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# Afro-South America: Culture, Resistance, and Identity

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## Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** Mapping Afro-South America: Peoples, Places, and Paths
- **Chapter 2** From Enslavement to Emancipation: Foundations of Afro-Descendant Life
- **Chapter 3** Maroon Geographies: Quilombos, Palenques, and Community Autonomy
- **Chapter 4** Racial Ideologies: Mestizaje, Blanqueamiento, and the Nation
- **Chapter 5** Urban Migrations and the Making of Black Cities
- **Chapter 6** Work, Labor, and the Political Economy of Race
- **Chapter 7** Family, Kinship, and Community Networks
- **Chapter 8** Spiritual Worlds: Candomblé, Umbanda, and Afro-Brazilian Religions
- **Chapter 9** Pacific Currents: Afro-Colombian Spiritualities and Territory
- **Chapter 10** Faith and Festivity in Afro-Peru: Devotion, Syncretism, and Ritual
- **Chapter 11** Drums Across the South: Rhythms, Instruments, and Lineages
- **Chapter 12** Music of Belonging: Samba, Maracatu, Currulao, Festejo, and Landó
- **Chapter 13** Dance, Body, and Memory: Capoeira and Beyond
- **Chapter 14** Language, Orature, and Creolization
- **Chapter 15** Foodways and the Geographies of Taste
- **Chapter 16** Visual Arts and Representation: From Colonial to Contemporary
- **Chapter 17** Literature and the Black Imagination
- **Chapter 18** Education, Knowledge, and Epistemic Justice
- **Chapter 19** Law, Citizenship, and Collective Rights
- **Chapter 20** Land, Territory, and Environmental Justice on the Pacific and Amazon Frontiers
- **Chapter 21** Social Movements and Black Politics: Brazil, Colombia, Peru
- **Chapter 22** Gender, Sexuality, and Intersectional Struggles
- **Chapter 23** Media, Technology, and the New Public Sphere
- **Chapter 24** Memory, Heritage, and the Politics of Recognition
- **Chapter 25** Transnational Connections: Diasporic Networks and Future Horizons

## Introduction

*Afro-South America: Culture, Resistance, and Identity* is a social and cultural history of Afro-descendant communities whose presence has shaped the continent's past and present. Centering Afro-Brazilian, Afro-Colombian, and Afro-Peruvian experiences, this volume examines how people forged collective life in the wake of slavery, navigated the promises and limits of citizenship, and created worlds where music, religion, and kinship became instruments of survival and self-definition. Rather than treating culture as passive reflection, we approach it as a field of struggle—where memory, creativity, and political imagination meet.

The book's geography is wide but precise. In Brazil, we attend to port cities and plantation zones, to the Northeast, Southeast, and Amazonian interior where quilombo communities reworked land and law. In Colombia, we follow rivers and mangroves along the Pacific littoral, the Caribbean coast, and urban barrios where Afro-Colombian organizing has linked territory to culture and rights. In Peru, we trace coastal valleys and city neighborhoods where Afro-Peruvian families nurtured ritual, music, and craft traditions through centuries of upheaval. Across these places, Afro-descendant life emerges as both local and transnational, shaped by Atlantic crossings and continental migrations.

Three themes anchor the chapters that follow: culture, resistance, and identity. Culture names the practices—rituals, sounds, languages, cuisines, bodies in motion—through which communities transmit knowledge and claim belonging. Resistance encompasses everyday strategies like mutual aid and maroon settlements as well as organized movements contesting racial hierarchies and dispossession. Identity points to evolving self-understandings, forged at the intersection of race, gender, class, religion, and territory, and continually negotiated within national projects that have celebrated mixture even as they reproduced inequality.

This book also attends carefully to spiritual worlds and their ethical force. Afro-Brazilian religions such as Candomblé and Umbanda, Afro-Colombian devotional practices and funerary chants, and Afro-Peruvian rituals entwined with Catholic feast days are treated not as relics but as living philosophies. They organize care, steward sacred ecologies, and guide aesthetic invention. The same can be said of music and dance—samba, maracatu, currulao, festejo, landó, and capoeira—where rhythms, instruments, and movement encode histories of labor, oceanic travel, and community sovereignty.

Politics, in this account, is inseparable from place. From quilombos and palenques to urban associations and contemporary NGOs, Afro-descendant organizing has sought

recognition, collective land rights, environmental justice, and protection from racialized violence. National narratives of mestizaje and racial democracy promised inclusion while often masking structural exclusion; Black movements have exposed these contradictions and articulated new horizons of citizenship. By situating law, policy, and activism alongside ritual and performance, the book maps how cultural work and political work co-produce one another.

Methodologically, the chapters weave archival records with oral histories, ethnography, musicology, and visual analysis. Community scholars, elders, artists, and movement leaders are treated as theorists in their own right, and their insights shape our interpretations. Concepts like diaspora, creolization, marronage, intersectionality, and territoriality appear throughout, not as jargon but as tools forged from lived experience. We aim for an ethics of collaboration and citation that foregrounds the voices of those whose lives animate these pages.

Finally, this is a history with contemporary stakes. As climate change reshapes riverways and coasts, as cities expand and extractive economies reach deeper, Afro-descendant communities confront old and new forms of displacement—and they craft innovative responses grounded in ancestral knowledge. The chapters that follow are organized to move from foundations to futures: from the making of Afro-South America under slavery and empire, through cultural and political innovations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to twenty-first-century struggles and solidarities. We invite readers to hear the echoes in the drum, the prayer, and the protest—and to recognize in them a blueprint for more just worlds.

## **CHAPTER ONE: Mapping Afro-South America: Peoples, Places, and Paths**

Afro-South America is not a single story but a constellation of geographies and lifeways stitched across continents and centuries. Its peoples stretch from the Amazon's interior to the Andes' foothills, from Atlantic sugar zones to Pacific ports. Some arrived enslaved on colonial ships, others migrated later as workers or citizens. Their descendants shaped cities and countrysides, turning rivers, plazas, and fields into sites of memory and innovation. To map this world is to trace lines drawn by ships and states, but also paths created by families, faith, and song.

Brazil anchors the map by sheer numbers, with one of the largest Afro-descendant populations outside Africa. Communities radiate from Bahia's Recôncavo and Salvador's hills to Rio de Janeiro's favelas and São Paulo's neighborhoods. Further north, Maranhão's drumming traditions and Pará's riverine lifeways mark Amazonian Black life. In the Northeast, Pernambuco's maracatu and coastal quilombos speak to endurance. In the Southeast, Capoeira circulates through gyms and streets. Southern cities host new arrivals, while inland Cerrado towns sustain old roots. Brazil's size and diversity make it a continent within a continent.

Colombia's Afro presence is concentrated along the Pacific coast, a rainforest shoreline where rivers carry communities and culture. Buenaventura, Cali, and the Chocó region are hubs of Black organizing and music, from currulao to salsa. The Caribbean coast, especially Cartagena and its islands, reflects a different history, with urban palenques and fishing villages. The Atrato and San Juan rivers connect towns where territorial rights are tied to ancestral stewardship. In Bogotá and Medellín, migrants transform barrios, turning coastal rhythms into urban soundscapes.

Peru's Afro heritage clusters on the coast, where valleys and ports nurtured Afro-Peruvian lifeways. Lima's neighborhoods, Callao's docks, and towns like Cañete and Chincha echo with landó and festejo. The south, around Ica and Nazca, holds traditions of dance and artisanry shaped by rural and urban exchanges. While smaller than Brazil's population, Afro-Peruvians have had an outsized influence on national culture, particularly in music and cuisine. Lima's museums and festivals narrate a history sometimes obscured by national myths of indigeneity and whiteness.

Across the continent, countries like Ecuador, Venezuela, Argentina, and Uruguay hold smaller but significant Afro communities. Esmeraldas in Ecuador is renowned for its marimba traditions and strong ethnic identity, sustained through rural and coastal lifeways. Venezuela's barlovento region preserves Afro-Venezuelan drumming and

cacao economies, while Caracas hosts new urban networks. Argentina's Buenos Aires and Rosario have long-standing Afro-Argentine histories, often overlooked despite their contributions to tango and labor. Uruguay's Montevideo, with its candombe drumming, links street parades to public memory and the politics of celebration.

The historical routes of Afro-South America were shaped by the transatlantic slave trade, but also by intra-American circuits. Ships carried people from West and Central Africa to ports in Bahia, Cartagena, and Callao, while smaller vessels ferried captives along rivers into the interior. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, internal migrations brought Afro-descendants to cities for work, education, and political participation. Transnational paths formed through activism, music, and religion—capoeira masters traveling abroad, samba schools forging ties with African troupes, Candomblé and Umbanda linking Brazil to Benin and Cuba.

Religion provides one of the most visible maps of Afro-South America. In Brazil, Candomblé's orixás and Umbanda's spiritual charities organize communities and anchor identity. In Colombia, Afro-Pacific rituals blend Catholic saints with African-derived practices, while funerary chants keep histories alive. In Peru, marinera dances carry devotional traces into secular festivals. Across borders, practices like feasts for saints, New Year's rituals on beaches, and healing ceremonies reveal a spiritual geography that is local in form yet transnational in reach, connecting descendants to African lineages and diasporic kin.

Music is another key to mapping the continent. Samba and maracatu in Brazil, currulao and salsa in Colombia, and landó and festejo in Peru chart the movement of sound and people. Instruments—agba bells, cajón, surdo, repinique, marimba—trace African roots and local innovation. Rhythms carry memory, recording the tempo of labor, migration, and celebration. Street parades, club scenes, and religious processions draw sonic boundaries that shift with time, as youth remix traditions and elders preserve structures. These soundscapes are not mere entertainment but maps of belonging.

Dance provides bodily cartography. Capoeira's ginga and roda offer a language of resistance and artistry, mapping space through movement. Afro-Colombian dance forms like currulao and marimba map coastal ecosystems, echoing mangrove and rainforest rhythms. Afro-Peruvian landó and festejo embody histories of plantation labor transformed into grace. In Buenos Aires, tango carries traces of Afro-Argentine movement. Dance classes, community workshops, and festivals circulate these forms across borders, turning bodies into archives and stages into classrooms. The choreography of diaspora is both local and global.

Foodways map taste and memory. In Brazil, acarajé, vatapá, and moqueca connect Bahian kitchens to West African legacies. In Peru, carapulcra and anticuchos testify to Afro-Peruvian culinary contributions. In Colombia, coconut-rich fish stews and palm oil

dishes along the Pacific mark the region's African heritage. Markets, street vendors, and family kitchens keep these traditions alive, while restaurants and festivals transform them into public culture. Ingredients traveled across oceans, but recipes adapted to local ecologies, creating distinct culinary geographies that taste of both survival and creativity.

Languages and creoles chart the verbal terrain. Brazil's Portuguese carries African influences in syntax and vocabulary; Afro-Brazilian communities often blend Portuguese with ritual speech. Colombia's Pacific coast hears Spanish layered with lexical and rhythmic features shaped by African languages; some communities maintain storytelling traditions that echo older oratures. Peru's Spanish absorbs African-derived terms, especially in music and folklore. Oral histories, proverbs, and religious chants are repositories of memory. Across borders, new languages emerge in diasporic neighborhoods, marking identities in speech.

Territory is a central coordinate of Afro-South America. In Brazil, quilombos carved communal landholdings recognized, after long struggle, by the constitution. In Colombia, collective titles along the Pacific formalize ancestral stewardship over mangroves, forests, and rivers. In Peru, coastal communities negotiate rights to land and water amid urban expansion and tourism. Territory is more than property; it is a web of ecological knowledge, sacred sites, and livelihoods. Mapping these lands exposes how extraction and displacement challenge Black communities, but also how legal tools and local organizing defend common goods.

Urbanization has redrawn the map. Cities like Salvador, Rio, São Paulo, Buenaventura, Cali, Bogotá, Lima, and Callao absorb migrants seeking work and education, creating new cultural hubs. Neighborhoods become laboratories of identity, where religious houses, dance schools, and community centers form networks. Urban planning and zoning often concentrate poverty, but they also foster creativity. Afro-descendant youth use hip-hop, graffiti, and digital media to narrate city life, transforming sidewalks into stages and cell phones into archives. The urban map is layered with history and innovation.

Environmental issues carve another dimension. The Pacific rainforest and the Amazon face deforestation, mining, and dam projects that disproportionately affect Afro-descendant territories. In Colombia and Brazil, rivers are lifelines for transport, food, and ritual; their contamination endangers culture itself. Coastal erosion and rising seas threaten Afro-Peruvian towns that depend on fishing. Community knowledge about ecosystems—mangrove management, sustainable farming, water stewardship—forms a counter-map to state and corporate plans. Environmental justice becomes cultural survival, linking activism to ancestral practices.

The legal map is uneven and contested. Brazil's 1988 Constitution recognized quilombo territories, yet implementation has been slow and fraught. Colombia's Law

70 affirmed collective rights for Afro-Colombian communities, but land titles remain incomplete. Peru has advanced anti-discrimination measures, though land and labor rights lag. Across the continent, courts become arenas where identity, territory, and citizenship are negotiated. Lawyers, leaders, and elders collaborate to translate custom into law. Mapping these rights reveals how formal recognition interacts with everyday strategies of survival and solidarity.

Education shapes how Afro-South America is seen and how communities see themselves. School curricula often omit Black histories, but teachers, students, and scholars are building new materials that center Afro-descendant contributions. Universities host research on music, religion, and law; community schools teach capoeira, drumming, and orature. Language instruction includes Portuguese, Spanish, and creole forms; literacy projects expand access. Education is not only about formal classrooms but also about intergenerational transmission in homes, temples, and streets. It redraws the map of knowledge, inviting new readers to the continent's story.

Media and technology create digital geographies. Radio stations along the Pacific broadcast currulao and news; Afro-Brazilian television programs and podcasts circulate stories of resistance and joy. Social media platforms allow communities to share rituals, music, and calls for solidarity across borders. Cell phones document police encounters and environmental destruction, producing evidence for advocacy. Digital archives preserve oral histories and visual art, though access remains uneven. The internet maps a new public sphere where diaspora conversations happen in real time, expanding the continent's borders.

Migration and diaspora networks extend the map beyond national frontiers. Afro-Brazilians move to Portugal and Spain; Afro-Colombians and Afro-Peruvians travel to the United States and Europe, sending remittances and ideas back home. Transnational religious houses link Salvador to Candomblé communities in New York; capoeira academies span continents; music collaborations blend samba, reggaeton, and jazz. These flows are not one-way; they are circular, drawing global influences into local practices while projecting local identities outward. The map of Afro-South America is thus planetary.

Memory institutions—museums, archives, community centers—chart the past and present. In Brazil, the Museu de Arte Afro-Brasileira in Salvador and the Museu Negro in Rio curate visual histories. Colombia's Museo Palenque in San Basilio de Palenque preserves knowledge of maroon life. Peru's museums in Lima and Chincha highlight Afro-Peruvian arts. Community archives hold photographs, oral histories, and ritual objects. These spaces map narratives often excluded from national canons, offering critical perspectives on the past. They are not just repositories but active sites of identity-making.

Collective organizing draws the political map. Black movements in Brazil, Colombia, and Peru have formed NGOs, advocacy networks, and cultural associations to advance rights and visibility. Women's groups, youth collectives, and LGBTQ+ organizations within these movements add intersectional dimensions. Trade unions and cooperatives connect labor rights to racial justice. Political parties increasingly include Afro-descendant candidates, though representation remains limited. Mapping these organizations reveals strategies—from courtroom litigation to street festivals—that translate culture into power. The geography of activism is as varied as the communities it serves.

There are challenges to mapping Afro-South America. Data on race and ethnicity is uneven, with census categories often inadequate or inconsistently applied. Invisibility persists in national narratives that prioritize whiteness or indigeneity. Internal diversity complicates labels; Afro-descendant communities include Indigenous mixtures, European lineages, and distinct regional identities. Some groups reject the term Afro or emphasize local names like Palenquero or Maroon. Geography itself is fluid, as urbanization, migration, and climate change redraw boundaries. Mapping must be cautious, avoiding rigid borders that erase nuance.

Culture is a compass in this cartography. Religion, music, dance, food, language, and art do not merely reflect geography; they produce it. Samba schools define neighborhoods; drumming lines mark festival routes; ritual calendars shape weekly rhythms; culinary traditions chart local ecosystems. These practices create “cultural geographies”—spaces where identity is performed and remembered. Mapping them reveals how Afro-descendant communities navigate state boundaries, economic pressures, and historical erasure through creative expression. The map is alive, moving with bodies and voices, not fixed on paper.

This chapter offers a preliminary sketch, a guide rather than a definitive atlas. It names places and paths, peoples and practices, in order to set the stage for deeper exploration in later chapters. The goal is to show how Afro-South America is at once regional and global, historical and contemporary, local and transnational. It is a terrain shaped by struggle and celebration, by pain and pleasure, by the constant work of making and remaking home. Mapping it is an invitation to listen closely to the rhythms, prayers, and stories that chart its contours.

The chapters that follow will expand these lines, turning the sketch into a fuller portrait. We will move from the foundations of enslavement and emancipation to the geographies of maroon communities, from racial ideologies to urban migrations, from spiritual worlds to music and dance, from law and territory to media and memory. Each chapter deepens a part of the map, connecting lived experience to broader structures. In doing so, we aim to illuminate how Afro-descendant communities across Brazil, Colombia, and Peru—and beyond—have crafted cultures of resilience and

worlds of meaning.

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