

“Ahorita estamos en lo nuestro” (“Now We Are Ourselves”): Afro-Venezuelan Music Rituals for Health and Community Wellbeing¹

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Abstract: In Venezuela, people of West African descent developed rituals for wellbeing within Catholic contexts. This study analyses performances directed at fulfilling health-related desires. The first is ritual street performance staged as part of Corpus Christi, under the name of the Devils of Corpus Christi. It includes instrumental music, dance, special clothing, theatricality and high symbolism. The second performance is the Feast of Saint John, celebrated with drums, songs, dances and rituals. These ritual music festivities also present communal benefits like solidarity, pleasure and unity, since people can express their unique identities through them and use them as acts of resistance.

Keywords: Venezuela, Afro-Catholic rituals, music and dance, health and wellbeing, identity

Celebrated for centuries, the rituals of Saint John and Corpus Christi in Venezuela connect faith, music and dance with healing and wellbeing. Historical and social structures of these rituals reflect, on the one hand, the human and non-human interactions that deal with health problems, and the process of fortifying group cohesion on the other hand. The rituals are practiced among people of African descent who typically belong to the lower classes and they are partly gender-dependent, but not age-dependent. Historically, the rituals' structure is based on the introduction of West African labor, through slavery, the Catholic Church, and a deficient public health system. But it is also based on the compatibility of several religious practices and symbols in West African, Christian, and indigenous religiosity. An example is the concept of a supernatural cause of illness or the idea of a mediator who acts between earth and cosmos. Owing to these similarities, a symbiosis emerged in which Afro-Venezuelans were able to reinterpret their faith as they took refuge in the new religion, which provides psychological, medical, social, as well as, recreational functions.

Methods of participatory observations, interviews, and experiences in the field, as well as, the analysis of historical, anthropological, and musical studies reveal the relations of health, music, and ritual as a part of social and cultural identity in each town where the festivals of Saint John and Corpus Christi are celebrated. Within the context of religion, community music, dance, illness, and social health, Saint John and Corpus Christi are two examples of complex and effective rites that show a perfect balance between necessity, activities, and results, where

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individuals attempt to solve health-related problems that are thought to be beyond the curative expertise of orthodox medical personnel. In these contexts, a very personal relationship between humans and the supernatural being is established based on devotion and confidence. For that reason, the divinities have a very human demeanor and form part of the human group. When the problem is solved, the public thanksgiving goes on, characterized by music, dance, and singing. The activities of the thanksgiving require a close coordination between participants and public authorities. These extensive rituals produce unity among members of the community, as well as, between the community and the saint. The collective unity is strengthened by efforts towards creating harmony, relaxation, as well, as the sharing of cultural and musical values, which lasts for several days.

Today, these rituals continue to be a space for resistance to hegemonic domination by sustaining dynamics and processes of self-determination that confirm local identity and stabilize the community. They provide a useful model for mutuality, solidarity, and optimism in times of crisis. Also, they demonstrate how to maintain identity, group-feeling, and collective power.

History of Venezuela: Discovery and Slavery

When the Spanish colonizers arrived in Venezuela in 1498 looking for gold mines, they instead found extensive amounts of natural pearls on the coast. This was their first great “discovery” and they capitalized on it through slave exploitation. The natural pearls were soon completely exploited, and cocoa exportation became the biggest business after 1615. Cocoa was produced on big plantations based on slave labor. From the beginning of the sixteenth century to 1800, an estimated 100,000 slaves were imported (Pollak-Eltz, 2000, p. 39). They came from different kingdoms in West Africa, often not directly, but via detours. Venezuela has a 2800 km long coastline along the Caribbean Sea and the Caribbean region is historically a system of interconnection and exchange. In colonial times, the main ports of direct negotiation with Europe and Africa were Havana in Cuba, Veracruz in Mexico, and Portobelo and Cartagena in Colombia. These routes operated based on both wind and water streams. Thus, other places such as Venezuela were involved predominantly through indirect trade. As such, many African slaves brought to Venezuela first lived in the Antilles and were not selected by nationality, but by physical condition. Enslaved Africans of various origins were traded together and only in very few cases did groups of the same origin move together. This accelerated the transculturation process between and with European and indigenous influences.

It is difficult to determine precisely where descendants of slaves have their origins, or what historical and cultural heritage they brought along, because they arrived first in other Latin American and Caribbean places before coming to Venezuela. Pollak-Eltz (1972) analyzed different historical documents and concluded that descendants of Africans in the Americas can trace their backgrounds primarily to the following three groups: a) the West African coast (Ghana/Gold Coast, Togo and Benin/Slave Coast, Nigeria), e.g. Fanti, Ashanti, Ewe, Fon, Yoruba, Tari, Carabalí, etc.; b) the Bantu culture from the region of Congo and Angola; and c) the culture of the Islamized Malinke (Mandinga).

It is likely that slaves arriving in Venezuela were brought mainly from West and Central Africa. Researchers such as Suárez (2003) and Acosta Saignes (1984) confirm that among the ethnic groups who ended up in Venezuela are: Ewe, Fon, Ashanti, Efik, Efofok, Mina, Bakongo, Loango, and others. Pollak-Eltz (2000, p. 80) mentions ethno-linguistic studies which have

found evidence of 115 words used today in Venezuelan Spanish that are of Bantu origin, possibly from the present-day Democratic Republic of Congo and Angola, although these studies do not necessarily account for the similarities of root words in other Bantu languages such as Kimbundu, Kikongo, or Shona. Afro-Venezuelan music cultures can be delineated into more homogeneous and more heterogeneous areas. Suárez (2003) found that this is due to geographic conditions. More homogeneous cultural areas are found in plain regions where communication between groups is easier. But in mountainous situations with poor infrastructure, heterogeneous cultural phenomena develop, due to limitations on exchange and influence.

This study focuses on the central northern part of Venezuela, near the Caribbean. The Spanish have intensively settled here since the beginning of the seventeenth century and established big plantations cultivating cocoa, sugar, and coffee. To attend to and extend such agricultural production, slaves of African origin were bought and exploited. Within these heterogeneous Afro-Venezuelan territories exists only one homogeneous area: the plains of Barlovento, not far from the current capital Caracas. García (1989, pp. 18, 27 & 33) reports that Barlovento was colonized at the end of the seventeenth century. Since 1700, Spaniards, Creoles, and some free descendants of Africans have acquired large lands for 186 cocoa plantations along the route connecting the towns of Araguaita, Caucagua, and Capaya. By 1750, the number of farms had already grown to 555. Although the African slaves came to this region from different cultural areas, Brandt (1987, p. 20) concludes that most originated in Congo, Guinea, and Angola. The resulting culture is quite homogeneous due to the geographical conditions of the region.

About 100,000 slaves came to Venezuela between 1525 and 1800. While quantitatively this does not appear to be much, by 1600 Black inhabitants proportionally comprised the majority of the population as compared to Whites. In the seventeenth century, according to Pollak-Eltz (2000, p. 42), slave importation increased due to the intensification of the establishment of plantations along the coast. The conditions for both free and enslaved descendants of Africans were brutal; they were extremely exploited in the plantations and mines and faced punishments of lashing or incarceration. They had only a few free days a year. In 1585 the Provincial Council of Mexico, which was then the centre of religious power in Latin America, fixed specific holidays for slaves to attend mass and be free of work. García (2006, p. 65) found that these included the Feast of Saint John on the 24th of June and the Feast of Corpus Christi, held on a different date each year.

Thus, enslaved Africans faced a trinity of conditions: Cross, lash and cocoa. The law dictated that Black slaves had to be baptized upon reaching American soil. The Catholic Church's strategy was based on the goal to depersonalize Africans and their descendants. García (1989, pp. 40, 42 & 50) emphasizes that the Catholic Church required payment for the permanent indoctrination of slaves, but landowners did not consider productivity compatible with humanity and so in most cases religious life was minimal among slaves. But religion came to represent an extraordinary refuge in which to construct identities.

An important mechanism of cultural and social action was the formal constitution of brotherhoods (Span.: *cabildos/cofradías*). At first, these organizations did not differentiate between social class or skin color, but beginning in 1646 they founded separate guilds for free or enslaved Black and mixed-race people. The brotherhoods' function was to prepare religious festivities, but it also provided mutual aid such as burials or caring for the sick or orphaned. Due to the existence of similar institutions in Africa, these associations were very successful

among displaced Africans (Pollak-Eltz, 2000). In addition, these structures allowed the development of festive practices within the local legal framework throughout colonial times (García, 2006).

Health Systems

Today health is defined not only as the absence of illness, but also in terms of conditions of nutrition, living circumstances, education, environmental factors, work, transport, personal security, employment, recreation, liberty and access to services. In these terms, health is equivalent to wellbeing. Thus, health levels are evaluated based on policies, socioeconomic conditions, service availability, and health status indicators such as mortality and birth rates. Indicators of health in Venezuela demonstrate the strength of the current health system. Venezuela's health system is comparable to the best in the global North, with two doctors per 1000 inhabitants (similar to Canada) and a life expectancy of 76 years (Welt in Zahlen, 2016). More than 96% of the population have three balanced meals every day (Agencia Venezolana de Noticias, 2012). One can find sufficient hospitals, private clinics, medical consulting centers, outpatient centers and pharmacies across the country.

A formal health system has existed in Venezuela since 1936. Previously, it was not common to have access to formal medicine. As recently as 1926, the life expectancy was only 34 years due to several health risks, such as, the prevalence of malaria, which afflicted one million of the three million inhabitants yearly (Cámara de Comercio de Maracaibo, 2011). In colonial times, White, Black and mixed-race people frequently died young because of epidemics, wars, malaria or accidents. Child mortality was very high, with the main causes being stillbirths and snakebites (Pollak-Eltz, 2000).

These general health conditions encouraged people to seek alternative treatments to sicknesses. Today, a distinction is generally made between scientific medicine and folk medicine. Many people believe that the official scientific medication is for the treatment of external symptoms while other forms of medicine deal with the real causes, namely the spiritual. Therefore, people often use both forms in order to get to the root causes of any degenerative health condition (Clarac, 2010). It is important to keep in mind that people in both Sub-Saharan Africa and Venezuela believe in the supernatural causes of many diseases, especially if the symptoms are hard to define and the disease is chronic. Slaves brought alternative traditional healing practices with them from Africa. Once in Latin America, these merged with Indian and European practices. Both White and Black people are said to have visited Black medical practitioners, because they often had more success and experience than the White surgeons in the treatment of diseases. Healers accompanied their practice with religious rites, such as making offerings to the gods or expelling evil spirits through "sucking them". Spaniards also had similar traditional religious practices, which included praying and making promises or offerings to their God, the Virgin Mary, or saints (Clarac, 2010). This continues to today. Due to the background of such beliefs, contemporary Venezuelans in general still look for alternatives to conventional medicine. This is one of the reasons behind the great success of religions such as evangelical Christianity and Catholicism, but also Cuban *santería* and spiritualism.

Popular religiosity is practised in contexts of hierarchical religious institutionalization that allows only limited participation for the majority. This was the case in Catholicism. Gurjewitsch (1986, p. 121) emphasizes, for example, that early Christianity had no veneration of saints, but in the Middle Ages this practice began to spread because of the increasing abstractness of the figure of God. Collective memory moved toward taking events of the saint-hero's

story and adapting them to everyday needs. In Venezuela, saint worship found fertile ground because, according to Pollak-Eltz (1975, p. 125), the African deities and religious structures were similar in their essence to that of Catholics. She highlights that the interpretation of cultural elements created an alteration of the content but retained psychological value. African descendants were able to reinterpret their beliefs within a Catholic frame due to these similarities. For example, the idea that a supreme being created the world and then retired and delegated his power to the divinities (nature, ancestors, saints, spirits). In both religions, pacts or promises are made with the divine in order to achieve or attain something. When receiving the favor, it has to be reciprocated accurately. Each deity has a well-defined role. Clarac (2000, p. 399) points out that the Catholic Church selected its saints during colonial times due to their relationship with water, sun, agriculture, health and illness, although some saints later came to represent varying characteristics. So, the rites in popular Catholicism have not only religious functions, but also psychological, medical, economic, social, and recreational value, when seeking aid for problems that do not always seem to have official solutions. And for a long time, there has been an abyss between Church doctrines and popular practices.

Religious Music Practices

Many manifestations of popular religiosity respond by reciprocating a granted favor, often related to health problems. From the rituals with major Afro-Venezuelan emphasis, I selected two specific ones which are practiced in the same geographic area in north-central Venezuela. These are the festivals of Saint John and Corpus Christi. Both events are of a high priority in the liturgical schedule and were imposed through colonization by the Catholic Church. In Latin America, they were then adjusted to the concrete conditions of each country and region. This explains why there is a manifestation of great diversity in the way these festivals are celebrated throughout the continent. Due to the same religious origin of both rituals, they have a lot of general elements in common. However, they are also different in relation to their specific content and especially in their popular expression.

The practices are similar in structure (eve, principal day, *octavita*), symbolism, aim, collective participation and motifs. Many villages that have Devils that dance for the Blessed Sacrament of Corpus Christi also celebrate Saint John.² Although Saint John is called upon for various needs and the Blessed Sacrament is used mostly for the curing of diseases, both are employed in health matters depending on the preference of the affected person, the family, or local tradition. The choice may be determined by an individual, can be based on a family member's promise, and it can even be inherited. There are many testimonies attesting to the success of these methods, for example to heal injuries from accidents, peritonitis, asthma, or pregnancy problems. Asthma is a chronic disease, so it fits well with the pattern that underlines the major belief in traditional medicine and divinities in remedying chronic and apparently ineradicable problems. But unexpected circumstances such as accidents are also included when seeking the assistance of divinities, as are other conditions like pregnancy.

² These are Patanemo, San Millán, Cata, Cuyagua, Ocumare de la Costa, Naiguatá, and Chuao.

Testimony³

Eight years ago my daughter Camila was born. But her mother had problems during the pregnancy. When I found out I would become father, the first person I talked to was Him [Saint John]. As one usually does, I told Him: "She is yours, I entrust her to You. You have the commanding voice." I promised: "If You can save my baby, I will give You a dress and a silver bracelet." Every time I went to the village, I visited Him and spoke to Him. We talked, I made requests and made offerings to Him We say: Saint John has everything, Saint John gives everything if he wants, but you have to pray. So we do it out of devotion and with love, because it is love that we feel for him. Saint John is the people, he does not belong to anyone, but to the common people. Saint John is always present in me. I wouldn't have made a promise to another saint. I most identify with him.

Because the mother of my daughter had trouble with blood pressure, she could have lost the baby. She went to the doctor and had regular medical exams from the first to the last day of her pregnancy. She trusted the doctor. And so did I, but I clung more to the saint. The mother didn't know what happened from this side. She was involved with her doctor and I with my devotional saint.

Look, my daughter was born with the umbilical cord around her neck. Thankfully the doctor didn't approve a natural birth, he proposed a Caesarean operation. He didn't know about the umbilical cord. If it was a different doctor, they might have proceeded with a normal birth. And in that case it could have played out differently When he took the baby in his hands he said: "Fortunately we did it this way". And I thought: ... well... the saint... He complied with me.

Today Camila goes crazy when she hears the drums dedicated to Saint John. When she was two years old I took her to the saint's festival. I put her on my shoulders and went next to the drums in the middle of the crowd. It was midday and unbearably hot. Everybody was dancing and jumping. Suddenly I felt her moving to the rhythm. After a while I wanted to leave, but the girl started weeping. I returned and she calmed down. When I walked out again, she cried. Her mother said: "What are you doing with her for such a long time in this crowd?" And I answered: "But the girl wants to stay there." "How does she want to be there?" "Come and see it" I went into the throng and when I stepped out, she began to cry. Other children get tired and want to leave. She doesn't. She does not complain about anything, she is attentive to all. And she knew how to dance since she was two years old (J. Aguilar, personal communication, March 9, 2016).

Feast of Corpus Christi

The "dancing Devils" are an expression of popular religiosity linked to the Feast of Corpus Christi in Venezuela (see Figure 1 & 2). The first reference to the celebration of Corpus Christi dates back to 1582, when the festival included a mix of sacred and secular elements such as dances, comedies, *tarasca* (dragon), giants and little Devils. The dances were organized by people from the same social group, generally by indigenous and Black people. Capelán (2014/2015, pp. 7-8) reports that in 1619 the authorities decided that brotherhoods of Blacks and of mulattos held their own separate dances. In 1765, a royal law prohibited the sacred comedies that had been a part of the celebration of Corpus Christi, and in 1780, other presentations,

³ The following section is based on an interview on March 9, 2016, by the author with Johan Aguilar, a devotee of Saint John in Curiepe, Miranda.

including those of the *tarasca*, giants and Devils, were also banned. The Devils were always represented by Blacks in regions with predominantly Afro-Venezuelan populations. Far away from the urban centres, the prohibition was ignored and the celebration was reduced to the activities of dancing Devils, as an expression of Black identity and faith (M. Capelán, personal communication, April 15, 2016).



Figure 1: Devil dancing, Cata, 2014 (photo: K. Lengwinat)



Figure 2: Dancing Devils, Tinaquillo, 2012 (photo: K. Lengwinat)

Even today, the Devils are a devotional expression in about 11 villages in the northern part of the country where there are old Afro-Venezuelan and slave settlements that were once engaged in fishing and agriculture. In the different villages, the Devils share the organization into brotherhoods and protective elements as well as the combination of devotion, masks, clothing, dance, and music. This comprises a complex magico-religious ritual, symbolically indicating the submission of heresy to Christian doctrine, and reaffirming the power of divine forces over the forces of evil.

The Confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament has a hierarchical organization with specific responsibilities. Considering the role of the foreman, one does not just assume this position because of knowledge and experience, but also due to the one's personality. A foreman has to be wise and listen, give advice, and intervene in interpersonal conflicts. In many cases foremen also heal. An example is Roberto Izaguirre in the village of Naiguatá, who is said to have cured the evil eye and shingles and who was able to banish evil spirits. As he related in an interview, he did this out of faith, not for money, stressing that whoever practises this for money cannot cure (R. Izaguirre, personal communication, October 7, 2011). In general, women do not participate in this manifestation, although some cases of limited participation have begun recently.



Figure 3: Surrender, Turiamo, 2007 (photo: K. Lengwinat)

The ritual is comprised of a minimum of three moments: The *víspera* (eve), the Thursday of Corpus Christi, and the *octavita* (octave, i.e. one week later). In all places where it is celebrated, these three parts of the ritual are based on faith and music. The eve lasts nine hours, the Corpus festivity takes eight to ten hours, and the *octavita* lasts about five hours. Apart from the eve in some villages, the celebration is centered on instrumental music and dance. The instrument used is a single *cuatro* (a small four-stringed guitar) or a single drum. The musical pieces are quite similar in harmonic sequences, but they are different in rhythmic patterns depending on their function. As such, we can distinguish four or five airs. The most devotional one is at the moment of surrender. But there are also special tunes for calling, for walking, or for entertainment. All performances are usually based on duple meter, except for few diverting themes that are in triple meter. The following examples (Figures 3, 4, & 5) are from the moment of compensating for the received favor.⁴

⁴ See and hear these recordings at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2fc4PzAtrWg&no_html5=False, http://mimp3.me/escuchar/3KClagKdo6Rq/10-diablos-de-yare-escobillao-corto_ and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Nmo6OKIOeU>.

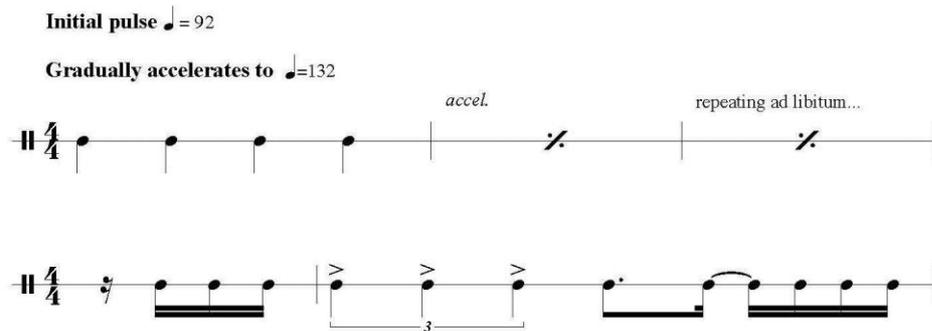


Figure 4: Drum surrender pattern in Yare, adapted from Ortiz et al. (1982, p. 180)

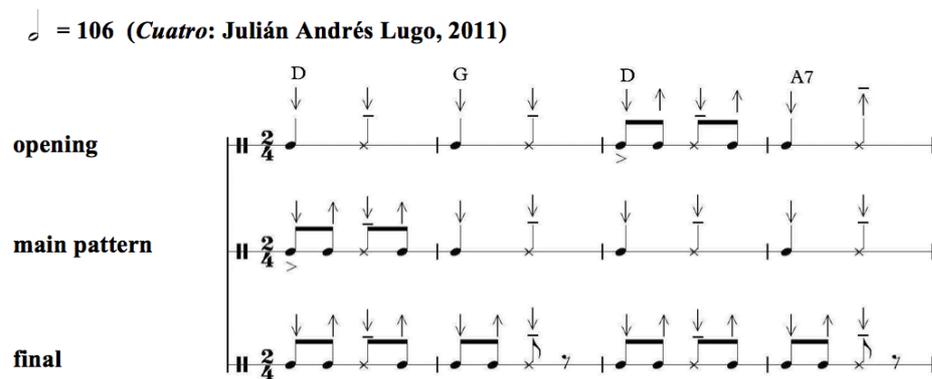


Figure 5: *Cuatro* surrender pattern of Devils from Patanemo, adapted from Lengwinat (2012, p. 36)

Feast of Saint John

At the beginning of the colonial era in Latin America, the feast of Saint John was one of the most popular celebrations in Spain and elsewhere in Europe. Originally associated with the solstices, the festival was significantly impregnated with African roots after its arrival in Venezuela. Until today Saint John is one of the most adored saints in Venezuela. There are about 100 localities in which Saint John is the official patron saint, especially in the north-central part of the country (Miranda, Aragua, Carabobo, Yaracuy and Guárico States). Here, the saint is worshipped every 24th of June with rituals, festivals, chants, dance, music, and different Afro-Venezuelan percussion ensembles (see Figure 6). According to several scholars, those festivities were directed initially toward ancient African deities, but camouflaged behind the Catholic saint figure (Liscano, 1973; Pollak-Eltz, 2000). Thus, the commemoration of the saint, implemented by the church and supported by the slave holders, took on a deep re-signification, transforming it into a symbol of resistance.



Figure 6: Playing for Saint John, Naiguatá, 2010 (Photo: Patricia Martínez)

Today, the ritual is composed of two main moments: The *víspera* (eve) and the principal day, which falls on the 24th of June. There are other dates that are marked by commemorative performances, such as the 1st of June (the welcome party for Saint John's month), in some places the 25th of June (when the saint departs [*encierro*]), and in others the 29th of June (a meeting with St. Peter) or the 16th of July (the day of the Virgin of Carmen). The ritual on the eve takes about 9 hours and the main celebration about 12 hours or more. Drums are played throughout and there is singing and dancing for the saint. One can distinguish three basic musical forms: The *sirenas* (sirens, an invocational a capella song), the *sanguero* (solemn processional song with drums, see Figures 7 & 8) and the *golpe* (fervent song with drums and dance). In the celebrations, women are very active as organizers, singers, and dancers.



Figure 7: *Sanguero* of Saint John, Patanemo, 2011 (photo: K. Lengwinat)



Figure 8: *Sanguero* of Saint John, Lezama, 2008 (photo: K. Lengwinat)

The basic musical components in the celebrations are the homophonic singing and the percussion instruments, normally grouped into different registers that portray different levels of Africanness and rhythmic functions, combining drums with fixed patterns of sustenance, escapement and functions of improvisation (Lengwinat, 2009). The *sirena* is characterized by free meter, *sanguero* by double meter and *golpe* by triple meter. The triple meter is typically used for ritual in West African music. The songs are performed in responsorial manner (call-and-response), alternating between an improvising soloist and a fixed chorus. The frequent usage of vocables such as *lelolé*, *lelolá*, and *loloé* is derived, according to musicologist Rolando

Pérez (personal communication, October 11, 2008), from the Bantu ideophone “le, le, le” used to attract attention. Figures 9, 10 and 11 show examples of the rhythm of the *golpe*.⁵

Rattles	X			X			X			X		
Sticks	/		/	/		/	/		/	/		/
Big drum		O		O	●	O		O				●
Small drum		O		O	●	O		O		O		●

Chorus		A	Y	LO	LO	O	LO	O	O	O	O	E
		A	Y	LO	LO	O	LO	O	O	O	O	A
		ES	S	TA	MA	A	ÑA	A	NAE	EN	EL	MOO
		ON	TE	ES	TA	BA	LLO	RA	AN	DO	O	LA
												BOA

Figure 9: *Golpe*, drums from Borburata, Carabobo State. Transcription by Darmi Romero

Small drum		O	O		●	●		O	O		●	●
Middle drum	X	O	●	X			X	O	●	X		
Big drum	—●—		O	X	O		—●—		O	X	O	

Figure 10: *Golpe, cul'e puya* drums from Barlovento, Miranda State. Transcription adapted from Brandt (1987, p. 167-175)

Sticks	/		/	/		/	/		/	/		/
Big drum	⊖		O		⊖	⊖	⊖		O		⊖	⊖
Small drum	⊖	●	O		⊖	⊖	⊖	●	O		⊖	⊖

Figure 11: *Jinca*, drums from Tarmas, Vargas State Transcription adapted from Alexander Livinalli

⁵ The transcriptions use TUBS notation developed in the 1960s at UCLA for African percussion by James Koetting.

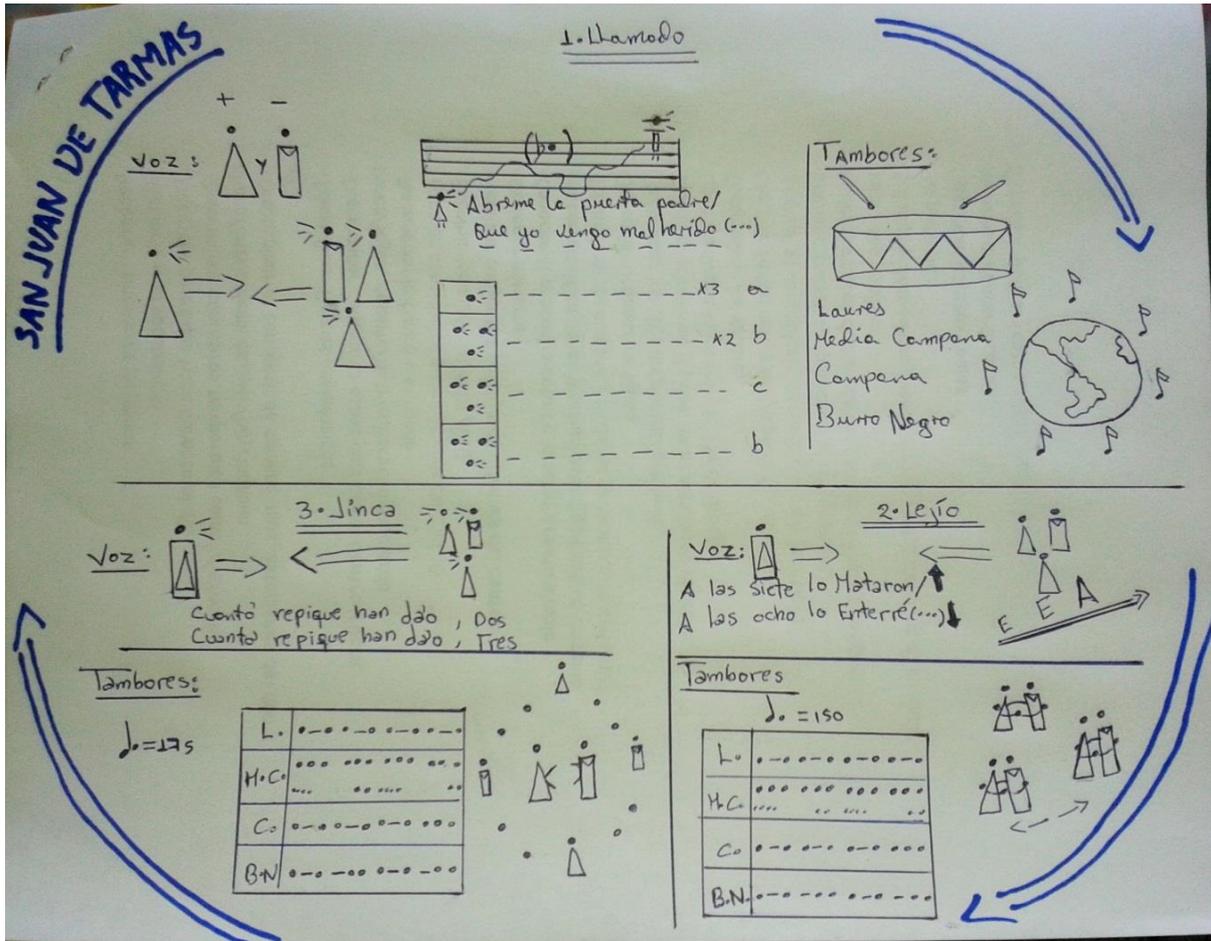


Figure 12: Graphical transcription of Saint John’s festival in Tarmas (by Iris Rojas)

The graphical transcription in Figure 12 shows the events taking place in the Saint John’s festival in Tarmas, including the principal musical and dance elements of the three forms mentioned above: *sirena*, *sangueo*, *golpe*. In the case of Tarmas these are named *llamado*, *lejío*, and *jinca*.⁶

Rituals for Health and Community Wellbeing

With respect to health, music, and wellbeing in the African diaspora in Venezuela, we have to distinguish two phases: first, an individual problem of health and the personal alliance with divine forces; and second, the ritual for the divinity with continuous music and dance that generates wellbeing for the community. Testimonies are the best way to sustain both parts. Those who have the deepest commitments are of course people who reach out to divinities because of an alarming or worrying personal problem. They are the principal reasons for undertaking the public ritual (Tables 1 & 2).

Table 1: Devils From Corpus Christi

Moment and significance of ritual	Activities and musical elements	Testimonies of psychic implication
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⁶ For a video documentary of the Saint John’s festival in Tarmas see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dxy6mNF8LbM>

<p>surrender in front of the church and house altars Thanksgiving ceremony Submission, tribute</p>	<p>Individual dances in front of the altar with the Blessed Sacrament and other artefacts promised by devotees Only devotees active Solemn tune (<i>rinde</i>) binary rhythm <i>cuatro</i> or drum rattles bells</p>	<p>Tengo que darle gracia al Santísimo por el favor recibido. Me curé mi enfermedad, me operé, me salí bien, se me quitó mi asma, mi taquicardia, el embarazo o los hijos pa' que salgan normal. (Izaguirre, 2011) [I have to thank the Blessed for the received favor. I healed my illness, I had an operation, I became well, I overcame the asthma and the tachycardia, the pregnancy finished well, and everything with the children went normally. (Izaguirre, 2011, my own translation)] Nos disfrazamos de Diablos y entonces vamos humillados ante el Cuerpo de Cristo que es la Santa Custodia, vamos humillados a pagar una promesa, pagamos y salimos humillados. (Félix Mijares, Turiamo) [We dress as devils and come humbled before the Body of Christ which is the Holy Custody. We are going humbly to fulfil the promise, we pay and leave humbly. (Félix Mijares, Turiamo, my own translation)]</p>
<p>On the tour Streets of the village Bringing faith and miracle elsewhere Happiness of sharing with the community this glorious day</p>	<p>Translation from one place to another Group dances Only devotees active Different binary rhythms and dances <i>cuatro</i> or drum rattles bells</p>	<p>Es una bendición para todo aquel que los diablos lo visiten, aleja las enfermedades. (Lobo, W. 2011) [It is a blessing for all who are visited by devils, because this keeps away diseases. (Lobo, W. 2011, my own translation)] Es posible que el demonio ande entre uno. Por eso cargamos campanas. El ruido de las campanas auyenta ese espíritu. Mientras más campanas bailo, para entrarle le cuesta. (Izaguirre, 2011) [It's possible that the demon walks among us. That's why we bear bells. The noise of the bells banishes this spirit. When I dance with more bells, it is more difficult for him to enter me (Izaguirre, 2011, my own translation)]</p>

The major Devil in Naiguatá, Roberto “Robin” Izaguirre (see Figure 13) was 74 years old when he told us:

Yo siempre hablo con el Sanísimo y le digo las cosas... está pasando esto, quiero que usted lo corrija... ayer mataron a un malandro, dice la gente que van a matar a un Diablo... Y le hago comprensiones así. Mi mujer me parió tres hijos e hice promesas por ellos durante el embarazo. Salieron correctos. (R. Izaguirre, personal communication, October 7, 2011)

I always speak with the Blessed and I tell him things that are happening, that I want Him to correct this ... yesterday they killed a criminal, or the people say: tomorrow they will kill a Devil. So I let him know it. My wife gave me three children and I made promises for them during her pregnancies. And everything went right (all translations by K. Lengwinat).

Table 2: Saint John’s Feast

Moment and significance of ritual	Activities and musical elements	Testimonies of psychic implication
Procession of the saint in the streets	Tour Devotees and community Moderate <i>sangueo</i> Drums	Es inexplicable, la sangre de negro llama, cuando suena el tambor... te mueve ese negro que llevas por dentro, esa raíz que uno tiene. (Eugenio Méndez, 2013) [It is inexplicable. The blood of blackness calls when you hear the drums...This touches the blackness you

<p>Walking together, the group acquires consistency.</p> <p>community is powered in its song unit</p> <p>honour of the saint</p>	<p>Responsorial singing Binary rhythm</p>	<p>carry inside, the roots one has. (Eugenio Méndez, 2013, my own translation)]</p>
<p>Stop at a place or house where there is an altar</p> <p>Thanksgiving to the saint for received favours</p>	<p>Sensual couple dancing Devotees and community</p> <p>Quick <i>Golpe (jinca)</i> Drums Responsorial singing Ternary rhythm</p>	<p>Todos los años siento gran alegría porque puedo tocar a mi santo y expresar ahí todo el inmenso cariño que siento hacia él y lo transmito tocando. (Blanco, C. 2016) [Every year I feel very happy because I can play for my saint and express all my immense love to him, and this is what I transmit in my playing. (Blanco, C. 2016, my own translation)]</p> <p>Me emociona ver la gente bailando y tocando sin tener discordia con nadie. (Franklin Espinoza, 2013) [I'm excited to see people dancing and playing without discord with anyone else. (Franklin Espinoza, 2013, my own translation)]</p>



Figure 13: Roberto Izaguirre, Major Devil, Naiguatá, 2011, (photo: Belén Ojeda)

Milinson Vegas, better known as “Macambo”, who has been dancing with the Devils for 26 years, made various promises to the Blessed.

Siempre le pido que me ayude, porque creo mucho en él. Le pedí ayuda para mi hijo cuando mi esposa tuvo un problema en el embarazo. Después por pocos

años que no pudo bailar por mi trabajo. Pero cuando tuve un accidente que me cayó un techo de 8 metros y me redujo el pulmón con el golpe, estaba a punto de un paro respiratorio, así que le pedí al Santísimo, que si saliera bien, iba a bailarle este año. (M. Vegas, personal communication, July 16, 2011)

I am always requesting Him to help me, because I have great confidence in Him. I asked Him to assist my son, when my wife had problems in pregnancy. Later there were a few years that I couldn't dance, because of a work engagement. But then I had an accident, when a ceiling collapsed on me from eight metres high. The impact reduced my lung and I almost had a respiratory failure. So I pleaded once more with the Blessed, that if I overcame this, I promised to dance for him the next year.

Marjorie Josefina Blanco (51 years) had a car accident, which impacted her ability to walk and she was bedridden for two years. The doctors did not believe in her recovery. As a devotee of Saint John, she says “realicé una petición a mi santo, pidiéndole mi recuperación y sanación, a cambio yo le veneraría y bailaré durante el resto de vida” – “I requested my recovery and healing from my Saint and in exchange I promised that I would worship him and dance for him the rest of my life” (M. Blanco, personal communication, 2016). Today, she has recuperated more than 90% of her mobility.

For Elisabeth López doctors diagnosed complications and the possible loss of her unborn baby.

Me encomendé a mi santo con mucha fe. Le doy gracias a dios y a mi San Juan que metieron las manos en mi parto y mi hijo está bien sano y sin complicaciones. Y en la actualidad participo en la festividad, ahora con mi hijo, donde pagamos nuestra promesa bailando y cantando en honor a Él. (E. López, personal communication, 2016)

So I entrusted this problem, with a lot of faith, to my saint. I give thanks to God and to my Saint John, who had a hand in the birth, so my child is healthy and was born without complications. And today I participate in the festival, now along with my son, where we pay for our promises by dancing and singing in his honour.

Even in only these few statements, the special relationship between people (supplicants) and the divine becomes evident. These individuals have established a very personal communication based on faith and confidence. But the central point is that of reciprocity and exchange: I need something and if you can it give me, I promise to pay you back. The feast day becomes a time of payment, within a public group event, where all has to be coordinated between the participants of the locality. Despite the fact that the ritual of Corpus Christi is limited to the active participation of only the Devils, whereas anyone can participate in the festivity of Saint John, both festivals are collective celebrations of a specific community. But what is the meaning, the significance, the importance of these prolonged music rituals for the community? I turn again to some statements of participants.

Edwar Palacios from Barlovento has not made any promise to Saint John, but he considers himself a devotee. “Heredé la devoción desde hace muchos años por mis mayores. Directamente de mis antepasados seguimos la costumbre manteniendo así la idiosincracia cultural de nuestro pueblo” – “I inherited the devotion from my elders. Directly from my ancestors we continue this practice and thus maintain the cultural specificity of our village” (E. Palacios, personal communication, 2016).

Norberta Romero communicates frequently with Saint John. “Dicen: viene Norberta para hablar con su marido. Aquí en Naiguatá no hay quien no quiera a ese santo, desde el más chiquito hasta el más grande. Él tiene que tener poder porque está al lado de Dios” – “The people say: here comes Norberta to speak with her husband. Here in Naiguatá there is nobody who does not love this saint, from the youngest to the oldest. He must have power because he is next to God” (N. Romero, personal communication, 2011).

Rosanna Benítez, a young woman, always participates in the Saint John’s festival in her native village of Tarmas. “Lo disfruto que no haya exclusion de nadie y en nada. Siento además una libertad spiritual, pero también mis raíces, de donde vengo, la negritud” – “I enjoy it because no one and nothing is excluded. I also feel a sense of spiritual freedom, as well as, my roots, where I come from, Blackness” (R. Benítez, personal communication, 2013).

There can be a very interesting musical and psychological element in the middle of the celebration. In Curiepe, Barlovento, some of the participants mention the word *la capilla* (the chapel) and all of them get entranced and achieve a perfect union without paying attention to the surroundings.

Es el momento que se cambia el chip y dentro de su mente se ponen en ese sitio (la capilla). Es algo automático, no sé por qué, pero uno se conecta perfectamente, entre uno mismo, en la música y con el universo. Uno está elevado. (J. Aguilar, personal communication, 2016)

In this moment, things shift, and internally we move to this place (the chapel). It’s something automatic, I don’t know why, but it creates a perfect connection between us, the music, and the cosmos. We are elevated.

This is a group phenomenon, but it also occurs individually. These are moments of a very intimate personal or group union with the Saint.

A veces me siento a tocar el tambor 2, 3, 4, 5 horas hasta que me lo quiten. Pero pasa que ves al tamborero y no parece ser él. Y uno piensa: déjalo quieto hasta que él diga: ya toque o ya canté. (J. Aguilar, personal communication, 2016).

Sometimes I’m playing the drum for two, three, four, or five hours until it’s taken over. But occasionally you see a drummer and it doesn’t seem to be him. So you let him keep drumming until he says: ‘Ok, I already played’, or, ‘I already sung’.

Franklin Espinoza, Claret Ramírez, and Norma Corro from the same village are delighted with the celebrations of the 24th of June.

Emociona ver la gente bailando y tocando sin tener discordia con nadie. Se divierten y comparten con personas que vienen de fuera. Ese día nos sentimos una

gran familia con unión espiritual. Nosotros sentimos el goce y ese sonido de tambor llega dentro, se mete en la sangre (cited from Lengwinat et al., 2014).

To see people dancing and playing without discord with anyone is fantastic. They have fun and also share with people who come from outside. This day we are a great family in spiritual union. We feel the pleasure and this sound of the drums comes in, gets into the blood.

Willam Díaz, one of the best singers and devotees, states that “es un momento que une a las distintas generaciones no sólo por el espacio físico sino por mantener “una disciplina ancestral y respeto por la tradición” – “this is a unifying moment, because it joins together different generations not only in a physical space, but maintains an ancestral discipline and respect of a tradition” (W. Díaz, personal communication, 2013).

Among the devotees of the Blessed Sacrament we can find different mechanisms of protection from bad influences.

Bailar diablo tiene sus riesgos. Por eso nos protegemos. Como diablo mayor tengo que estar pendiente que no haya una malignidad. Si hay algo raro, una confusion, un enredo, los diablos discuten, debo ordenar que se toque la danza cruzada. (A. Lugo, personal communication, 2011)

To dance with the outfit of a Devil is risky. So we have to protect ourselves. As the major Devil, I have to be aware of the infiltration of malignant elements. When I note something strange, like a confusion, a tangle, or discussion among Devils, at that moment, I must give the instruction to perform the *danza cruzada* (cross dance).

This is the most played tune, the *danza del camino* (road dance), but in a higher tonality and with crossed fingers, a symbol for protection. Only with this action the group will be fortified.

Another case that brings fraternity to the community is the Devil’s dance, the *galerón*. It is a profane dance within the religious ritual but somewhat special, because “se le toca a una persona creyente de los diablos y colaboradora. Es como un premio y no se le toca a cualquiera” – “it is dedicated to a distinctive person who believes in the Corpus’ Devils and collaborates with them. It is like a prize and is not played for everybody” (A. Lugo, personal communication, 2011). The *galerón* is the only music with a triple meter and the only individual dance. One Devil after another dances in a circle and shows his extraordinary skills according to the *cuatro* rhythm as a tribute and acknowledgment to somebody.

In effect, these festivities start from individual cases and for intimate reasons, but eventually become public to involve major groups and communities. This creates new relationships with the divine as well as interpersonal human bonding. These are spaces of social harmony, of love, protection, interaction, pleasure, of idiosyncrasy, identity in Blackness and unifying tradition, and above all, spaces of wellbeing, a living place with personal security, recreation, and liberty (see Figure 14).



Figure 14: Singing to Saint John, Borburata, 2009 (photo: Emiliano Montes)

Conclusion

Devils dancing in Corpus Christi and the Saint John's festival are two domains of popular religiosity within a Catholic context, where descendants of Africans once brought from West Africa as slaves to Venezuela construct and re-construct their identity. Both are rituals based on faith, characterized by long hours of music-making, dancing, and singing. These activities are coordinated by hierarchical brotherhoods, which, since colonial times, have also been organizations for solidarity and hiding places for identity construction involving Blackness. Historically, the public health system was insufficient and therefore complemented by alternative methods such as traditional medicine and spiritual aid in the form of entrusting the solution to problems to divinities.

The Corpus Christi celebration has survived 450 years in Venezuela in the form of a brotherhood of Devils, who organize to dance with masks, special clothing, and instrumental music, to signify the submission of heresy to the Christian doctrine. The Feast of Saint John, the most popular festivity of the Spaniards arriving in Venezuela, was used by Black slaves to invoke their ancient deities and give the feast a deep re-signification through the inclusion of drumming, singing, and dancing. Both celebrations have similar formal structures, consisting of the eve and the principal day. They start from an individual necessity and end in a collective public thanksgiving. In both rituals the main motive focuses on addressing a specific health problem and when it is solved, the gratitude is shared with the local community. This final moment generates wellbeing, happiness, and identity in the local groups. The main differences lie in how they are performed (Corpus Christi by only men; Saint John by both men and women), the instrumentation (Corpus Christi uses one *cuatro* or drum; in the Feast of Saint John three drums with different timbres are assigned rhythmic patterns), and active participation (only devotees partake in Corpus Christi; the whole community in the Feast of Saint John).

Music is part of the social practices and, in the ritual context, contributes to the stability of the social group.

The Devils' dancing and the Feast of Saint John's are an expression of liberty, fertility, life, magic, love, success, and hope. The Devils are not just mediators between the salvation of the community and the glorification of Jesus. They also represent the docility and submission of the Devil to the Blessed Corpus Christi (Alemán, 1997). Saint John gives the opportunity to feel, express and live love. Both celebrations are part of a culture designed to overcome obstacles and to praise life. They are ways to liberate vital energy and thereby to revitalise and unite people. It is a culture of resistance, not only in religiosity and musical elements, but also to globalization by creating or protecting their own space. As such, Afro-Venezuelans identify themselves with these rituals, expressing 'that's mine', "aquí me siento libre y puedo expresarme y hacer lo que quiero para el santo: tocando, bailando, cantando como lo siento. Ahorita estamos en lo nuestro" – "here I feel free and I can express myself and do what I like for the divinity: I play, dance or sing how I feel it. Now we are ourselves" (J. Aguilar, personal communication, 2016).

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