

Lessons of the Elders

Juan Garcia and the Oral Tradition of Afro-Ecuador

When the National Museum of African American History and Culture opens in 2015 on the Mall in Washington, D.C., among the thousands of artifacts from the African experience in the Americas will be a small carved stool of clear tropical hardwood etched with a spider web motif. The stool was shaped to fit in a narrow dugout canoe that carried Deborah Azareno on the rivers of Ecuador's Esmeraldas province more than 60 years ago. After poling the canoe into the muddy banks near where the Rio Santiago empties into the Pacific, she would carry the stool into her home and sit on it as she told her grandson stories. In 2005, long before ground was broken on the Mall, her stool became the museum's first official acquisition. This is how that came about.

Some 350,000 Ecuadorians of African descent live in the Pacific coast lowlands of Esmeraldas province. Starting in the 16th century, their ancestors arrived there as slaves, as runaways from Colombia or as shipwreck survivors. They cleared land and mined gold under duress, and escaped into the rainforests when they could, forming palenques, self-governing black communities, infrequently clashing, more often living in peace with the native indigenous peoples. They fought for Bolivar and South American independence early in the 19th century, but did not gain their own freedom until decades later, and then, in many cases, only on paper. As in the Southern United States, new forms of exploitation blighted emancipation hopes. Except when needed to fill the ranks of revolutionary armies, they generally lived quite isolated from and ignored by the highland political and economic centers 10,000 feet above them in the Andean clouds. They had almost no voice in Ecuador's national conversation.

Juan García Salazar changed that with a tape recorder. García is a rail-thin man of medium height, born in 1944 and still lithe as a dancer. His slimness seems to elongate his limbs; his fingers, extended in gestures as he talks, could come from a painting by Oswaldo Guayasamín, Ecuador's best known artist. He has the expressive face of an actor. The eyebrows and creases on his forehead arch into concentric curves of amazement when he's telling a story. With almost no formal training, García became a renowned collector and conservator of the oral traditions of the Afro-Ecuadorians. Their past and perhaps the keys to their future are stored on the coiled tape inside the thousands of cassettes García recorded over three decades.

Last year, as part of research on grassroots leaders in Latin America, I spent a week in Esmeraldas with Juan García. I'd first met him in Quito, and written about him, more than 20 years earlier. Now I wanted to interview him about his life's work and to see how that work was connected to the growth of the Afro-Ecuadorian movement in Esmeraldas. Juan had been invited to speak at a parish in San Lorenzo the next day and he invited me along.

We hired a car and driver, a man named Paco Ortíz who told us he lived a few blocks from Juan in a

neighborhood on the outskirts of Esmeraldas. Juan sat in front. We passed the airport and followed the potholed coastal road running north toward the Colombian border. Trucks stacked with mountain eucalyptus destined for Japan's paper mills roared south. Grass grew from the older potholes. The seat belts ratcheted tighter around our chests as the car lurched over them. Juan began the conversation with questions about Paco's parents and grew animated as he realized that Paco's father, a school teacher, had taught his third- or fourth-grade class in Limones. Did an aunt of Paco's own a bakery Juan remembered? Paco confirmed it. The conversation went on, tracing respective family trees

"We don't naturally join associations," Juan later told me. "You have to begin with the family. The family is solidarity here, not the cooperative, which was imported." The next day, we rode a motorboat from Borbón to Limones, to visit Juan's mother. The pilot walked with us to her house. Juan introduced him to his mother. "Of which family?" was her first question.

García's father was a medical doctor fleeing Franco's dictatorship after the Spanish Civil War, his mother, Juana Salazar, an esmeraldeña. "Down on the coast, you take in your culture with your mother's milk," he once told me. The family lived near the mouth of the Santiago river at a place called El Cuerval because of the crows (cuervos) that congregate there on dead tree branches in the river. His maternal grandfather, Zenón Salazar, raised his family on subsistence crops and fish and sold sugarcane to a nearby mill. The area was later bulldozed for shrimp farms, which have since failed, and the only sounds now come from the crows.

García remembers his father cursing Franco. He wanted his children to study and he talked of returning to Europe one day. There was a small group of Spanish exiles in the area. "Most of the Europeans who came here died of nostalgia," García said. When he was six, a heart attack took his father, and his mother sent him to live with friends and attend school in Limones. He finished the primary grades, and with that, his formal childhood education. In a church-run technical school, he learned carpentry.

The rivers were Esmeraldas' highways and the Humboldt current coursing up from Antarctica its interstate. García knew both from an early age. "We're people of the sea," he said. He remembers helping row outrigger canoes through the ocean waves at the river mouth and out to la altura where they found the Humboldt, raised a billowing sail of grain sacks sewn together and rode the current "down" to Tumaco, the Colombian city north of Ecuador, to trade their products. Travel on the inland rivers was more placid, the canoes skimming through the sheen of sunlight spread over the water's glass-smooth surface, past occasional houses of wood and cane shaded by coconut trees, simple clothing hanging on a line to dry.

García traveled widely, eventually managing a small factory in Bogotá. There, he sat in on university classes. Discussions with students led him to reflect on Ecuador and Esmeraldas. He began to wonder why there were no monuments to blacks in Ecuador. He returned home to care for his dying grandfather, a two-year commitment that changed his life. The old man's memory was a storehouse of folk history and wisdom.

“Some people in the community told me, ‘Look Juan, Don Zenón is not going to die for many years because he knows magic, and when people know magic, the body can die, but the head, no. You have to let him transfer to you this weight he bears.’” García listened to his grandfather pour out his knowledge. When the old man mentioned a relative in Playa de Oro who had other knowledge, García borrowed a large tape recorder and traveled there to make his first recordings.

“This was in the 1970s and I was preoccupied with the question of my identity—not yet a precise sense of cultural identity, but I knew there was something I lacked, some void. It came at the same time as my grandfather’s decline, a very important time for me. It was a return after a period of wandering, a vagabond life, through Guayaquil, Quevedo, Colombia. A return to the ancestors, to my cultural roots. The old people say that you have to send the young ones off on a journey, to work, to form themselves. To learn practical things, to manage a canoe, sails, learn the waves, the trees, distinguish good land from bad. All that was very useful for me.”

But the Esmeraldas to which he returned was poor. “We all had development in our heads those years, the idea of forming organizations to better our lives, in economic terms. And it was by getting involved in development that I discovered culture, that I discovered what was lacking.”

From 1972 to 1978, Juan worked as a cooperative organizer. “After the first three years, I started to realize that this kind of organization was foreign to people here. We would have meetings with technicians from cooperatives in Israel, in Germany or in the mountains of Ecuador. I saw that they had no affinity with us, nor did the project they described to us have any affinity with who we really were. I knew we had to include something else in this work with the people.”

The cooperatives had credits from Ecuador’s Central Bank, so bank officials knew García’s work. Around 1978, they offered him a job organizing in the community of La Tolita, a small river town built over an archaeological treasure trove of gold nose rings and earrings, tiny masks, and ceramic animal and human figures. The bank would provide credit and Juan would teach the community about economic alternatives to selling off the prehistoric pieces they found, thus safeguarding Ecuador’s cultural patrimony.

“And there,” García said, “I came face to face with the question of what a national culture is. Because the people in La Tolita, the guaqueros who dug up these pieces, saw things more clearly than I did. ‘These pieces don’t come from us,’ they said. ‘They have nothing to do with us.’ And I realized that this was about preserving a national patrimony in which we were not included. We weren’t meant to benefit from these vestiges. The people also made me see that while the bank was paying half a million or maybe a million sucres to the technical experts and foreigners on the archaeological project, they were putting maybe 10,000 or 5,000 sucres into the community organizations. Pretty soon, I decided to resign my job with the bank to work on my own sense of cultural preservation.”

Through talks he had given about Esmeraldas in Quito, García had met Chuck Kleymeyer, then the Inter-American Foundation representative for Ecuador. Out of their discussions García crafted a proposal requesting support for a systematic effort to record as much of the Afro-Ecuadorian oral tradition as possible. He already saw it slipping away as old people died and the younger generation, drawn to cities like Guayaquil, was losing its connection to the rivers and the forests and the centuries-old way of life. At the same time, García and a few colleagues with similar interests had organized the Centro Cultural Afro-Ecuatoriano in Quito as a place for reflection on their people's experience. All the currents of Afro-Ecuadorian thought were expressed there, from the revolutionary to the purely economic. And one current focused on Afro culture and sense of identity.

The IAF's support for García's work began in 1981 with grants to the Programa de Antropología para el Ecuador to cover outboard motors, travel expenses, tape recorders, cassettes and salaries for García and his team of assistants drawn from Center members with cultural interests. They began work both in Esmeraldas and the Chota Valley, home to the country's other concentration of Afro-Ecuadorians. "It was in that process of recording that we really began to educate ourselves. At first, we weren't thinking so much of identity, of territory, of the oral tradition as knowledge. It was simply to recover all that was in memory, so that it wouldn't be lost.

"The first lesson, for me the most important, was that we were completely ignorant. The old people were talking to us, and we knew almost nothing. We didn't understand. Our central question was about the past. We wanted the old people to tell us what they remembered of how life used to be. Only gradually did we recognize the role each of them played in the culture, that they were specialists, with different skills, different wisdom. For example, Benildo Torres, the man I'm working with now, we interviewed years ago, and we only had two cassettes with a few décimas (a complex form of medieval Spanish poetry that had taken root among Africans in Spain's American colonies). It's only now, 20 years later, that I'm asking why we didn't ask Benildo more. We hadn't gone to him understanding that he was really a great decimero. We didn't understand his importance in the culture. And that happened with many people."

Still, they were learning every day, and the tape recorders kept spinning and the stacks of cassettes mounted. "By the time the project ended, I felt as if I'd emerged from a university," García said. Afterwards, the researchers took different directions, those from Chota returning to work there. "And here in Esmeraldas, we divided into three groups—those who decided to work politically, those who concentrated on economic development, and the cultural project, which was basically me but the others told me, 'You're the custodian of all we have done, of the photos, the cassettes, all the memory.'"

Like his grandfather, García had assumed responsibility for the oral tradition of a people. He had to find ways to safeguard the material. The Central Bank helped with copies and stored some of the material, as did the Esmeraldas Museum. But just storing it was not enough. The cassettes, kept in air conditioned rooms

against the swamp-like humidity of Esmeraldas, still have to be run through a machine and rewound periodically. And while Juan was preoccupied with such details, the Afro-Ecuadorians in Esmeraldas were concerned with other matters. “People said to me, ‘Juan, all this about the culture, all this knowledge, how is it of use if they’re taking away our land?’ So I started awakening to new realities. They made me see that all this baggage in the head was of no use without a territorial space, no use without a project that would put food on the table, no use unless the people had a house to live in. ‘Without territory, where do we preserve the culture?’ they demanded. And at first, I responded, ‘Well, on the cassettes.’ But they said ‘No, where do we preserve the creation of the culture? The rivers have been taken away. The ancient cemetery was destroyed to put in a highway. There went our memories. What do we do now?’”

The loss of land was a refrain in Esmeraldas. The shrimp farms that had obliterated the mangroves and agricultural land around Juan’s childhood home were only one of many plans meant to wrest profit from what outsiders considered unproductive jungle. Invariably, the new enterprises were enclaves, producing for foreign markets and offering limited jobs to local people. Decades earlier, large tracts of Esmeraldas were razed to produce bananas. Today, regiments of African palm oil trees march across the landscape, occupying tens of thousands of hectares. Afro-Ecuadorians and indigenous groups with traditional claims to land rather than title have often been brushed aside.

Shortly after the IAF project ended, Juan enrolled at the Johns Hopkins University, where he wrote a thesis on Alonso Sebastián de Illesca, the most famous of Esmeraldas’ cimarrón leaders, whom the English pirate Francis Drake came to visit. Illesca had an indigenous wife and married some of his children into the families of indigenous leaders, cementing his rule in the region. His success and many other examples of African autonomy in Esmeraldas inspired Juan’s ideas about Afro-Ecuadorians’ need for self-sufficiency on their own land. “I use the past to illustrate that there is a fountain of thought, of philosophy, of experience, to which we can return. There were times when we were self-sufficient. Not that we had a lot, but that we didn’t need anything more. And those times were better than the present, when we are included in somebody else’s project. Because when you’re included, it’s difficult to be yourself. The power, the hegemony, belongs to the one who includes you. That’s why I say it was better when we lived free within our own cultural reality, managing our own resources, with our own philosophy. And why I insist that the Afro community use what we learn of the past as the starting point for integration today.”

Returning to Ecuador, Juan worked for a time with development projects funded by IAF, sometimes passing on the lessons of the oral tradition in Esmeraldas. Then he moved to the town of Maldonado to manage a Conservation International-funded project to preserve the forest and raise incomes through the production of decorative and useful articles such as buttons for clothing made from tagua—a palm tree nut with the color and qualities of ivory. Juan had suggested this project because, in his emerging understanding of development, it made sense.

“It was nourished by the culture. I was thinking that if you want to reduce the impact on the environment,

especially the forests, a project has to be traditional, in the sense of using a traditional product, one that people understand and have experience with, and it has to have a market, so that it generates income. Tagua falls from the trees. In the 1920s, when Germans would come to buy it, it was something of an economic bonanza. In the oral tradition, people talk of ‘the age of tagua.’ And there are many stories about going to the forest to collect the nuts. Our goal was to revitalize the market and raise the prices. We were in an area without electricity, so the work was done with hand tools. We were successful in finding markets, and that reanimated the cultivation of tagua palm trees. Visitors invariably urged us to get electric generators and motors, but I insisted we didn’t need them. The way we worked, the people kept their autonomy. All they had to do was go to the forest, harvest the tagua nuts, make the buttons or chess pieces, and sell them. We managed to sell quantities as far away as New York. For the first time, we had linked the culture with a marketing project aimed at development.

“But there was this major problem in the region—land. I was working with 32 communities. The benefit of all the projects that I’ve done is that I’m always on the move, always visiting communities, listening to people. And what kept coming up was that we were losing the land. Despite talk of environmentalism, the government was opening more and more agricultural land to vast African palm plantations. And there was continuing pressure from colonists moving into Esmeraldas from other parts of Ecuador. The need to organize the community was urgent.”

An opportunity appeared in 1995 when Juan won a four-year Ashoka fellowship for his proposal to develop a way of framing the discussion of issues affecting Esmeraldas’ African descendants that would help their communities defend their rights, especially their land claims. Ashoka is a U.S.-based NGO that supports “social entrepreneurs” around the world, allowing them to work full-time on their ideas for change and development. To start his political work, Juan went back to the recordings. “We took the voice of the ancestors from the cassettes and we put it on the table for political discussions.” He visited community groups, cooperatives, training centers, church-supported groups. “I said, ‘Listen to what the ancestors have to say: about the land, the rivers, the crops, about our presence here.’ And people would listen, and say, ‘So we lived in this region from, I don’t know, 1670?’ And someone else would ask, ‘And Ecuador existed?’ ‘No, it didn’t exist.’ ‘So we were here before Ecuador? When Ecuador did not yet exist, we were here, and we had land?’”

Once the discussions began, the cassette tapes were no longer just the echo of the past. Now, complemented by Juan’s previous experiences, they provided ideas for the future. “I began to use the oral tradition to design a political discourse based on what I had studied in the university, the local history I had learned, my knowledge of the communities, the tagua project, the cooperatives. It was the sum of all that I had previously done. I worked with organizations, proposing that we use our traditions, for example, that instead of calling ourselves cooperative associations, we use the term palenque, which took on many meanings. Beyond physical territory, it represents a cultural space, a safe haven, an enclave of resistance to threats from

outside.

Juan's political work coincided with changes in Ecuador. "If we compare the situation now with where we were in the 1970s, it's incalculable how much we've advanced. We're in the Constitution. The term Afro-Ecuadoriano is written in the Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador. For me, that is like the officially recognized birth of the black community in the political and social world here. When they were writing the Constitution, there were three of us standing outside, full-time, talking, struggling, and we finally got in the Constitution. And now you hear people talk about Articles 83 and 84, about collective rights. You have no idea how often you hear people refer to those articles."

Rights enumerated address the preservation and development of cultural identity and cultural and social traditions, including ways of organizing and administering justice; the nontransferable ownership of ancestral community lands; and the shared use of renewable natural resources and consultation on projects to exploit them. These rights made possible the formation of new Afro-Ecuadorian organizations in Esmeraldas that drew on their own traditions. "The communities," said Juan, "formed their territorial palenques, some of them with up to 30 communities, with legal status, with their own bylaws. There are eight palenques now; one has 62,000 hectares. And others formed without any land at all; 40 cultural groups in Guayaquil, for example, decided to form a palenque."

Where this process of organization goes next is unclear, but Juan has moved on. He devoted the four years with Ashoka support to political organizing—"the best four years of my life," he says. But he doesn't see political organizing as his main project any longer. "Now there are centers where the future leaders can be trained. Now I'm going to write."

He has three major goals, and plans to spend about four years on each. The first is to complete a series of publications based on the recordings and his ongoing research. The second goal builds on the publications. He wants to get the material about Afro-Ecuadorian history and culture into the school systems so that education in Esmeraldas will be less alienating than he finds it today. Even though it's a long-term goal, Juan takes every opportunity to advance it. An example of what he has in mind was on view one night when about 40 people gathered at the Casa Palenque, a church-supported meeting place in the city of Esmeraldas. They included teachers, a few nuns, priests, a couple of former gang members, who had come for Juan's workshop on the oral tradition. El río—the river—was the topic. Juan brought a series of brief readings drawn from conversations with people about their lives on the rivers of Esmeraldas recorded over the past three decades. He wanted to challenge the argument he's heard from some teachers that they would like to teach Afro-Ecuadorian culture and history, but they have no material.

Juan passed out the sheets and asked participants to read. There were observations about the rivers becoming more polluted, about colonists from other regions taking land along the rivers, about the contrast

between travel on the roads and travel on the rivers. When, after each two or three paragraphs, Juan interrupted to ask for reflections, all the themes that affect Esmeraldas came pouring out. A discussion started up about potable water systems. Someone observed that the government charges communities for pipes and wells. But in the readings, the old people Juan interviewed recall when the rivers ran clean. Is it fair that the people who didn't contaminate the rivers now have to pay for potable water? Why can't the government just keep the rivers pure? The final reading was a lyrical description of the beauty of light on the river, like diamonds floating on its surface. An animated 90-minute discussion, ranging over history, politics, economics, the environment and literature had evolved from an excerpt totaling no more than 10 minutes from Juan's thousands of hours of recordings.

Juan's third four-year plan—he seems to think in four-year episodes—is to tie all his work together with an exploration of the connections between African and Afro-Ecuadorian culture that digs down to the roots. He is already at work on three stories that he thinks demonstrate the connections—one from Esmeraldas, one from the Chota Valley, and one from West Africa that he translated from French. In a sense, Juan already made that link in 2005 when he brought his grandmother's canoe stool with its spider design, the West African anansi figure, to the offices of Lonnie Bunch III, director of the National Museum of African-American History and Culture, and Smithsonian official John W. Franklin, who accepted it as the museum's first official acquisition. Anansi, according to West African lore, first brought stories to the world. It was a fitting gift to the museum from a man who has kept so many of them from disappearing.

Patrick Breslin retired from the IAF in March after 22 years of service, most recently as vice president heading the Office of External Affairs.