointed the chief accountant and trustee. He will work together with Don Diego Duran, who will serve as the official recorder. These two gentlemen will act in the official capacity of conducting the inventory and supervising the embargo of the properties of Don Juan Chourio in the Valle de Santa María. And the captain of the fort at Perijá, Don Rafael Nebot, with the attached government recorder Don Gregorio García, keeping in mind that all that will be discovered at this locale will become the ultimate property of His Majesty in accordance with the previously cited law. As a consequence, the estates that were previously financed for twenty thousand pesos in the Valle de Santa María are being mortgaged, to include the house located in Perijá. Equally, these properties are to be mortgaged in the amount of three thousand two hundred and thirty nine pesos and three reales in accordance with the decree of the court. It was then appealed to the High Court of His Excellency, and is now pending a decision, with no further properties of Don Juan Chourio having been discovered.

Some furniture, however, was discovered in the house where Don Juan Chourio was resident, but it was not determined to be his. The furniture was valued at approximately two hundred pesos. Unfortunately, this was not even enough to pay for his internment. To pay for the cost of his burial, we appeal to the generosity and wisdom of His Excellency.

May Our Lord protect His Excellency and bless Him with many years!

Maracaibo, the 28th of November 1757.

-Francisco de Ugarte⁷

⁷ Francisco de Ugarte to José Solís Folch de Cardona, 28 November 1757, Archivo Histórico Nacional de Colombia (Ciudades de Venezuela), Catálogo R-3:110-113, Public Library, Mérida, Venezuela.

The prosperity enjoyed by Chourio up until the time of his death indicates a degree of success in his operations, which no doubt filtered down to the blacks in his charge. It appears as though circumstances in the Sur del Lago may have worked to the advantage of Chourio's blacks from 1723-1757. The Serranía de Perijá and its immediate environs were populated by various indigenous groups unwilling to simply roll over and let the Spanish Crown usurp their lands. Because these lands were on the periphery of the Spanish American Empire, and because the king was hesitant to support the efforts of a Frenchman during an age of British ascendancy, Chourio was unable to receive the logistical and military support he needed from Spain to support the expansion of settlements in the area. Being left to his own recourse, as it were, Chourio needed to generate his own monies from the sale of agricultural products, mostly cacao, to European markets. The funds generated from these enterprises could then be used to purchase arms and munitions in Europe for transport back to the Sur del Lago, whence they could be deployed against the intransigent Native American population.

In the meantime, Chourio experienced more difficulties. The Europeans were growing impatient in the face of a fierce indigenous threat, and were steadily abandoning the area. In accordance with the disposition document of 28 November 1757 that bequeathed estates, farms, ranches and other property to Chourio's son-in-law, it appears that Chourio continued to buy up sundry properties as they were abandoned by European settlers.⁸ That this property was assigned by the court in Maracaibo to his son-in-law may be indicative of Chourio having only one child, a daughter that survived at least until his death.

All of this meant that between 1722 through 1757 Chourio had to increasingly rely on the blacks he had transported to the area for defense of the village and mission, planting and

⁸ Ibid.

harvesting of commercial produce (principally cacao), as well as the defense and productive redeployment of abandoned properties.

The extant chronicles of Perijá seem to support this interpretation. Of the history of the region, it can be garnered that the date most often cited for the foundation of the La Villa del Rosario is, indeed, 9 May 1722, conforming to the royal order given to Juan de Chourio e Iturbide by the Spanish king. However, there are some discrepancies over this. The Zulian historian Juan Besson indicates that the village was really established three years later by Chourio's heir and successor, Manuel García de Peña, the first "Marqués de Perijá."⁹ While the king of Spain had ordered the "pacification of the Indians" in these lands, it was not until 1775 that the governor of Maracaibo, Francisco de Santa Cruz, ordered that the king's decree respecting the region of Perijá actually be carried out to its conclusion, indicating that the task had remained unfinished. And according to the chronicler of the village, Oscárido Montero,¹⁰ while Chourio received the king's order to pacify the Indians and populate the zone with European settlers in 1722, it was not until the following year that he was able to begin the work by deploying 150 Africans to "open roads and construct fortifications" so that in 1724, La Villa del Rosario was ready to open its gates and receive its first European settlers.¹¹ This first

⁹ Germán Montero Alcalá, "Villa del Rosario,"

<http://www.pueblosdevenezuela.com/Zulia/ZU-VillaDelRosario.htm>, accessed 4 August 2010. Montero Alcalá indicates an assertion allegedly made by the Zulian historian Juan Bautista Besson Lalinde (1881-1951), who authored *La Historia de Zulia, 1499-1950*, 5 vols. (Maracaibo: Hermanos Belloso, 1943-1951), out of print and currently unavailable. Besson Lalinde served in many appointed and elected posts in the Venezuelan federal government. Interestingly, following Chourio's death, Manuel García de Peña moved out of the Sur del Lago and into a palatial residence in Maracaibo, which today serves as a civil registration office. In essence, he became an absentee landlord, not taking the care that Chourio displayed in managing the vast properties and its attendant black workers. See Hennel Huerta, "Maracaibo: De Botica Nueva a Cobeica, 100 años de historia," <http://www.lamaracucharadio.com/NOTICIAS/BoticaNueva.htm> (4 August 2010).

¹⁰ Pedro Ramón Estrada, "El Zulia se engrandece de cronistas," *El Regional del Zulia* (Cabimas), 26 June 2010. This newspaper article details the appointment of local Rosario attorney, Oscárido Montero, as the official historian for the Villa de Perijá in accordance with a directive from the Zulia branch of the Asociación de Cronistas. This clarification is provided in order to avoid confusion with Germán Montero Alcalá, who provides on-line tourist information on towns and villages throughout Venezuela.

¹¹ Montero Alcalá, "Villa del Rosario."

contingent of whites was primarily from the Canary Islands, augmented by some from the city of Maracaibo, approximately 100 kilometers to the north.¹²

The anticipated growth in European settlers never materialized. Fifty-one years later, in 1775, the Catholic bishop from Caracas, Mariano Martí, arrived at La Villa del Rosario de Perijá, to take count of the church's flock in the entire region. He counted only 488 souls residing in 127 houses scattered throughout the Serranía.¹³ This census was not race specific, but only took count of individuals baptized into the Roman Catholic faith. By 1775, however, the process of miscegenation was already changing both the complexion and demographics of colonial Venezuelan society, and Perijá, as shall be demonstrated later in this chapter, proved no exception. It is also known that from the outset, white settlement would not be easy. In the very first year of the village, for example, the mission records indicate the internment of a white man killed by the Motilones.¹⁴ That only four indigenous areas close to the mission were brought under control by the time of Chourio's death means that the Basque captain never lived long enough to realize his dream of transplanting a European faith and society to this isolated corner of the New World. Nevertheless, it afforded Chourio's Africans and their descendants in the region certain freedoms not shared by other Afro-Venezuelans.

Chourio deployed his Africans to shore up the abandoned European settlements from the foothills of the Serranía to the shores of the Sur del Lago. He had to increasingly rely on the Africans because the rate of European departure from the area was accelerating. Despite the promise of riches from cacao and cattle ranching, the Europeans could not be tempted to remain

¹² Gobernación del Estado Zulia, www.gobernaciondelzulia.gov.ve (12 June 2010). There was no reason to doubt the distance stated, as this is an official website of the State of Zulia.

¹³ Gustavo Yamarte Ocando, *Historia del Zulia* (Caracas: Editorial Arte, 1986), 84. See also David M. Cheney, <http://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/bishop/bmartim.html> (12 June 2010). Bishop Martí was born in Brafim, Spain, in 1720. He served as the bishop of Caracas from 1770 until his death there in 1792.

¹⁴ Tulio Chiossone, *Diccionario Toponímico de Venezuela* (Caracas: Monte Avila Editores, 1992), 490.

in the Sur del Lago. It was not just that they had to cope with a hostile indigenous population, but the temperatures frequently soared into the high 90s and occasionally above 100 degrees Fahrenheit.

Another factor in the exodus of Europeans from the region was the presence of certain scorpions. A recent study conducted by doctors at La Universidad de Zulia demonstrated that, “Envenoming by *Tityus discrepans* (TD) scorpions in north-central Venezuela mainly causes pancreatic and gastrointestinal complications, whereas the sting by *Tityus zulianus* (TZ) (western Venezuela) often produces respiratory arrest and death by pulmonary oedema.”¹⁵ In the minds of both Spaniards and Creoles, the more temperate regions of the coast and littoral were decidedly preferable to the hot and dusty Sur del Lago, replete with its venomous scorpions. Perhaps these whites thought it beneath their dignity to live in this region, so far from the cultured life afforded in Caracas or Cartagena. “Let the *indios* and *negros* keep it,” they probably surmised.

Cacao Plantations

To generate the funds necessary to continue any European settlement schemes in the area, the first action that Chourio had to take was to insure that the cacao plantations were producing abundantly, and that there were a sufficient number of workers for both the harvesting of the cacao and its safe transport up to Maracaibo, either by land or on the lake. This was crucial, because funds from the Spanish Crown were not immediately forthcoming and nothing could be accomplished unless Chourio undertook the financing by himself.

Some social-economic historians believe that nearly the entire Venezuelan colonial economy was based on cacao. Yes, other agricultural products were produced, such as tobacco

¹⁵ Adolfo Borges, *et al.*, “Pancreatic toxicity in mice elicited by *Tityus zulianus* and *Tityus discrepans* scorpion venoms,” *Investigación Clínica* 45:3 (2004), 269.

and wheat.¹⁶ But these were produced in very small quantities when compared to the output of cacao. From the mid-seventeenth century, cacao overtook the other agricultural exports and dominated Venezuela's colonial economy. Cacao became a monocultural Venezuelan export. It was oriented towards an external market (Europe), and the colonial Venezuelan state became dependent on it. Cacao plantations were established all along the Venezuelan coast, in Choroní, Ocumare, Chuao and Turiamo, as well as in the valleys of Caucagua, Capaya, Curiepe and Guapo. In the interior, they were set up in Barquisimeto, Mérida and Trujillo. Commerce in cacao enriched the white Creole plantation owners beyond measure, but substantially increased the work load of the slaves who toiled on the vast estates. To cultivate the cacao, the African workers needed to burn off most the ground-cover vegetation, while at the same time preserving and even planting shade trees. In effect, they were reconstructing the physical environment of the region. The owners of the plantations, it should be added, also took precautions to conserve the forests at the head of the rivers. This was important because they wanted to assure the containment of water required for irrigation.¹⁷

In Chourio's case, the land in the Sur del Lago was well suited for cacao, but the region was overrun by hostile indigenous peoples. In addition, Chourio must have reasoned that his days as an agent for the French Guinea Company were coming to a swift conclusion, and that if he wanted to secure a stable financial future for himself and his family, he would have to find a way to transition into Venezuela's landed cacao aristocracy. Thus, in light of the departure of the Europeans from the area, Chourio had to place increasing control over the cacao operations into the hands of black lieutenants.

¹⁶ Estrada, et al., *Estudios Sociales*, 47.

¹⁷ Ibid., 47-49. See also Brito Figueroa, *Estructura Económica*, 235-245.

Here is where share-cropping deals may have been struck between Chourio and some of his black foremen, but never recognized by the Spanish colonial authorities after his death. It seems that beginning in the 1740s, the incorporation of virgin lands by way of usurpation and planting effected changes in the economic relations of slavery. Slave owners acquired new lands practically free. When the slaves signed a contract of manumission with their master, he promised them freedom in five, ten, fifteen, twenty or twenty-five years, but the slaves were to work virgin land granted by the Spanish Crown to the slave owner, and keep half of what they produced, while turning the other half over to the master. At the end of the specified time, the slaves would become free men and the once virgin land that they had made fertile and productive, would revert to, and remain forever the property of, their former master.¹⁸

According to Brito Figueroa:

The phenomenon first manifested itself in the period of expansion for cacao plantations, with this fruit becoming the most important export product in Venezuela's agricultural economy and when, still, the enslaving regime predominated in the conquered territory. Nevertheless, the land owners needed to demonstrate that the land they were claiming and attempting to occupy was, at least, in the process of being cultivated and was effectively and rapidly being transformed into a base of material wealth for the colony. The slaves worked the land because of the freedom promised them. The slaves were, therefore, actually interested in bounteous production. They favored the plans of the *hacendado*. But in these cases, the slave owner was not simply freeing them, but rather selling them their freedom, with the slaves paying in advance with their manual labor.¹⁹

For the case of Juan de Chourio, there is little reason to doubt that he would ignore a process that was taking place in cacao plantations throughout Venezuela. It would have been to his advantage to enter into such an agreement with his black contingent. After all, the Europeans were not staying. They were selling off their land to Chourio as they departed the area or outright abandoning it. Looking to the future, and believing in the initial promise of his

¹⁸ Brito Figueroa, *La Estructura Económica*, 363.

¹⁹ Ibid.

enterprise, Chourio most likely entered into such manumission and share cropping negotiations. He could secure his land in this manner or lose everything to the Motilones. Since Chourio died before most of those contracts could be fulfilled, however, it appears as though his heir and the courts decided against the interests of the Sur del Lago blacks, having put all of Chourio's property, including them, in "trust."²⁰ This failure to honor contracts most likely explains the massive infusion of runaway blacks to the *cumbes* in the Sur del Lago in the period of 1758-1800; and these were blacks who had seemingly been satisfied to work for Chourio and his economic interests until Chourio died and representatives of the colonial system turned against them.²¹

Of course, some may conjecture that Chourio never entered into manumission and share cropping negotiations with the members of his black contingent. But one can reasonably assume he did, for the cacao plantation owners across Venezuela were doing the same; and as it will be demonstrated in the next section, it was Chourio's Imbangala blacks who organized a fugitive slave settlement following his death. They turned from cooperating with Chourio to joining up with the Native Americans and fighting the Spanish. His heir moved up to Maracaibo and was taking little interest in managing his inherited estates in the Sur del Lago. The blacks would not have run off to a *cumbe* if they enjoyed even a modicum of the freedom granted them by the pragmatic Basque. It looks as though Chourio must have promised the blacks their freedom to keep them hanging on, or the blacks would have scattered to the wind long before Chourio's death. They definitely had no desire to work for Manuel García de Peña, who most likely did not share in Chourio's desire to pacify the Native Americans and spread Christianity. He was going

²⁰ Francisco de Ugarte to José Solís Folch de Cardona, 28 November 1757, Maracaibo.

²¹ Brito Figueroa, *La Estructura Económica*, 362 (map of Venezuelan *cumbes*, 1550-1800). See Appendix C for a reproduction of this map.

to squeeze the blacks for every peso he could wring out of them, even if it killed them all. And that was not something that Chourio's blacks could fathom or tolerate.

Cattle

Another significant, income-generating activity for Chourio in the Sur del Lago was that of cattle herding and dairy production; and according to one Perijá journalist and chronicler, both cattle and dairy “have moved the village's (Rosario's) economy since its very foundation.”²² Even today, the Sur del Lago remains one of the prime sources of beef and dairy products for the entire country.²³

Cattle arrived in Venezuela along with the conquistadores. The climate was favorable throughout Venezuela, and this facilitated the rapid expansion of cattle ranching throughout the country. Along with the heads of domestic cattle, free-ranging cattle were added, rounded up from throughout the vast geographical expanse of the country. By the mid-seventeenth century, cattle ranchers were extending their reach into areas that had largely remained unpopulated, and this process continued well into the twentieth century. Surprisingly, beef production and dairy farming did not do as much damage to the environment as one might first suspect. The slaughter of the cattle, besides providing meat, also served to produce leather goods. These were also important products derived from the extensive cattle exploitation. The thinning of the herds to produce leather goods also kept the cattle from over-grazing. This was important because it prevented soil erosion and helped to perpetuate the industry throughout the region up to the

²² Gastón Fernández, “288 años de la fundación de La Villa del Rosario,” <http://perija.com/?p=2040>, on-line daily news of 9 May 2010, accessed 4 August 2010.

²³ Janice Bauman and Leni Young, *Guide to Venezuela* (Caracas: Ernesto Armitano, 1981), 470. The Guajiro Indians share productive cattle and dairy regions in the Sur del Lago with the Afro-Zulians. Cattle are extremely important to both of these groups because their family diet consists of meat and milk products. Because “cattle are the basis for wealth” in this region, the Guajiro are reluctant to eat them. They use the milk to make cheese and butter, as well as barter the animals for goods. The *Guide* also notes: “Some Guajiro men workas cow hands on the ranches west and south of the lake.” Those ranches in the south are largely black owned.

present day, providing substantial and meaningful employment for many Afro-Zulians.²⁴ In contrasting cacao and cattle, it is clear that cacao better served the economic interests of the white owners of the big plantations, increasing the numbers of black workers who engaged in repetitive toil on them. On the other hand, cattle herders had free reign to go almost anywhere they wanted. Their geographic distance from the locus of control bought them time to think, plan and take decisive actions in defense of freedom when the opportunity presented itself. Also, the cacao was suited only to limited areas, but cattle herding helped to open up an entire country and the northern tier of a continent.

Clearly, cattle herding was conducive to the expansion of Spanish control south of Maracaibo. However, because the Spanish Crown failed to provide a sufficient military presence to secure the area against indigenous incursions, Chourio from the start needed to deploy at least 25 percent of his black contingent in guarding the perimeters of the settlement. To get the most out of these Africans thus arrayed, Chourio armed them and placed them in charge of herds of cattle. Therefore, while they stood guard against indigenous attacks, they also tended to the cattle, protecting the herd from wild animals and rustlers. But the most important benefit to the blacks under Chourio's command was that they were working in an economic sector they were familiar with back in Africa, cattle raising, and they were granted the freedom to roam free and armed in the Serranía de Perijá.

The historical record reveals that a smaller proportion of Afro-Venezuelans worked as cattle ranchers than in other agricultural sectors. Miguel Acosta Saignes, one of the first Afro-Venezuelan historians, notes that, "We have to keep in mind that the penetration of the Llanos occurred late in Venezuela. Only in the mid-seventeenth century was the Apure River discovered. The *llanero* (cowboy) originated, principally, in the first decades of colonization,

²⁴ Estrada, et al., *Estudios Sociales*, 49.

when the missionaries in Western Venezuela taught indigenous peoples the work of cattle ranching.”²⁵ Saignes added that because of the late entry of cattle ranching in Venezuelan history, “it was only in the eighteenth century that a black and mixed-black population began to appear in the Llanos and other parts of Venezuela, engaged in this occupation.”²⁶ Nevertheless, a minority of Afro-Venezuelans did work cattle, and Saignes emphatically states that at the beginning of the eighteenth century, some black slaves were already being sent to the Llanos and other areas of Venezuela to herd and tend cattle. This was an important step in Afro-Venezuelan history because, “Many times the blacks who were sent out as cattle ranchers came to occupy leadership positions later in history. For example,” said Saignes, “when we study *Cimarrones* (fugitive slaves), we find that after 1750, many of them that led insurrections were *llaneros* who had surely learned the art of cattle ranching and could, therefore, provide needed leadership skills in tending and directing both cattle and men.”²⁷

One of the best examples of this can be found in the life of the three-time Venezuelan president, José Antonio Páez. He was born as the last of eight children in a modest home on the banks of the Curpa River near the village of Acarigua in the Llanos province of Barinas to a white Creole civil servant and storekeeper, Juan Victorio Páez, and an Afro-descendent mother whose family were cattle ranchers. As Páez’ father died early in the young man’s life, he moved to the ranch of his mother’s family in San José de Guama, where he lived the life of a true *llanero*, learning the trade of cattle ranching and developing excellent skills in horsemanship and martial arts. At the age of 20, Páez married Dominga Ortiz, whose parents were both deceased, and moved her into his mother’s house. In that same year, he joined the revolutionary army and was quickly recognized for his skills as both an equestrian and lancer, going from victory to

²⁵ Miguel Acosta Saignes, *Vida de los esclavos negros en Venezuela*, 194.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 195.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

victory in numerous battles waged against Spanish forces over the next twenty years.²⁸ Bolívar appointed Páez as a general and his chief of staff. Páez is most noted for his comment made on 30 April 1830 in San Carlos, Venezuela, after being elected as president of the new Republic of Venezuela by the Constituent Congress, and sent to Bolívar: “My sword, my lance, and all of my military triumphs are laid down in the most respectful obedience to the decisions of the law.”²⁹

The case of Páez also demonstrates that, without a doubt, those few blacks who worked as cattle ranchers enjoyed unprecedented freedom and access to social mobility not generally available to those toiling in other sectors. It also allowed them contact with indigenous peoples of the interior and others passing through unpopulated zones, and afforded them numerous chances to run away from their masters, when such opportunities presented themselves, thus being in a position to help other blacks escape as well.

As for Chourio’s blacks that worked the cacao plantations, they must have felt betrayed when not receiving their promised manumission. Fleeing from the Serranía to more southern regions of the Sur del Lago, they met friendly black cattle men completely familiar with the interior terrain to help them on their way to freedom. Interestingly, the very term for runaway slaves, maroons, finds its derivation from *cimarrones*, which, in turn, fixes its origins among Spanish cattle herders. Apparently, a *cimarron* was simply any animal (but usually a steer) that had escaped its domestic condition and returned to the wilds, thus reverting to a savage state.³⁰ The application of this term to fugitive black slaves beckons a deconstruction that invokes a

²⁸ Coronel Juan José Aguerrevere S., ed., *Fuerzas Armadas de Venezuela: Organismo del Ministerio de la Defensa* 259 (October-December 1973): 2-37. This military journal contains numerous and anonymously written articles related to the life of General José Antonio Páez,

²⁹ Ibid., See also Guillermo Morón, “Historia de Venezuela: José Antonio Páez,” <http://www.ayantepui.com/historia/paez.html> (5 October 2002).

³⁰ Bastide, *African Civilisations*, 46.

racist view of the world on the part of the European colonialists, that being that Africans can be classified with animals and in the context of animal behavior, and hence blacks were considered a sub-human species. It additionally implies that anything beyond the scope of European civilization was savage, and difficult, if not impossible, to tame.

Fugitive Slaves

Following Chourio's death in 1757 and up to the declaration of Venezuelan independence in 1811, it appears as though the institution of slavery in the Sur del Lago, and Spanish colonial society in Venezuela generally, was already nearing a state of total collapse. Africans and African-derived peoples were escaping in ever increasing numbers from the clutches of their masters, following a long tradition of establishing fugitive slave settlements, or maroon communities, in the Venezuelan interior.

In the Province of Maracaibo, for example, it is said that all who desired to escape enslavement could find refuge in the maroon communities established there along the extreme southern shores of the lake.³¹ They knew they were getting close when they could hear the distinct musical syncretism of the Chimbángueles, the living Angolan drums discussed in Chapter 3. However, these drums also served as a warning to any whites with ideas of hunting down and capturing any escaped slaves that proceeded further only at their own peril and the risk of losing their lives. Once a fugitive slave made it to the maroon settlement in the Sur del Lago, he/she was considered safe. And as any maroon could find refuge there, it not only became a place in Venezuela where the Imbangala culture survived, but other African social artifacts from a diverse array of backgrounds as well.³² But it was here that the music of the Angolan drums

³¹ José Gregorio Bracho Reyes, "El culto de San Benito en el Sur del Lago de Maracaibo. Una propuesta de acercamiento desde la antropología de la música," *Boletín americanista* 47 (1997-Annual), 45-75.

³² Jesús García, *África en Venezuela* (Caracas: Cuadernos Lagoven, 1990), 80. This book states: "...Chimbángueles is a word of Bantú origin: Imbangala of Angola, or the Mbangala, a Congolese ethnic subgroup

served as a weapon of resistance for the Maroons organized in the *cumbes* of the Sur del Lago. These *cumbes* were set up in the remote area surrounding Bobures, right on the lake, and that once served as grazing areas for cattle.³³ The residents of the *cumbe* supported themselves through subsistence agriculture and trading what little surplus they had in foodstuffs with the local Native American population, with whom they also began to merge out of common interest against a mutual threat. The sites did not afford easy accessibility, since they were originally chosen in areas that discouraged cattle rustlers. The *cumbes* were protected by fortifications in the form of fences and hidden ditches. Their principal weapons were the Angolan drums (psychological warfare) and machetes. The exact date that these *cumbes* were established is unknown, but most likely in the latter half of the eighteenth century. What is known is that they enjoyed spectacular growth, particularly in the twenty years prior to the declaration of Venezuelan independence and Bolívar's calls for the abolition of slavery.³⁴

The *cumbes* also allowed for increased miscegenation between blacks and other racial groups, particularly Native Americans. This, however, was swiftly diminishing the percentage of unassimilated blacks in the overall Venezuelan population, and essentially boosting the *pardos* to the most populous group, which is still the case of Venezuela's demographic in 2010. In this section we will examine these historical trends, such as increasing cooperation between blacks and Native Americans.

For the blacks in the Sur del Lago, it appears as though a goodly number had joined up with some of the indigenous peoples with whom Chourio's original black contingent had been

located on the banks of the Banguí River, on the border of the Popular Republic of the Congo and the Central African Republic. Among the Mbangala, we can observe dances with skirts identical to those in the Sur del Lago de Maracaibo."

³³ Michelle Ascencio, *San Benito: ¿Sociedad Secreta?* (Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1976), 16. "...Bobures was at one time *un pueblo palenquero*, a village of *cimarron* slaves."

³⁴ Acosta Saignes, *Vida de los esclavos*, 262. While there were only three *cumbes* at the end of the sixteenth century in Venezuela, and nine at the end of the seventeenth century, by 1800 there were a total of 56 active *cumbes* scattered throughout the national territory.

fighting.³⁵ This may have also been a factor that helped, in the long run, to preserve some of the cultural patterns of the Angolan Imbangala. Bastide believes that elements of African culture in the Americas were best maintained in the confines of societies established by black *marrons*, or maroons. On the nature of marronage, it cannot simply be viewed in the context of an economic phenomenon. Rather, it can be seen as characteristic of resistance. The various bands that were formed tended to coalesce along ethnic lines. And if they managed to federate into some type of government (kingdom, republic, etc.), as was sometimes the case, the distinct bands did not so much lose their identity as establish a pattern of peaceful coexistence.³⁶ The need to readily adapt in an ongoing state of situational crisis was apparent. This required extensive cultural transformations by all parties concerned. More often, it was easier for blacks and indigenous people to modify the past to suit the present than to create entirely new societal customs and standards.³⁷ In this scenario, a high degree of syncretism and transculturation took place between blacks, Native Americans and even whites. Any maroon communities, although geographically isolated from European settlements, were nevertheless impacted by the colonial society at large. The maroon communities owed their very existence to the Europeans, for the new systems they were creating for themselves in some way represented attempts at improving the types of societies and hierarchies they were running away from. That some Europeans were

³⁵ Helferich, *Humboldt's Cosmos*, 81-82. On the evening of 27 October, 1802, on the outskirts of Cumaná, in the far eastern side of Venezuela, the European explorers and scientists, Alexander von Humboldt and Aimé Bonpland, survived an attack by a club-wielding renegade. After the perpetrator was subdued and taken into custody, "the attacker told the authorities that he was from the area around Lake Maracaibo, in northwestern Venezuela, and had served on a privateer out of Santo Domingo. In fact, he was not a full Indian (Native American, as was first assumed) but what was called a *zambo*, with a mixture of Indian and black blood. ... Such mixed-bloods were considered to be the one insoluble- and completely undesirable- ingredient in the racial melting pot of the colonies.... Having quarreled with his captain, the man had put him ashore at Cumaná when the ship left port." When the colonial authorities questioned him as to why he attacked and attempted to rob Humboldt and his party, he stated that he "had flown into a rage on hearing them speak French, the language of his erstwhile captain." Here is clear evidence that Afro-Zulians were well aware of what was transpiring in Haiti, and that they clearly empathized with L'Ouverture and Dessalines in their struggle to free the western half of the island of Hispaniola from French control.

³⁶ Bastide, *African Civilisations*, 51.

³⁷ Ibid.

also working to establish a radical new order did not escape the attention of sundry Africans of the Diaspora.

The precise European idea that did appeal to Afro-Venezuelans, however, was the so-called “Law of the French,” more of which will be explained toward the end of this chapter. “In Venezuela,” wrote Bastide, “uprisings took place and *marron* republics were formed, that were known as *cumbes*. These included that of King Miguel in the sixteenth century, that of Adresote in 1732, and above all that established in the Coro region (1795).”³⁸ The problem with these fugitive communities lay in certain internal discrepancies. Splits occurred at various levels. For example, all of the Venezuelan *cumbes* cited by Bastide were established on the basis of an egalitarian vision of man and society, yet they functioned in the stratified nature of reality. Social organization frequently clashed with practical and economic know-how, as well as systems of religious belief. Such fissures divided maroon communities, making it easier for colonial authorities to subdue them.³⁹

Bastide elaborated on this point:

On the one hand, they have a powerful incentive to adapt themselves to their new environment, to forge new and individual institutions from their struggle for survival. On the other hand, there is a strong force driving them to maintain their old ancestral traditions, since these are seen as symbolizing their independence (political, no less than cultural), and forming the spiritual cement which binds them all together. Obviously, tensions will be found in any over-all social group; but whereas in Africa there exists a functional connection between the various levels of what G. Gurvitch has termed ‘sociology in depth,’ and all strata- from the ecological to those embodying social values or the group conscience- form part of the same continuum, in these *marron* communities a quite different state of affairs prevails. Here environmental determinism and the claims of collective memory come into direct conflict.⁴⁰

³⁸ Ibid., 66.

³⁹ Ibid., 67.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Those *cumbes* that endured for the longest time did so because each band realized it was in their best interest to establish and maintain alliances with other bands, all the while keeping true to its own character. At this stage, it was not requisite for these bands to sacrifice their individuality to a serve a common revolutionary cause. The threat of re-enslavement by the European colonialists provided impetus enough in holding any alliance together.⁴¹ What galvanized the Afro-Zulians and other blacks in the New World into taking concerted revolutionary actions against the colonial Spanish administration were new ideas conceived in France and carried out in Saint-Domingue (Haiti).

Black Revolution

Clearly, Afro-Venezuelans were among the first to be inspired by the French Revolution (1789) and the subsequent abolition of slavery that ensued (1791) in the nearby French colony of Saint-Domingue. The bold actions of the black Jacobins within Venezuela gave impetus to other revolutionary movements, and without later Afro-Venezuelan participation on the side of the patriot forces against the Spanish Crown, the first republic would have never been proclaimed and the subsequent independence of Venezuela would have never been assured.

Influence of Haiti: Historical Context

In the colonial and geographic vacuum that existed in the early seventeenth century Caribbean sailed buccaneers and freebooters that were seeking safe harbors for their ships, as well as provisioning points for their crews. Most of these were French, along with other scattered Europeans. They primarily settled on the island of Tortuga off the northern coast of Saint-Domingue in 1630. Within thirty years, the larger French contingent had expelled the

⁴¹ Ibid., 69.

other European interlopers and successfully repelled Spanish incursions from the eastern end of the island.⁴²

With the help of African slaves, the French settlers were able to convert their half of the island into one of the richest European colonies of the New World, even surpassing Great Britain's Jamaica and Spain's Cuba. Cacao from Mexico and Venezuela supplied France with its raw chocolate, while refineries in Bordeaux processed sugar from Saint-Domingue that gave the chocolate its flavor and texture. That sugar not used in cacao processing was converted into rum and exported all over the known world. Also, Saint-Domingue was known for having shipped huge quantities of cotton and coffee back to France.⁴³

The problem with this scenario is that it required half a million imported Africans to make this economic miracle happen. And that huge number of blacks required 30,000 white French colonists to keep them in line. In order to maintain control over such a disproportionate number of Africans, the white French slave masters kept up the most brutal repression. They exercised the power of life and death over their slaves, and did not hesitate to use, and abuse, such vast power. Blacks were frequently seen being whipped in the streets of Port-au-Prince, the capital of Saint-Domingue. And in the countryside, it was not uncommon to see disobedient slaves being buried alive, with their heads left exposed and covered with molasses so that nasty red army ants could finish them off.⁴⁴

As in other parts of the New World, such maltreatment of blacks could not long be tolerated, especially by the blacks themselves. This sort of terror produced an even larger counter-terror. As blacks in Saint-Domingue escaped these vile conditions, they made their way to the mountainous interior. Occasionally, bands of blacks would come down from their

⁴² Richard Joseph, *Haiti* (New York: Nelson Doubleday, 1959), 13.

⁴³ Ibid., 15-16.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 16.

mountain hideouts and raid outlying plantations. One of the most devastating of these incursions was carried out by a maroon slave in 1758, simply known as Mackandal. Swarming down from the hills, Mackandal and his men set fires to the building(s) of nearly every white he encountered. But as news of his exploits spread, it did not take too long for the French island authorities to discover his hideout, flush him out and burn him alive.⁴⁵

But events on the other side of the ocean would provide the spark to reignite the passion of resistance in the hearts of the blacks in Saint-Domingue and other European colonies throughout the Caribbean and the Americas. Just two years after the National Assembly signed and enacted the *Rights of Man and the Citizen* in Paris, France (1789), this same body granted political rights to “persons of color.”⁴⁶

However, it soon became obvious that whites in Saint-Domingue had no intention of complying with this law of the French National Assembly. And when two young mulatto leaders organized a protest demonstration and spoke up against the intransigence of the island’s white colonists, they were quickly arrested and smashed to death on the wheel. Not long after this brutal display of repression, the blacks of Saint-Domingue began to organize themselves in the mountain forests, planning a great rebellion that would set them free. And free they would be, for if they failed to defeat the French in battle, they reasoned that they would become free at the time of their deaths, with their spirits breaking loose from the physical plane whence they could direct their living kin from the spirit world.⁴⁷ As in Venezuela, it was their religious syncretism that empowered them to survive the relentless evil of their masters, and it also provided them with the courage and solidarity to fight back.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 16.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 16-17.

Then, on the night of August 14, 1791, the Voodoo drums pounded as never before, reverberating throughout the western end of the island. The white colonists may have thought it was for a marriage celebration, or some other religious occasion. In a way, it was the latter; but the drums were actually signaling the coming destruction of the old order in Saint-Domingue with the rise of a black revolution. The black slaves worked the land, but like revolutionary peasants in every part of the world, “they aimed for the extermination of their oppressors.”⁴⁸

The black revolution was led by a *papaloi* or high priest named Dutty Boukman, who employed Voodoo as the medium of his conspiracy. Boukman was a Jamaican slave quite literate in Arabic and English, but was sold by his master to a French planter in Saint-Domingue. Boukman’s former English master accused him of teaching the other slaves on the plantation how to read and inciting insurrection. The French planter assumed that if he gave Boukman the job of being his coachman, it would help to pacify his rebellious instincts. But Boukman used his coachman experience to forge connections with other rebellious slave leaders on plantations up and down the Northern Cape and even to regions further south, indoctrinating them into the rites of the Voodoo religion and stirring them up against their French masters.⁴⁹ In spite of all the religious restrictions, the blacks travelled miles into the forest to sing, dance and practice their Voodoo rites, as instructed by Boukman. But these were also occasions in which they could talk and share political news, and make their plans beyond the white man’s range of sight or hearing.⁵⁰

After some deliberations, Boukman and a council of elders agreed upon a plan that encompassed a massive scale and aimed at exterminating the whites and seizing the colony in the

⁴⁸ C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 2nd ed., revision of 1938 edition, republication of 1963 Random House edition (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 85.

⁴⁹ Carolyn Cooper, “Haiti- The Price of Freedom,” *Jamaica Daily Gleaner* (Kingston), 17 January 2010.

⁵⁰ James, *Black Jacobins*, 86.

name of its black population.⁵¹ With such a bold plan in mind, Boukman gave the signal for attack in the early morning hours of the following day. At dawn, he led 12,000 slaves, half of them women, into the towns and villages surrounding Le Cap François, whereupon they set fire to every cane field, grove and plantation house. And through the leaping flames, Boukman's blacks wielded their machetes, plunging them into the collapsing bodies of any whites or others who got in their way.⁵²

After a few weeks, the rampaging blacks had managed to kill 2,000 whites. However, whites from throughout the island coalesced in the north to put down Boukman's rebellion, whereupon 10,000 blacks were captured and hanged. The roadsides were littered with the bodies of blacks hanging from the trees.⁵³ Boukman was guillotined by the French in November, with his head publicly displayed in an attempt to dispel the aura of invincibility that he had cultivated among the island's blacks.⁵⁴

These events in Saint-Domingue were remarkable for several reasons. First, the plan almost succeeded. If not for some delays in carrying out the plans, the whites would not have found the time needed to group for a counteroffensive. Second, as James notes, "That so vast a conspiracy was not discovered until it had actually broken out is a testimony to their (the blacks') solidarity;"⁵⁵ and third, the whites were so blinded by their own arrogance and despised the slaves so much, "that they did not believe them capable of organizing such a mass movement on a grand scale."⁵⁶ In other words, the blacks were underestimated. Also of importance was the prestige gained by the mulattoes. Once they distanced themselves from the black slaves, but

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Joseph, *Haiti*, 18.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Sylviane Anna Diouf and Sylviane Kamara, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 152.

⁵⁵ James, *Black Jacobins*, 86.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 87.

now they desired to join them in a fight against a common enemy, the European enslaver.⁵⁷ The whites were fearful and started to make some concessions to the mulattoes. The revolution was underway, and there was no going back.

All of this did not escape the attention of one mixed raced Venezuelan resident in both France and Saint-Domingue. When he returned to his home in western Venezuela, he brought with him some revolutionary ideas that attracted the attention of many Afro-Venezuelans, to include the descendants of Chourio's African contingent. That person, José Leonardo Chirino, and the continuing influence exercised by the French and Haitian revolutions on Afro-Venezuelans, is the subject of the next section.

Of course, the potent impact of the Age of Enlightenment, and the French and Haitian revolutions that followed it, on Spanish colonial societies is a vast one, indeed, and therefore this dissertation limits its investigation to its effect on Venezuela's blacks, to include those segments of Venezuelan society also constituted with some degree of African bloodline, i.e. the mulattoes, *pardos*, *zambos* (black and Native American), etc., as well as the descendants of Chourio's African contingent. A transfer of ideas can be traced from the radical arm of the French Revolution to the Black Jacobins of the Haitian insurrections, passing on to the social rebellions of Venezuela's blacks in the colonial and post-colonial times.⁵⁸

In just four short years since the slave rebellion in Saint-Domingue, between 10 and 12 May, 1795, *zambos*, free blacks and slaves on the peninsula of Coro in west central Venezuela, being inspired by both the French Revolution and the charismatic Toussaint L'Ouverture's interpretation and application of it in the Caribbean, united and attempted to employ similar seditious actions against the Spanish colonial authorities. They saw republicanism as the key to

⁵⁷ Ibid., 89.

⁵⁸ Brito Figueroa. *30 Ensayos*, 405.

affecting their liberation. Their battle cry was “Death to the Tyrants!” Their leadership advanced a program that would abolish special privileges for white persons as they then enjoyed, above and beyond that of all others in the colonial, caste society. This rebellion was instigated and led by José Leonardo Chirino, but was forcefully extinguished by colonial soldiers on 12 May 1795, headed by the *justicia mayor* (chief justice) of Coro, don Mariano Ramírez Valdenay. The fate of the revolutionaries was similar to those who had gone before them on the path of freedom, and would follow after them as well. They were overcome by massive force of arms, and those that survived were jailed and tortured, with their leadership being summarily executed. This uprising on Coro, however, introduced new political overtones with connections to the French Revolution.

Figure 5.1: José Leonardo Chirino

José Leonardo Chirino, of Angolan descent, led an insurrection at Coro (1795) inspired by the revolutionary events then taking place in Saint-Domingue (Haiti). Many historians consider Chirino a precursor to the Venezuelan liberators Francisco Miranda and Simón Bolívar.

Source: http://www.kalipedia.com/kalipediamedia/historia/media/200808/01/hisvenezuela/20080801klphishve_2_Ies_SCO.jpg

José Leonardo Chirino

José Leonardo Chirino was the son of a free Native American woman and a black slave who belonged to a *criollo*⁵⁹ family, from whence he received his name. He was born as a free *zambo* and toiled as a day laborer, cultivating the ground on the hacienda of Don José Tallería, where his future wife was also working.⁶⁰ This slave woman of Tallería, María de los Dolores, had three children with Chirino, these being María Bibiana, Rafael María and José Hilario. The hacienda owner would frequently engage in business trips to the Antilles, and on more than one occasion Chirino accompanied him. It seems that Chirino developed an intense interest in the ideas and practice of the French Revolution while travelling outside Venezuela to the island of Saint-Domingue with Tallería. Of course, this island today is comprised of that territory constituting both Haiti on its western end, and the Dominican Republic on its eastern side. The effects of the French Revolution were manifest worldwide, but especially in her own colonies. The area that now makes up Haiti, i.e. the French-speaking portion of the isle, was in political turmoil over these revolutionary ideas and ideals then emanating from Paris, the epicenter of political enlightenment. Thus, both Tallería and Chirino were exposed to the virus of Republican ideas, and, more importantly, of the existence of a strong abolitionist movement in France and other parts of Europe.

Tallería was cognizant of Chirino's intense interest and manifest reactions, and became somewhat concerned over whether or not his talented free black would remain in his employ. But as for Chirino, he wasn't worried about the matter, but stimulated by it. The notions of liberty and equality for his black brothers and sisters back home propelled him to consider

⁵⁹ In Venezuela, this word denotes a Latin American of pure or overwhelmingly Spanish-European heritage, but born in the New World. It is the Spanish word for Creole.

⁶⁰ Newspaper supplement dispersed throughout Venezuela in 2002 in cooperation with Fundación Banco Mercantil and CANTV, the national telecommunications corporation, *Rostros y personajes de Venezuela: Crear la República*.

drastic actions. Never had even the existence of such a revolutionary concept or movement dawned upon him until his arrival in Paris.⁶¹

Back in Venezuela, Chirino joined a group of conspirators who clandestinely met in the mill of the Mancanillas farm, located on the outskirts of Curimagua, in the present state of Falcón. Among those present was José Caridad González, well informed about the French Revolution and the black insurrections in Saint-Domingue. He was an ex-slave of Angolan-Congolese descent, commonly referred to in Venezuela as a *luango*,⁶² and served as Chirino's right-hand man. From May 3, 1795, they began preparing the insurrection, which broke out on the 10th. Chirino and his partisans went to the hacienda El Socorro, where they adopted his revolutionary program: establishing what they called "The Law of the French," i.e. a republic for Venezuela; elimination of slavery and social classes; abolition of racial privileges; and repeal of the excise tax.⁶³ Almost all of the blacks recruited by Chirino were of the *luangos* or the *minas* groups.⁶⁴ The idea was to take all the bigger farms and plantations in the area, recruit more men from among the liberated slaves, assure clear passage to the city of Coro, and then capture it as their base of operations in further freeing blacks throughout Venezuela and providing a safe haven for any runaway slaves or others seeking asylum and wishing to join the revolution. After conducting several incursions onto the larger plantations in the area and killing their white owners, Chirino and his men made the critical mistake of delaying the taking of Coro. He

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Acosta Saignes, *Vida de los esclavos*, 151. Loango is a region situated to the north of the Congo River. There was a French processing area there for Africans to be transported to the New World. Hence, those Africans proceeding from that "factory," to include their descendants, were referred to in Venezuela as *luangos*. Brito Figueroa refers to this same group as *loangos* in *Las insurrecciones de los esclavos negros en la sociedad colonial venezolana* (Caracas: Editorial Cantaelaro, 1961), 67-77.

⁶³ Brito Figueroa, *Las insurrecciones*, 71. "Chirino remained in the Sierra applying the Law of the French, or better said, the law of the Black Jacobins of Toussaint L'Ouverture and Dessalines, recruiting soldiers for their army..."

⁶⁴ Acosta Saignes, *Vida de los esclavos*, 152-153. *Minas* refer to Africans with Akan origins in the Gold Coast, present day Ghana, such as the Ashanti, Fanti, Ewe, etc., and derives from the prominent Portuguese Elmina fortress there, that served as a slave factory, or processing point.

probably thought he needed to take some time in reorganizing his forces, especially with the new recruits, but this gave Spanish colonial officials more time to organize the defense.⁶⁵

The revolutionaries were repelled, but many died and others were arrested. The more fortunate escaped. Chirino, hunted by the authorities, fled and took refuge in the interior until he was betrayed by an acquaintance in Baragua, whence he was imprisoned in August 1795. After a short time, he was moved to Caracas, where the Royal Court condemned him to death by hanging on December 10, 1796, believing he was acting "as an active agent in the crime of subversion."⁶⁶ The sentence was immediately carried out in the central plaza. His head was set on an iron lance and placed on the main road out of Caracas leading to the valleys of Aragua and Coro, presumably to serve as a warning to any potential revolutionaries.⁶⁷ His wife and children were condemned to be sold as slaves away from the place where they lived with Chirino: María de los Dolores and Rafael María, in Caracas, and José María Bibiana and Hilario in Puerto Cabello. His wife, however, did not live long enough to see her sentence carried out, as she became sick and died shortly afterwards.⁶⁸

Chirino's memory lived on, however, and inspired others to continue the work of liberation. It should also be pointed out that right before the close of the eighteenth century, in 1799, more than one hundred *pardos*, blacks, mulattoes and Native Americans were jailed in Maracaibo on the charges of planning a conspiracy to overthrow Spanish colonial rule, establish a republic and abolish slavery. The original plan was to carry out an insurrection in Maracaibo at the same time a slave rebellion was being carried out in Cartagena in the neighboring territory of

⁶⁵ Brito Figueroa, *Las insurrecciones*, 75..

⁶⁶ Paul Verna, "Chirino, José Leonardo," *Diccionario de Historia de Venezuela*, 2nd ed. (Caracas: Fundación Polar, 1997), 800-801.

⁶⁷ Brito Figueroa, *Las insurrecciones*, 75-76.

⁶⁸ Verna, "Chirino," 800-801.

Nueva Granada (Colombia).⁶⁹ The revolutionaries were counting on the inability of the Spanish colonialists to extinguish two fires at the same time, reasoning that it would tax their military to the extremes. That they were on the right track was later proven by Bolívar, Páez, O'Higgins, Santander, San Martín, Sucre and other South American freedom fighters, who extended the struggle to the whole of Latin America. It wasn't until 1808, however, that the leaders of this plan were revealed to be the *pardo* Francisco Javier Pirela and the black Francisco Suárez. Two mulattoes served as their lieutenants.

Of Chirino's revolution and the subsequent insurrections he inspired, Afro-Zulians in the *cumbe* at Bobures and other areas in the Sur del Lago were decidedly onboard. Jesús Ángel Parra,⁷⁰ chair of the Department of History and a member of the Zulia State History Academy at La Universidad de Zulia in Maracaibo, when asked by the author what happened with the descendents of Chourio's Africans from 1757 until Venezuelan independence in 1811, responded that: "In Venezuela, in 1795, the black José Leonardo Chirino, who had contact with Haiti, became the precursor in launching a rebellion against Spanish colonial control. The majority of the blacks in the Sur del Lago sided with, abetted, or joined the struggle of Chirino and those who would follow in his footsteps."⁷¹

As noted above, Parra considers Chirino's movement a real revolution. Its political, economic and social significance has been recognized by all historians who have studied it. On the Occasion of the 200th anniversary of the insurrection led by Chirino, the National Executive, the Congress of the Republic, and various cultural institutions in Venezuela, united and accorded honors posthumously on the social activist. Among the acts of commemoration was the unveiling

⁶⁹ Arellano Moreno, *Orígenes de la economía venezolana*, 123.

⁷⁰ Luis Guillermo Hernández and Jesús Ángel Parra, *Diccionario General del Zulia* (Caracas: Editorial Arte, 1999).

⁷¹ Jesús Ángel Parra in e-mail to Raymond Keller dated 2 June 2010.

of a plaque at the National Pantheon on May 10, 1995, which officially recognized Chirino's presence alongside the other heroes and forefathers of Venezuelan independence.⁷²

Chirino took proactive steps to advocate the rights of men, s taking the fires of revolutionary tendencies among the slaves, the free blacks, the Native Americans, the *mestizos*, the *pardos*, the *zambos*, and all oppressed Venezuelans. Most importantly, Chirino's revolution transformed the Afro-Venezuelans' struggles for freedom from isolated, backward-looking slave revolts and linked them with the revolutionary-democratic and republican tides sweeping the Americas and the entire Trans-Atlantic world.

Because of Chirino's movement and the on-going Haitian revolution, the Creoles in Venezuela came to the realization that the abolition of the slave trade reflected their commercial interests as a class of the emerging bourgeoisie. What they definitely wanted to avoid was a repeat of the Haitian experience in their own backyard. And, after a series of stinging defeats in their struggle for independence from Spain, Venezuelan Creole leadership, headed by Bolívar, prematurely proclaimed, on numerous occasions, the abolition of slavery throughout Spanish America. They hoped they could win black support for the Bolivarian Revolution. And following these proclamations, Haiti twice provided Bolívar refuge during the period of 1815-1816, even equipping him with money and arms to continue his fight on the mainland.⁷³ More about Bolívar and the Afro-Venezuelans as the revolutionary nexus appears in the next and concluding chapter.

Conclusions

Throughout colonial Venezuela, Africans and African derived peoples manifested their opposition to slavery in many ways. Some committed suicide, hoping for a better life with their

⁷² Verna, "Chirino," 801.

⁷³ "Toussaint L'Ouverture and the Haitian Revolution," *Workers Vanguard* (New York), Nos. 446 and 447, 12 and 26 February 1988, respectively.

ancestors dwelling in the spirit world. And for some women, voluntary abortion spared their children from a future in bondage. Also, some slaves, with the astute use of toxic plants, poisoned their master's food. Bastide believes that this latter action belies the existence of African *baba-osaim*, or medicine men, throughout the Americas and Caribbean.⁷⁴ And then there were some slaves who would sabotage their work in the fields or mines, or just slow down the intensity of their labor and production rates. This type of strategy gave rise to “lazy” stereotypes for blacks among European settler populations.⁷⁵ The most common forms of resistance to enslavement, however, were flight and fight, both of which took place in Western Venezuela on a grand scale from 1750-1811.

As far as flight is concerned, in the Sur del Lago there are small societies of the descendants of runaway black slaves, generically referred to as maroons. They have continued to this day as an ethnic minority, but the resulting Afro-Zulian culture is one of more than mere survival. Following the death of Juan de Chourio in 1757, the ancestors of these blacks ran away from the white settlement at and around Perijá and avoided remaining victims by settling in small villages or *cumbes* along the southern shores of Lake Maracaibo, principally at Bobures. Their descendants have peacefully lived in the Sur del Lago ever since, principally engaged in cattle herding and agricultural pursuits, generally preferring to keep to themselves. They fled from deteriorating and oppressive conditions, and perhaps a breach of promise that they would obtain papers of manumission. Nevertheless, the Afro-Zulians managed to maintain their self-image as the descendants of the proud Imbangala warriors. They did not let themselves be hemmed in by the prevailing Venezuelan Eurocentric culture. Their relative isolation in the Sur del Lago facilitated their political and social formation as one people and one culture. Their

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

escape from servitude not only insured their biological survival, but perpetuated their dignity under conditions which only served to run counter to it.

Insofar as fighting, the Afro-Zulians and other black Venezuelans clearly sided with and assisted, where possible, the efforts of José Leondardo Chirino to establish a new order in Venezuela, based on the French *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* (1789), as well as the then on-going efforts of the black Jacobins to liberate themselves in Haiti. In this sense, he was a precursor to Simón Bolívar and other Latin American liberators. Therefore, Chirino's insurrection rightfully can be classified as a revolution, Trans-Atlantic in scope. The Latin verb, *revolvere*, for example, signifies to “roll over.”⁷⁶ And that is exactly what was indicated in Chirino's actions, a complete roll over and revolutionary transformation of Venezuelan society. He not only wanted to replace the political leadership (king to president) and form of government (monarchy to republic), but to convert a slave-holding society into one where all men and women, regardless of race, were free and agents unto themselves. He wanted a free peasantry in place of a plantation aristocracy, strengthened ties with the entire Trans-Atlantic world and free trade. In addition, Chirino and his partisans wanted to do away with an imposed state religion (Catholicism), and promote a pluralism of beliefs based on African, European and Native American syncretism, as was practiced in the *cumbes*, then serving as prototypes of the envisioned new world where “*Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*” would be the guiding stars.

This chapter demonstrated that while the Afro-Zulians may not have been at the eye of the Trans-Atlantic revolutionary storm, they certainly were caught up in its more devastating winds. Therefore, despite being buffeted by events throughout the Trans-Atlantic world, the

⁷⁶ Thomas Reinhardt, “200 Years of Forgetting: Hushing up the Haitian Revolution,” *Journal of Black Studies*, 35:4 (March 2005), 251.

Afro-Zulians resisted the most tumultuous effects and held on. They survived and prospered in communities of their own making on the southern shores of Lake Maracaibo.

CHAPTER SIX

THE AFRO-ZULIANS

This dissertation set out to ascertain the ethnogenesis and historical linkages of the blacks in the Sur del Lago with societies in Africa as well as other cultures of the Trans-Atlantic world, examined within a case study of those Angolans brought to the Sur del Lago Maracaibo in 1722 by the Basque-French Captain Juan de Chourio, and following the descendants of these Africans up until the declaration of Venezuelan independence from Spain in 1811. The ancestors of these blacks established the nucleus of what became a significant contingent of the contemporary Afro-Zulians.

Emergence of an Afro-Zulian Community

What was discovered is that like other blacks in the Diaspora, the Afro-Zulians strove to attain self-conscious dignity and respect. The Afro-Zulians successfully resisted the pressures to lose their identity through total assimilation into the Venezuelan *pardo* melting pot.¹ But while they are proud of their African heritage, they would not Africanize the rest of Venezuela. They are cognizant that Venezuela is a political house hammered together by many carpenters, and they are content to have played a significant role in its construction. Their survival and

¹ Robert M. Jiobu, *Ethnicity and Assimilation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 5, 6. In the context of this dissertation, Jiobu's definition of assimilation is applied, whereby it signifies the "blend of the culture and structure of one ethnic group with the culture and structure of another group." Assimilation, therefore, has two possible outcomes: First, the minority group loses its distinctiveness and becomes like the majority. And in the process, the majority group does not change; or second, both the ethnic and majority groups blend homogeneously, with each losing its distinctiveness, whereby a unique product results. This process is sometimes referred to as the "melting pot." Jiobu indicates that, "these concepts have their origin partially in scientific theory, partially in Utopian wish, and partially in political ideology." Assimilation can sometimes be referred to as acculturation. Assimilation is, therefore, regarded as a cultural mechanism of acculturation. Hence, the revolutionary activity of the Afro-Zulians engendered a partial political assimilation, while miscegenation of the Afro-Zulians with other ethnicities fostered a partial national and *pardo* acculturation/assimilation that continues to the present time.

expansion provides a message of hope for other groups of the African Diaspora throughout the Americas and the Caribbean.²

If it is true that, in the final analysis, revolution is based on land, then the case of the Afro-Zulians can be counted a success. In order to produce a community, feed, shelter and clothe themselves, the Afro-Zulians secured and developed their own lands in the Sur del Lago. While ideas and theories were important to the Afro-Zulians, what they primarily fought for was a better way of life for themselves and their descendants. The ideas and theories merely provided them with the intellectual tools to accomplish this formidable task. After all, people do not usually fight, and sometimes die, solely for ideas and theories unless they can see a light at the end of the tunnel, i.e. a superior way of life emerging from those ideas and theories.³ That the Afro-Zulians enjoyed control over substantial tracts of land in the Sur del Lago permitted them, as a people of the Diaspora, to retain and develop a knowledge of their Angolan origins, resist enslavement in the *cumbe*, oppose racism and forge their own destiny within the emerging cultural and political mosaic that is Venezuela.

Geographical factors in the Sur del Lago also proved to be important. At the beginning of this research, all that was known about the towns of Bobures and Gibraltar were their colorful and tropical character, and that they were largely inhabited by Afro-Zulians who enjoyed playing and listening to the *chimbangeles*, or Angolan drums, on festive occasions. What the investigation revealed, in the previous chapter, was that these towns, situated on the southern extremes of Lake Maracaibo and serving as *cumbes*, were centers of resistance against the slave aristocracy, and later, the colonial authorities. Their relative geographic isolation is what

²W. E. B. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1994), 2-3. This book was originally published in Chicago, A. C. McClurg and Company, 1903.

³Stokely Carmichael, "Pan-Africanism- Land and Power" in *Modern Black Nationalism: From Marcus Garvey to Louis Farrakhan*, ed. William L. Van Deburg (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 209.

allowed their inhabitants to avoid the general patterns of acculturation and deculturation imposed on most of her black Venezuelans. On this forced situation, Magnus Mörner penned: “Furthermore, the very conditions of their passage and their existence as slaves made it impossible for them to bring any artifacts and other property to the New World. Under these adverse conditions, it is surprising that, after all, the slaves were able to exert such influence as they did upon folk religion, language, music, dances and agriculture in the Americas. If the form of migration and treatment had been somewhat more humane, there can be no doubt that their contributions would have been much more important.”⁴

Here the Afro-Zulians were able to hold on to their ethnic integrity more so than blacks in other regions of Venezuela, like the littoral abutting the Caribbean coastline, replete with its big cacao and sugar plantations.⁵ Unlike those areas under a tight Spanish grip, in the more remote areas of the Sur del Lago, Afro-Zulians established the perfect breeding grounds for sedition against the colonial authorities. In the *cumbes* of Bobures and Gibraltar, as in other *cumbes* across Venezuela, maroons and Native Americans came together to organize and fight against their common foes: the white enslavers and Spanish rule. With regard to *zambo* leadership in Venezuelan revolutionary movements, Mörner notes: “In one way or another faint echoes of the French Revolution, or, rather, its sequel in Haiti, reached the Spanish American masses. In Coro, Venezuela, José Leonardo Chirino, a free *zambo*, made himself leader of a slave uprising with the aim of introducing ‘the Law of the French.’”⁶

Therefore, within the confines of the *cumbes* a revolutionary ideology was able to take hold among the Afro-Zulians and others finding refuge there. Additionally, the cordillera of the

⁴Magnus Mörner, *Race Mixture in the History of Latin America* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1967), 17-18.

⁵ Carlos Esteban Deive, *Dominican Cultures*, 90.

⁶ Ibid., 79-80.

Andes fronting the Sur del Lago inland to both the east and south served to isolate the region, and augmented the defense of both Bobures and Gibraltar. This was another factor that lent itself to halting the process of deculturation among the Afro-Zulians through the infusion, maintenance and fostering of Angolan Imbangala culture among them. In resisting deculturation, Chourio's Africans and their descendants moved in directions that helped them develop as a separate and distinct community within Venezuela. This was the result of those historic forces that worked against the incessant push for deculturation on the part of the European colonists and their descendants. The Afrocentric theoretical construct central to this study acknowledges that the Afro-Zulians still maintained a significant semblance of those fundamentals such as culture, ethnicity, language and religion that linked them to the Imbangala peoples of Angola.

Trans-Atlantic Connections

This dissertation also served to augment the connections made by the Afro-Zulians with the greater Trans-Atlantic world: the Basques, the Dutch, the English, the indigenous peoples, the Portuguese, the Spanish, as well as Africans and others of African descent.⁷ In this regard, the case of Juan de Chourio provided the link with all of these cultural groups. With the Basque connection, Chourio's genealogy was thoroughly examined, thereby providing insight not only into his motivations for becoming involved in the African slave trade, but the often overlooked contributions made by the Basque people generally in helping to develop the New World. Through Chourio's case, linkages in the slave trade were also probed. It is understood, for example, that Chourio's father leveraged his influence with a French king sitting on the Spanish throne in order to obtain a diplomatic post in the Netherlands, and that Juan de Chourio, in turn,

⁷ The Afro-Zulians, for example, share in the Afro-Venezuelan development of religious syncretism, the establishment of maroon settlements and the emergence common fronts against slavery, and later the manifestations of racism in Venezuelan society, both overt and imbedded.

parlayed alliances gained among the Dutch to establish initial slaving operations on the island of Curaçao under the auspices of the French Guinea Company. And after 1713 and the signing of the Treaty of Utrecht, especially, all of this transpired under the watchful eyes of the British, enjoined to enforce their monopoly granted over slave trafficking operations in the Caribbean.

By 1722, the British grip over the Caribbean was tightening. Whereas the Spanish colonists in Venezuela and throughout the region in need of African manual labor for their mines and plantations could no longer accept the importation of slaves from any agent other than a British one, the once inter-Caribbean source of second and third generation blacks was drying up. This trafficking was reduced to the realm of contraband trade. This forced Chourio and the French Guinea Company, as well as other *asientos*, to look back to Africa in order to obtain the required slaves.

This is what brought Chourio to the Cabinda Coast in Central West Africa, to a port tenuously controlled by the French in an area predominantly under the visage of the Portuguese. It was here that the Basque-French captain may have first encountered the Italian Capuchin missionaries, and hence the Imbangala. As the Capuchin fathers were allowed to proselytize among the interior peoples of Angola and the Congo, and were actually quite good at it, they found strange partners in the fierce Imbangala warriors. At various times in the early Portuguese incursions into the Central African interior, Luso-Imbangala strategic alliances were formed. These arrangements facilitated the westward expansion of the Imbangala out of the Luba-Lunda complex. The Portuguese armed the Imbangala with European weapons, and this allowed the Imbangala to rapidly expand their territorial influence throughout the interior, but it was not without a cost. As a consequence, they had to turn over the majority of captured slaves to the Portuguese and accept Christian evangelization as provided by the Capuchins. They were also

required to provide military detachments to fight on behalf of the Portuguese in other parts of their worldwide empire. These Luso-Imbangala fighters were known as the *guerras pretas*, and proved particularly effective in the conquest of Brazil, ridding that country of Dutch usurpers and rebellious indigenous peoples.⁸ Knowledge of the *guerras pretas* spread throughout the known world.

Chourio had to find a way to take advantage of this information and optimize his short presence in Africa, for he realized that his profitable days as an *asentista* were coming to a quick close. He needed to transition out of his role as a slave trafficker and get a piece of the action in the profitable cacao business. He faced several obstacles in this regard, however. First, most of the best land suitable for cacao on the Spanish Main (mainland coast of the Spanish empire around the Caribbean Sea), was in the highly developed littoral. Purchasing this land would be too cost prohibitive. Second, there was some choice property that could be developed, but it was in the areas south of Maracaibo and infested with bands of the hostile Motilones. And third and lastly, there was the matter of circumventing the British slave trade monopoly.

Taking all of these matters into account, Chourio reasoned that establishing cacao plantations in the Province of Maracaibo was his best option. He could undertake this enterprise based on the Spanish king's desires to reduce the Motilones and evangelize them in the process. With this in mind, he petitioned the king for a royal decree that granted him the authority to introduce a Capuchin mission into the zone, engage the Native American population and suppress any rebellious among them, as well as to take whatever actions he deemed necessary to accomplish these aims. Hence, following the king's issuance of the *cédula real*, the introduction of his own contingent of the *guerras pretas*, along with a sufficient number of accompanying

⁸ Mattos, "Black Troops," 15-16.

slaves, was accomplished in 1723, or close to it, plus or minus one year.⁹ In this endeavor of Chourio, the infusion of many Trans-Atlantic cultures found its fulfillment.

Assimilation of Afro-Zulians in the Venezuelan Nation State

This dissertation also demonstrates that Afro-Zulians assimilated into Venezuelan history from its very beginnings through their direct participation in those political and social movements that led to the formation of the first republic. Throughout the formative years of 1722 through 1811, this dissertation highlights some areas of Afro-Zulian assimilation into what has ultimately emerged as the Venezuelan nation-state. Over time, Venezuela has become a nation peopled by many groups from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds, including the Afro-Zulians. As noted by Mörner and others, all Venezuelan blacks were galvanized by the French/Haitian-inspired events that transpired on the Coro peninsula in the short-lived revolution of Chirino.¹⁰ This provided solidarity with the overarching struggle of all Afro-Venezuelans, in addition to an incorporation into the forthcoming Bolivarian Revolution, which would consume the active participation of all ethnic and social classes except the *peninsulares*.

The Afro-Zulians, then, were part of a true revolution that was Trans-Atlantic in scope. British historian J. B. Trend, a biographer of Simón Bolívar, made the following comments in this regard:

The revolutionary movement in Venezuela began in 1795 with a rising in Coro, a town some way from the capital (Caracas) and always in opposition to it. Serious outbreaks had already taken place in New Granada (present day Colombia) and Peru. On this occasion the causes of the revolt were social rather than political, although the influence of France and the United States is not difficult to detect. Negroes and mulattoes, with whom many *pardos* and a few whites were secretly in touch, proclaimed what they called 'the law of the French: a republican

⁹ Chiossone, *Diccionario Toponímico*, 490.

¹⁰ Mörner, *Race Mixture*, 79-80.

government, freedom for slaves, reduction of taxes. The rebels were overcome without difficulty and punished with the barbaric severity of the age.¹¹

The events at Coro also served as a catalyst for yet more revolutionary stirrings in the Venezuelan black community. Just two years later in nearby La Guira, Manuel Gual, a retired Spanish army officer, together with José María España, the owner of a large hacienda, advocated the formation of a republic that would incorporate people of all races on an equal footing.¹² These men, calling for equality, liberty and harmony among all Venezuelans, were also inspired by the rhetoric of the French Revolution (1789). They made a conscious decision to recruit blacks (freed or slave), *pardos*, poor whites, laborers and small shopkeepers in a war for independence. They promised to abolish black slavery, do away with Native American tribute, and to establish a free trade zone throughout the Americas. To rally the people to their cause, these revolutionaries invoked the newly formed United States of America, but unfortunately they received neither help nor encouragement from the young colossus to the north. All of this proved to be too much for some of the big Creole property owners, who collaborated with the Spanish authorities to crush the rebellion in its infancy. But as conditions would continue to deteriorate, cooler minds like Miranda and Bolívar would come to see the wisdom in bringing blacks onboard in the revolutionary struggle.

As the case of Gual and España so aptly illustrates, once Chirino and his partisans rose up in Coro, the spirit of revolution could not be contained within Venezuela. Therefore, despite the small duration of the Coro rebellion, it was symptomatic of, and perhaps the key to, understanding the insurrectionist ferment gripping the entire Trans-Atlantic world at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century. It would appear that neither the

¹¹ J. B. Trend, *Bolívar and the Independence of Spanish America* (London: Hodder and Stoughton for English Universities Press, 1946), 59.

¹² Haggarty, *Venezuela: A Country Study*, 50.

American, French or Latin American revolutions can be viewed as singular events. They are all interconnected as one comprehensive Trans-Atlantic revolution.¹³ Taken in context, this revolutionary age began with the American Revolution in 1776, continued with the slave revolts that erupted in Saint-Domingue (the French colony that became Haiti with its independence in 1804), and concluded with the prolonged struggle of the Spanish American colonies to free themselves from the grip of Spain, most of these having done so by the mid-nineteenth century. Following this timeline, we can set Venezuela's course to real revolution as beginning at Coro. This would place it after the start of the black insurrections in Saint-Domingue but preceding the work of Miranda and Bolívar. Its true significance is that it fixed blacks in the vanguard of revolution in Venezuela, and this included those of Angolan descent in the Sur del Lago. The Afro-Zulians, therefore, sealed their revolutionary testament to Venezuelan history with their blood. No further proof of assimilation was required.

Another factor facilitating a partial assimilation, at least, was that of *mestizaje*, or miscegenation. The infusion of European and Native American blood with that of Afro-Zulian peoples has forced them to try and redefine their own identity while dealing with social and sexual conflicts, power, culture, the law and interpersonal relationships on a vast scale. Even free blacks continued to suffer various forms of discrimination following Venezuela's declared independence from Spain. As late as 1815, for example, the Captain-General of Venezuela, José Ceballos, was shocked to discover the extent that racial discrimination still flourished in Caracas. He mused that not only were full-blooded Africans excluded from "all municipal positions and other honorable occupations and distinctions, from entrance in some religious congregations and brotherhoods," but "even from social contact with the white class. They would not approach the persons or houses of the whites without paying the same or greater respects to those paid or due

¹³ Langley, *Americas in the Age of Revolutions*, 2.

to public authority.”¹⁴ Clearly then, losing an African identity through intermarriage with non-blacks could have been viewed as a measure of upward social mobility. Mörner, the authority on race issues in Spanish Latin America, also states that it was not uncommon for peoples of color in the late colonial era to purchase a *gracias al sacar*, or “honorary whiteness certificate.”¹⁵ Therefore, in consideration of this socializing and underlining Eurocentric pressure, it is quite amazing that a core unassimilated African contingent still remains in Zulia State, to carry on the legacy of New Africa in the Sur del Lago.

Afrocentric Culture

The emergence of a New Africa in the Sur del Lago, a community of, by and for the Afro-Zulians, largely depends on the formation of Afrocentric cultural constructs. In this regard, the role of cultural elements like music and religion were significant in helping to discover and investigate the Angolan origins of the Afro-Zulians, thus reinforcing their Afrocentric perspective. Cultural themes like music and religion take on added importance when viewed from the practice of Afrocentricity, which then serves as a transforming agent. M. K. Asante believes that the Afrocentric paradigms permit all things old to become new.¹⁶ Therefore, African and African-derived music and religion facilitate societal transformations in the lives of the Afro-Zulians, whose attitudes, beliefs, values and ultimately, behaviors, were influenced through the resurrection of Angolan musical and religious forms.

In societies with a scarcity of written sources, history is passed on through art, song, dance, the telling of stories and the enactment of ritual. This dissertation examined the research of La Universidad de Zulia professor, Juan de Dios Martínez Suarez, who dedicated his life to the collection and dissemination of objective information about the Angolan origins and

¹⁴ Mörner, *Race Mixture*, 65.

¹⁵ Ibid., 64.

¹⁶ Asante, *Afrocentricity*, 3.

characteristics of the drums, music, and dances associated with the Sur del Lago communities of San José, Gibraltar, Palmarito and Bobures in the Sucre Municipality,¹⁷ as well as the emergence of new forms of religious syncretism based on the fusion of Roman Catholicism (San Benito), Central African *orishas* (principally A jé), and indigenous myth (Mucúchies).¹⁸ Martínez' research has indicated the existence of anthropological and linguistic ties to these various cultural themes with specific ethnicities in Angola, placing an emphasis on the Imbangala. This work continues where Martínez' left off. It provides a plausible historical linkage with the Sur del Lago communities and the Imbangala through tracing the commercial trading activities of Juan de Chourio.

The resuscitation of these Angolan motifs among the Afro-Zulians contributes to the constructive efforts of the people in creating a symbolic life. The introduction of this African mythos helps the Afro-Zulians to discover the values of a spiritual, traditional and even mystical rhetoric that will serve them well in confronting the conforming pressures that a Eurocentric and increasingly technology-oriented society has imposed, and will continue to impose, upon them. Myth is important to Afro-Zulians because it permits them to see themselves as agents of destiny, rather than victims of circumstance. It defines their historic struggle and reinforces a true Afrocentric identity, fraternity and even a sense of nationhood. M. K. Asante articulated that: "We are, as the continental Africans would teach us, and as we once knew, one with the environment. We have leaped from the environment, the same substance; the cells of the human bodies are of the same essence as the cells of trees and plants. We are quite honestly not humans separated from other matter, but, more correctly as the physicists now understand, of the same

¹⁷ Martínez Suárez, *Chimbángueles*.

¹⁸ Martínez Suárez, *San Benito*.

nature. Within this context, myth is important as an organizing principle in the area of human discourse.”¹⁹

The perpetuation of an Angolan/Imbangala mythos among the Afro-Zulians also provided the impetus for them to resist enslavement and work for the liberation of themselves and their Afro-Venezuelan brothers and sisters. For example, most of Chirino’s revolutionary cadre in Western Venezuela self-identified as Angolans. In addition, the organization of the *cumbes* was consistent with that of the *ki-lombos* of the Imbangala and the *quilombos* of the Luso-Imbangala *guerras pretas*,²⁰ even to the very establishment of perimeter defenses and the internal layout of the maroon village.²¹ There was also the tradition in Venezuela and throughout the Caribbean of runaway blacks joining up with *contrabandistas*, freebooters, pirates and others operating against the interests of the Spanish Crown since the days of the *práctico*.²²

Thus, the Afro-Zulians, like other Afro-Venezuelans, fought when necessary against the evils foisted upon them by Spanish colonial administrators and slave masters. And as the day of Venezuelan independence drew ever closer, the Afro-Zulians, along with other Afro-Venezuelans, aligned themselves with sundry parties partial to both the French and Haitian revolutions.²³ Try as they did, the Spanish colonial authorities and slave masters tried to limit access to information about these revolutionary movements in Europe and the Caribbean. The Haitian revolution, particularly, struck fear in the very core of their beings, as the slavers could never fitfully sleep, not knowing when their slaves would rise up and slash them to pieces with a machete. During the course of investigation for this dissertation, it was discovered that the

¹⁹ Asante, *Race, Rhetoric and Identity: Architecton of Soul*, 152.

²⁰ Mattos, “Black Troops,” 15, 16.

²¹ Bracho Reyes, “*El culto de San Benito en el Sur del Lago*,” 49-50.

²² Cohen, “Smuggling in Eighteenth Century Venezuela,” 4-5.

²³ Brito Figueroa, *30 Ensayos*.

insurrection of José Leonardo C hirino exercised the most profound influence on all Afro-Venezuelans, and Chirino is also considered, along with Manuel Gual, José María España, and Francisco de Miranda, a precursor of Simón Bolívar and his valiant and successful transnational revolution across the northern tier of South America. Much information was gleaned concerning Bolívar and blacks, as well as Afro-Venezuelans generally in the period of 1811 through the abolition of slavery in Venezuela in 1854. However, this was beyond the scope of this work and remains open as the subject for further research and publication.

Conclusions

Having been transported thousands of miles across the sea from their homes in the Angolan interior, so far from their families and established social networks, the blacks in the Sur del Lago quickly undertook measures to integrate themselves within the extant colonial Venezuelan society, yet set about to create a community of their own. Under conditions of servitude or freedom, the Afro-Zulians were successful in forging a new society in the Sur del Lago Maracaibo. This dissertation, in highlighting the emergence of a New Africa on the southern shores of Lake Maracaibo, added a new area of research for students of the Diaspora. This dissertation also assures that the memory of those 600 Africans brought to the Province of Maracaibo by Juan de Chourio, and their descendants, will not be lost to the history of the worldwide diffusion of black people.

From the beginning of settlement, the Afro-Zulians carved out an important niche for themselves in colonial Venezuela, serving as *guerras pretas* in subduing hostile indigenous populations and carving out zones for future agricultural production and cattle herding. While many cultures interacted in the Sur del Lago, the area maintained a largely Afrocentric character mostly due to the strong Imbangala influence exercised by Chourio's original black contingent.

During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, many fugitive blacks from throughout the region found their way to the *cumbes* in the Sur del Lago. The interaction of the blacks in these communities with local indigenous populations, mulattoes, *pardos* and renegade whites, also allowed for greater access to, and connections with, the larger Trans-Atlantic world. Over time, this facilitated Afro-Zulian identification with, and participation in, revolutionary movements then sweeping Europe, the Caribbean and the Americas.

Because of Chourio's black contingent and its ability to hold on to and transmit sundry elements of Angolan culture and values, the Afro-Zulians have been rescued from an invisibility and marginality often affixed to other groups of the Diaspora in Latin America. The Afro-Zulians contributed to the evolution of Venezuela as a free and democratic state. Through the centuries, the blacks of the Sur del Lago were active participants in the construction of their own communities and the forging of a true Afro-Zulian identity.

APPENDIX A: CITI Training Certification attained by Raymond A. Keller, II, on September 16, 2008 in compliance with dealing with human subjects.

APPENDIX B: Social Groups by Caste and Race that Formed Spanish Colonial Society in Venezuela during the period of 1722-1811.

The following are presented in their order of societal precedence. They are adapted from pages 29 and 30 of Zamora, H., et al. *Estudios Sociales*. Caracas: Departamento de Producción de Colegio Bolivariana, C.A., 1998.

SOCIAL STRATIFICATION OF VENEZUELAN COLONIAL SOCIETY

BLANCOS PENINSULARES: Born in Spain. These possessed all of the high posts in the royal administration. They were archbishops, bishops, captains general, bureaucrats, etc. Generally, they staffed nearly all of the higher public employee positions.

BLANCOS CRIOLLOS (Creoles): Born in Venezuela. They were descendants of the conquistadores and therefore owners of vast tracts of land. They were the true dominant, landed aristocracy. Those that owned great mansions and estates were known as *mantuanos*, or in popular terminology, “*grandes cacaos*.” They also regulated the local constabulary through the office of the city hall and exercised dominion in most of the municipal assemblies. Only those who owned land, slaves, or hired hands to work vast cattle ranches could sit on these assemblies. It was a privileged group and within it resided the wise, educated and the wealthy.

BLANCOS CANARIOS: Originated in the Canary Islands. These were laboring white persons (tradesmen) and merchants. They did not occupy high positions in public administration nor did they possess vast sums of money. For the most part, they lived on the outskirts of the cities.

PARDOS: They were the majority population group in the 18th century. They were the racial product of intense ethnic mixing that took place throughout the colonial epoch. There were *pardos* (browns) of white and indigenous called *mestizos*, and yet others of blacks and indigenous called *zambos*. Those born in varying degrees between these two aforementioned groups received various names like *tercerón*, *cuarterón*, *salto atrás*, *tente en el aire*, *sambajo*, *quinterón*, etc. There were more than 100 such classifications, and by the start of the nineteenth century, the simple but more comprehensive term of *pardo* came into general use. They were dedicated to various trades such as carpentry, iron working, tailoring, shoe making, etc. Socially, they were discriminated against by the Creoles, who would not permit them to enter into university studies or occupy any post in the Royal Consulate. Neither could they become ordained as priests. Nevertheless, since 1797 they were admitted into schools of medicine and allowed to serve as doctors in various civilian and military capacities, but only because there was a lack of qualified white doctors.

INDIOS: By the end of the 18th century, nearly all of the indigenous population had been conquered. Many lived in small towns as free individuals while others lived on mission grounds. Still others preferred to distance themselves from Spanish colonial settlements, keeping to remote areas like jungle valleys or mountain tops. The indigenous population greatly diminished during the conquest and colonization of Venezuela due to incessant warfare and biological agents introduced inadvertently by the Europeans, blacks and mulattoes.

NEGROS: These were the pure blacks. They were generally found in conditions of slavery, although there were some who were freed or even *manumisos*, i.e. they paid for their own freedom. In any event, the blacks found themselves in the group considered the most socially inferior in the colonial society, and had the most difficult obstacle in trying to overcome imbedded racism at all levels.

APPENDIX C: ROMAN CATHOLIC MOTIVATIONS OF JUAN DE CHOURIO

Much of the wealth generated in the Americas and elsewhere ultimately found its way back to Navarra, contributing to the construction of churches and other important buildings there. But a good deal of it remained in Venezuela as well, adding to the legacy and patrimony of the soon to emerge Bolivarian republic. Juan de Chourio, for example, is believed to have returned to the Basque country sometime in the mid-1740s, whence he commissioned an anonymous artist to paint the Virgin Mary and Baby Jesus. This splendid piece of artwork, titled “Our Lady of the Rosary,” is thought to be the oldest European painting extant in the contemporary Venezuelan town of Rosario de Perijá. According to legend, Chourio was quite a zealous Catholic²⁴ and felt that the town he established would not be complete without a portrait of the Holy Mother and her child Jesus on display in the very chapel that he had previously erected there in the plaza. Chourio arrived back in Perijá in 1748 with the iconic painting. It is still venerated by devout Catholics from Venezuela and beyond.²⁵

²⁴ In the document of Francisco de Ugarte dated 28 November 1757, we learn that the recently deceased Juan de Chourio had placed a military protective unit around the Capuchine Fathers, mostly Italian missionaries in the area of Perijá for its native inhabitants. This same Chourio also dispatched two permanent guards to the residence of the Capuchins to protect their persons and property. And all of this done was at his own expense, most likely with the assistance of the Africans he kept under his supervision, rather than underselling them in accordance with the new British mandate and regulation of the slave trade. As noted in Chapter One, Chourio branded the contingent of 600 Africans to the Sur del Lago with his name, rather than sell them on the open market, whence he would receive a pittance. These Africans may have also been maintained by Chourio for work on the three cacao plantations he had purchased at bargain prices, due to the raids by Native American bands. The Capuchins were most touted for their massive conversion of Africans in the heart of Angola, and many Africans were noted as loyal, Christian aids to the European colonists. The Imbangala chapter further explores these and other French and Portuguese African connections.

²⁵ Alberto Pachano Nava, *Himno a Nuestra Virgen del Rosario*, <http://www.perija.com/elcorreodelasierra/html/pachano.htm> (27 April 2009) Pachano Nava, a local historian in the area of Perijá, also dedicated a prayer to Our Lady of the Rosary, which is recited by her devotees worldwide and published on the cited webpage.

Figure C.1: Our Lady of the Rosary.

The painting, *Nuestra Señora del Rosario* (Our Lady of the Rosary) is reputed to have been brought from the Basque country by Juan de Chourio as an addition to the Capuchin chapel at Perijá, Venezuela, in 1748.

Source: <http://www.perija.com/elcorreodelasierra/html/pachano.htm>

APPENDIX D: Brito Figueroa, *La Estructura Económica*, page 362 (map of Venezuelan *cumbes*, 1550-1800), with major Afro-Venezuelan slave rebellions and insurrections.

Definitions for map:

***alzamiento*:** uprising

***cimarronera*:** fugitive slave settlement

***conspiración*:** conspiracy or plot

***cumbe*:** fugitive slave settlement

***esclavo negro*:** black slave

***insurrección*:** insurrection

***rochela*:** fugitive slave settlement

***subelevación*:** revolt

Map D.1: Map of Venezuelan *cumbes*

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