

San Basilio de Palenque, Colombia – A History

San Basilio de Palenque is an Afro-Colombian community located approximately 31 kilometers (50 miles) from Cartagena de Indias, the capital of the Bolívar Department in northeastern Colombia. Close to the Atlantic coast and hidden away in the dense hills and vegetation of the María Mountains, San Basilio de Palenque is a product of a series of historical events and circumstances rooted in the social, economic, cultural, and political institutions and practices that facilitated European colonization of the Americas. The accidental European discovery of the Americas in 1492 set off a centuries-long chain of violence, exploitation, resistance, accommodation, transformation, and exchange that impacted the lives of millions of Africans, Europeans, and Native Americans, forever changing landscapes, cultures, institutions, practices, and ultimately, the people themselves.

First African and European Contact - Slavery

Shortly after 1492, Spanish *conquistadores* (conquerors) set off from their newly conquered island possessions in the Caribbean Sea in search of wealth and also adventure and lands and people to Christianize. The Spanish defeat and conquest of the Aztecs and other indigenous kingdoms in North America resulted in the discovery and accumulation of unimaginable wealth in the form of gold, land, and a submissive labor force. This only emboldened them to increase their efforts at finding the next kingdom, setting their sights on South America. Unfortunately, the Spanish and other Europeans could not do so without resorting to the African slave trade.

First contact and trade between European merchants and Bantu speaking peoples began in 1483 and quickly evolved into an enterprise of intercontinental proportions. By 1510, the Spanish Crown had established settlements along northeastern of Nueva Granada (modern-day Colombia) and had established *el Asiento de Negros*, a monopoly-like agreement between the Crown and individual merchants and/or companies through which the latter acquired the right to the commercial exploitation of an African zone to supply Spain's American colonies with African slaves and goods.

Slavery as practiced in western and west-central Africa was usually temporary, and the reasons Africans became slaves varied. Sometime they did as prisoners of war or as punishment for a crime committed. Sometimes they were already slaves in Africa and their master sold them. Others sold themselves or were sold by their families as payment of debt or during times of famine. However, with European involvement in the African slave trade to the Americas, slavery took on a different, more sinister tone, and became a longer-term or permanent institution. Some Africans were captured and enslaved by European slave traders already on the continent and others, unfortunately, were captured and enslaved by African slave hunters who later turned in their catch to European merchants for a lucrative reward.

European merchants serving as middlemen in Africa desperately sought slaves for Europe's growing colonies and ventures. They traded with local African groups, exchanging goods such as glass beads, guns, steel, gunpowder, and alcohol for ivory, bee's wax, resin, and, more importantly, slaves, establishing trading agreements with tribal chiefs and with slave hunting groups. When this failed, these middlemen instigated the capture of Africans for slavery by exploiting existing African notions and traditions of slavery and by providing commercial incentives. They also

exploited existing social strife and power structures. This, in turn, resulted in some tribes gaining power over smaller ones and their land, intensifying the conflict and capture of slaves. Their weapons, obtained through trade with Europeans, made this possible. As European colonization of the Americas progressed during the 16th century, the flow of African slaves forcibly brought across the Atlantic increased in Spain's colonies.

Colonization and Resistance

By 1530, Spain had founded several settlements along the Atlantic coast of Nueva Granada and was ready to push further into the interior. In 1533, Don Pedro de Heredia founded the port city of Cartagena de Indias, which quickly became the colony's most important Atlantic and commercial port; it was also the most active slave trade port during the 1500s through the mid-1600s. That same year, de Heredia secured permission from the Spanish king Charles V to bring African slaves to assist in his new enterprise: ransacking indigenous tombs in search of gold, which aroused the curiosity and greed of all colonists, regardless of class or status. Here begins the story of San Basilio de Palenque. With the increase of African slaves entering Nueva Granada, a sharp increase in slaves escaping captivity ensued.

In 1540, the Spanish king issued a *cédula real* (royal decree), which documented for the first time the incidence of African slaves escaping captivity and called for measures to attract the "escaped and rebellious blacks in the hills." As more and more slaves escaped forced labor in Spanish mines, homes, and plantations, they set out for the hills of the María Mountains, resorting to violence in defense of their life and liberty. There they built small, rudimentary camps hidden in their dense vegetation. They gathered necessities such as food and shelter from the wild, and their homes were few and small. Any items they had were easy to make and carry or destroy if it was necessary to leave. By 1570, they were in an early period of formation as the Spanish crown recognized the existence of *palenques*, communities of runaway slaves (cimarrones - maroons).

By 1602, Governor Gerónimo da Suazo of Cartagena de Indias resolved to bring the escaped slaves back and declared the punitive *guerra de cimarrones* (Maroon War), which the Africans repelled. In 1603, he organized a larger expedition which also failed. The terrain was too difficult, and the settlement's robust defenses proved to be impenetrable. This forced the Governor to grant the settlers a one-year peace that was consolidated in 1621. This consolidated peace encouraged more Africans to escape slavery and head for the mountains, forming even more *palenques* or increasing the population of others. Over the next several decades, maroons resisted Spanish incursions, fighting a war of attrition against Spanish militias and their allies.

The end of the 1600s were marked by unimaginable terror, violence, and a series of short-lived peace agreements as maroons raided local communities and fought off Spanish attempts to capture them. In August 1691, Spanish King Charles II issued another royal decree, this time officially granting *palenqueros* (maroon residents of a *palenque*) their freedom and the right to exist as a community. Unfortunately, this did not sit well with Cartagena de Indias's authorities who feared the possibility of extreme consequences: an increase in slave insurrections and *palenques*, the collapse of the local economy, and an insurrection by the ruling, slave-owning class. They thus resolved to deny the implementation of the king's decree, opting instead to intensify the conflict with the maroons. Cartagena de Indias burned.

Palenqueros, however, quickly learned of the existence of the king's decree's and intensified their attacks, demanding its fulfillment decree. The Spanish responded with increasing violence as Africans continued to escape to the María Mountains and increased the ranks of the *palenqueros* who demanded the fulfillment of the king's decree, land and liberty. Unfortunately for the Spanish, however, *palenqueros* resisted fiercely and did not surrender. A lasting peace would have to wait.

Independence and Freedom

In 1713, the Bishop of Cartagena de Indias, Fr. Antonio María Casiani, approached one of the many *palenques* on the slopes of the María Mountains, which he labeled "San Basilio," with a pact of mutual concessions, none of which meant a surrender, that both parties accepted. Finally, there was peace.

Throughout the rest of the 1700s, there was some degree of relief from the decades of strife. In 1774, San Basilio de Palenque appeared in an official document, Lt. Colonel Antonio de la Torre Miranda's *Noticia individual sobre poblaciones en la provincia de Cartagena* (Individual Notice About Populations in the Province of Cartagena), which named it as "San Basilio de Palenque," and indicated that it possessed lands, crops, and sovereignty under a *capitán* (captain). In 1779, the government of Cartagena de Indias made the status quo official by recognizing the existence of the town in official documents; the *palenque* was recognized as a population composed of African-origin people with communal land.

By the end of the 1700s, the situation had changed in colonial Nueva Granada as the cost of slave ownership had begun to outweigh the cost of the slaves' freedom in the hearts and minds of Spain's colonists. Indigenous labor had been largely liberalized and as a result, *hacienda* (plantation) and herd owners had begun to compete for labor as they ramped up production of honey and other items for the manufacture of alcohol and other ventures. Slavery became expensive. Slaves were considered a costly investment because slave owners were legally and morally obligated to provide for the basic needs and human treatment of slaves. The wars of independence raging in Nueva Granada and other Spanish colonies during the early part of the 1800s also changed the dynamic. As both royalists and independentists fought for victory, they had no problem promising slaves their freedom if they joined their ranks.

After independence from Spain was gained in 1821, the new nation's government approved manumission laws, thereby creating a path to freedom for slaves. Unfortunately, slaves had to wait 30 more years for freedom. In 1851, the Colombian government finally abolished slavery. Immediately, Colombia's slaves were liberated, though without tools or land, where they increased the ranks of the new force of cheap labor. The *Palenqueros*, however, never surrendered. In fact, they remained in the María Mountains, where they continued to live, becoming the ancestors of the current inhabitants of San Basilio de Palenque.

Encroachment of Land and Modernization

Throughout the rest of the 1800s, *Palenqueros* continued to live their lives largely outside of Colombian society and subsisting on crops such as corn, sweet potato, rice, yucca root, and peanuts, which they grew on their communal lands. They also owned substantial amounts of cattle;

animals with which they had been associated since their introduction to the continent as slaves. During the second half of the 1800s, however, things changed again. Long-standing labor shortages in the cattle industry encouraged the region's elite-class landowners and cattle ranchers to begin enclosing land and forcing laborers to work there so that by the 1870s, laws for purchasing land favored the rich over the poor. In fact, in 1875, land owners began enclosing land with barbed wire, an innovation which had originated in the United States. According to residents of San Basilio de Palenque, cutting the barbed wire and taking the fences down was the "most heinous crime." This process of land enclosure continued well into the 1880s, when *Palenqueros* were forced to obtain an official deed to their land to continue living and working on it. Since most continued to rely on communal land ownership, few did and many lost their lands, receiving little to no compensation, forcing them deeper into the María Mountains.

Once higher in the mountains, *Palenqueros* began to practice deforestation, opening the land for cultivation and grazing land, but exacerbating erosion. The loss of their communal land deeply affected the *palenqueros* since the soil quality was ideal for growing rice and peanuts. With the loss of this land, the residents of San Basilio de Palenque began to lose the tradition and practice of cultivating both rice and peanuts.

Over the course of the 20th century, San Basilio de Palenque and its inhabitants continued to experience change. During the 1920s, *Palenqueros* began to leave San Basilio de Palenque to work in Colombian sugar and banana plantations. Here, they were, for the first time, exposed to mainstream Colombian society; they became wage laborers, learned to speak Spanish, and came to know a world much different from their own, one that they referred to as the "outside." Modernization was at hand, but it came slowly for a community long accustomed to living outside of mainstream society.

Though things were changing in San Basilio de Palenque, tangible change came in the 1970s. Even though *Palenqueros* had been to the "outside," they still largely traveled by foot and/or by horse, donkey, or mule. However, in 1971, the Colombian government constructed a road that connected San Basilio de Palenque to Cartagena de Indias, the state capital. Buses followed soon after, giving them increased access to Colombian society and opportunities.

In 1972, San Basilio de Palenque native Antonio "Kid Pembelé" Cervantes made history when he defeated Alfonso "Peppermint" Frazer, winning the WBA World Championship in the welterweight division. He then went on to successfully defend his title 16 times, retiring as one of Colombia's best boxers. His popularity put San Basilio de Palenque in the spotlight, a fact that highlighted many aspects about the community.

Due to Cervantes's popularity, and at his request, the Colombian government began a series of public works projects aimed at bringing the community into the 20th century. In 1974, the Colombian government installed power lines in San Basilio de Palenque, bringing electricity for the first time, which allowed *Palenqueros* to own appliances such as televisions, radios, refrigerators, and fans. From 1975-1978 the Colombian government installed water pipes and constructed an aqueduct, bringing running water for the first time to a community that relied on rivers and streams as their main sources of water. Though these infrastructure improvements surely helped, they could not alleviate all problems.

During the 20th century, *Palenqueros* began a process of staggered modernization. Economic necessity worsened by socio-economic trends from the previous centuries all but forced them to

seek opportunity “outside.” This in turn exacerbated the loss of certain cultural aspects, like language, community cohesion, and culturally and historically important crops and animals. But, like their ancestors, the residents of San Basilio de Palenque have confronted these challenges bravely going into the future the only way they know how – head on.

Bibliography

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