



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Saint Martin de Porres “The Black Saint of the Afro-descendant community in Quito-Ecuador”: Between segregation, racism, and black resistance

Rocío Vera Santos

Institute for Latin American Studies, Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, Germany

Correspondence

Rocío Vera Santos, Institute for Latin American Studies, Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, Germany.
Email: Rocio.vera@fu-berlin.de

Abstract

In the neighbourhood Caminos a la Libertad, located in the north-western part of Quito, every November, a group of Afro-Ecuadorian women called the Community of Saint Martin & The Martinas pay tribute to Saint Martin de Porres “the Black saint of the Afro-descendant community.” This celebration is relevant in a context in which the Afro-Ecuadorian inhabitants of the neighbourhood suffer segregation, racism, and discrimination. What happens in the microcosm of Caminos a la Libertad is, in part, a reflection of the experience of the whole Afro-descendant population in the capital: A city which has historically created an image of itself as white-*mestizo*, and where the presence of Afro-descendants has been systematically rejected. Based on ethnographic work, participant observation and semi-structured interviews, in this article I analyse how this community uses the image of Saint Martin de Porres and his celebration to combat racism, promote social cohesion and ethnic and gender empowerment in the neighbourhood, by creating “places of enunciation” and “spiritual citizenship.”

KEYWORDS

Afro-descendants, neighbourhood, social cohesion, discrimination, empowerment, racism, religion, Saint Martin de Porres

Resumen

En el Barrio Caminos a la Libertad ubicado al noroccidente de Quito un grupo de mujeres afroecuatorianas denominadas Comunidad San Martín & Las Martinas rinden homenaje cada noviembre a San Martín de Porres “el Santo Negro del Pueblo Afrodescendiente”. Esta celebración es relevante en un contexto donde los habitantes afroecuatorianos del barrio sufren segregación, racismo y discriminación. Lo que sucede en este microcosmos de Caminos a la Libertad es en parte, un reflejo de lo que vive la población afrodescendiente en la ciudad capitalina. Una ciudad que históricamente se ha construido he imaginado como blanco-mestiza y en donde la población afroecuatoriana ha sido sistemáticamente rechazada. Por medio de un trabajo etnográfico basado en observación participante y entrevistas semiestructuradas, analizo en este artículo cómo esta comunidad utiliza la imagen de San Martín de Porres para combatir el racismo, promover cohesión social y empoderamiento étnico y de género en el Barrio, creando “lugares de enunciación” y “ciudadanía espiritual”.

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.

© 2023 The Authors. *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC on behalf of American Anthropological Association.

PALABRAS CLAVE

afrodescendientes, barrio, cohesión social, discriminación, empoderamiento, racismo, religión, San Martín de Porres

MIGRATION, INVASION, RACIAL VIOLENCE AND RESISTANCE

After the agrarian reforms in 1964 and 1973 through which the peasant labor called *concertaje* and *huasipungo* were eliminated, several rural-urban migrations took place from territories traditionally occupied by Afro-descendants, such as the Chota Valley and Esmeraldas, to other cities, and to the capital Quito.¹ This concentration of migrants gave rise to a series of processes of social pressure for access to both employment and urban spaces, increasing the demand for housing. In Quito during the 1980s the municipal apparatus in the city practically ignored the problems affecting the inhabitants of the so-called “popular” or “marginal” neighborhoods. In the 90s, in the north-western part of Quito, the phenomenon of “invasions” began to emerge. For many racialized migrant families, invasion was the only way to obtain housing because, in Quito, signs with the words “for rent but not for black” were common (Puyol, 2009, 65). Staying in an invaded neighborhood implied a constant history of struggle to pay economic fees, to build a house so as not to be evicted, to have access to basic services and, as far as possible—at some point—to have access to deeds to their land, but mainly to create territorialities and communities, which would allow them to live in a more dignified way. That is the reason why the case of Caminos a la Libertad is the object of this study.

On August 9th, 1990, after a series of meetings and planning, approximately 500 Afro-descendant, mestizo, and Indigenous families participated in the invasion of the slopes of the Pichincha volcano, creating the neighborhood Caminos a la Libertad in the north-west of Quito. Most of the Afro-Ecuadorians who invaded were located in the lower part (in the plain) and they recognized themselves as “invaders.” The mestizos, the Indigenous, and a few Afro-Ecuadorians were mainly located in the upper part (on the hill). The majority indicate that they arrived after the invasion and bought lots. They recognized themselves as “deed holders.” For this group, economic capital plays a very important role in their positioning. Since 1990, the cooperative Caminos a la Libertad has succeeded in legalizing several properties, however the acts of legalization have only been concentrated in the upper part of the neighborhood. In the lower part, the invaders—mainly Afro-descendants—continue to live in a legally precarious situation. This has generated racial, class, and geographical tensions among the inhabitants of the neighborhood. The invaders consider it unfair that the municipal authority does not give titles to the lots, even though they were the ones who created the neighborhood and provided it with services.

In 2004 Afro-Ecuadorian families tried to acquire new lots, but the president of the cooperative Caminos a la Libertad—a mestizo man—prohibited the sale. This caused a “reinvansion” of uninhabited areas in the neighborhood and resulted in a series of conflicts between the different groups from the upper and the lower part. Only few of them recognize themselves as “reinvaders” because of the stigmatization. In the neighborhood this rivalry as well as the racism, classism, discrimination, and segregation that exist, caused that in the year in which the reinvansion took place, one case of extreme racial violence was registered in the neighborhood. The case occurred on Ash Wednesday in the soccer fields located in the lower part. Juan Pavón, a young 23-year-old Afro-Ecuadorian was “lynched, castrated, had an ear severed, and was burned alive” (see Newspaper Diario Hoy, March 28, 2004). According to the inhabitants of the neighborhood, Juan was drunk and with two white friends, but “because of being Black” only he was accused of “being a thief” and of being a “highly dangerous criminal” (Comments from neighborhood residents, Field Diary, December 2011). The Commission of Human Rights investigated the case and declared that the coordinator of the invasion in the 1990s, a mestizo man, was responsible for the murder (Dosch, 2010, 118). After the funeral, the people from the lower part along with relatives and friends from neighborhoods close by, organized a peaceful “rebellion” in the neighborhood directed at the ones implicated in the murder. After this rebellion Estuardo Delgado, an Afro-Ecuadorian leader, says that “a precedent was set, and no more Blacks in this neighborhood, nor in any of the adjacent neighborhoods were murdered” (Vera Santos, 2015, 283).

One year later, in 2005, the Afro-Ecuadorian Alba Pavón Congo, one of the “invaders,” decided to create the Community of Saint Martin & The Martinas in the neighborhood together with other Afro-Ecuadorian women from the upper and lower part in honor of Saint Martin de Porres.²

In this article I want to analyze on the one hand how the Community of Saint Martin & The Martinas strategically uses the image of Saint Martin to counteract the stereotypes, prejudices, and stigmas that the *mestizo* population has about the Afro-descendants of the neighborhood, and on the other hand, how The Martinas support Afro-Ecuadorian women and single mothers through networking, empowerment, knowledge, and information. This study is relevant because religion, spiritual, and political actions allow The Martinas the creation of strong social cohesion in the Afro-Ecuadorian community in the neighborhood, positioning Black identity, *Negritude*, Africanity, and the ethnic and gender political position of the Afro-Ecuadorian women against social injustice, discrimination, sexism, classism, and racism. The Martinas have earned respect and admiration not only in the neighborhood, but also in Quito, and their contributions have been recognized nationally and internationally.³

This article is based on an ethnographic case study carried out between 2008–2013 in the Caminos a la Libertad neighborhood in Quito. I conducted semi-structured interviews with members of the Community of Saint Martin & The Martinas, and the inhabitants of the neighborhood. In particular, I conducted participant observation of the activities of the Community of Saint Martin & The Martinas, especially of the meetings to coordinate the Afro Mass and the Feast in honor of Saint Martin, as well as the event itself. A field diary was kept covering the activities of the Martinas, which was complemented by the documentation which this group had of its activities in the neighborhood. This documentation included the Diary of the Community of Saint Martin & The Martinas, in which the Martinas had written protocols about their meetings and reflections on the meanings of their activities, objects, and rituals.

BLACK WOMEN IN THE MIGRATION AND INVASION PROCESS

Different studies carried out in Quito have highlighted the role of Afro-Ecuadorian women in the migration process and family solidarity networks (see García, 1985; Fernández-Rasines, 2001; Hernández, 2005; Vera Santos, 2015). These are “support networks” for the “new migrant families,” which are based on kinship or friendship. The new migrant families contact friends and relatives who already lived in Quito, and it is these people who guide them where to look for housing and work, or even give them lodging in their home until they get a “room of their own,” thus creating a “family migration strategy” (Hernández, 2005, 62). This process of insertion and finding a house to rent can take years due to the lack of employment and mainly intersectional discrimination of class, ethnicity, race, and gender (see Crenshaw, 1989). The Afro-Ecuadorian migrants with fewer economic resources, single mothers with precarious jobs as domestic workers, were not only not given bank credits, but were openly denied the possibility of renting decent housing, which resulted in discrimination in terms of access to housing (see Fernández-Rasines, 2001; De la Torre, 2002; Caicedo, 2006; Vera Santos, 2015; Serrano, 2016). Hernández (2010) pointed out that the discourses and representations about Afro-Ecuadorian women revolve around representing women as sexual objects or as domestic workers. For Puyol (2009, 69) domestic work has worked under the logic of “cycle of servitude” in which Black girls from the Chota Valley were taken by mestizo and white families to Ibarra or Quito to work as “live-in” domestic servants without a salary in most of the cases. The stereotype of “black women as domestic servants” has led many women to believe that they can only work as domestic workers, since for many of them it has been the only way to make a living (Puyol, 2009, 62). This bodily and subjective historical construction based on racial and gender stereotypes has been used to produce and reproduce subaltern, colonized, and racialized subjects under a “matrix of domination” from patriarchal, capitalist, sexist, and racist systems (see Hill Collins, 2000). However, Afro-Ecuadorian women have used their own bodies to re-signify and counteract these stereotypes, positioning themselves as “mothers,” “sensual women,” “beautiful women,” “women with hot bodies,” where “being hot” has several meanings, among them to be strong and to know how to face problems (Hernández, 2010, 104; Santillán, 2006, 54), as well as “women invaders” or “women founders” in the context of neighborhood foundations (Vera Santos, 2015).

Although the invasions were normally organized by men, most of them *mestizos*, Afro-Ecuadorian women were the ones who contacted and mobilized other families to participate in the invasion, even when these events involved risking their lives. It is also women who create community and social cohesion in the neighborhoods, in fact, the figure of the woman is extremely important in Afro-descendant families, both for the household—mainly female-led—and for the neighborhood’s actions (see García, 1985; Fernández-Rasines, 2001; Hernández, 2005; Puyol, 2009; Vera Santos, 2015). Fernández-Rasines (2001) identified in an Afro-descendant neighbourhood in Quito that the figure of the “woman-mother” (not necessarily a biological mother but in the social sense) plays an important role in the community, linked to effective action and decision-making through political representation as agents and social leaders. The author uses the concept of “agency” from a feminist perspective to refer to “women as agents” with the capacity for autonomous and competent management (Fernández-Rasines, 2001, 151). In the field of institutional relations, they are “women-leaders” and “political subjects” capable of acquiring power and transforming systems of social injustice (Fernández-Rasines, 2001, 151). The “woman-mother-leader” therefore has an overlay of authority and symbolic power in the public sphere and is a highly respected figure in the community (Fernández-Rasines, 2001, 95). Vera Santos (2015) identified in the neighbourhood Caminos a la Libertad, an Afro-Ecuadorian woman as a president of the “improvement committee” since 2004, who even left her job to dedicate herself totally to work in the neighbourhood, mainly to obtain property titles for the Afro-Ecuadorian families. In this case, it is not the figure of the “mother” that was important, but the role of being an “invader,” as well the ethnic positioning as a “Black woman” or an “Afro-Ecuadorian” in a neighbourhood with a lot of conflicts and intersectional discrimination, due to class, ethnicity, “race,” and location in the neighbourhood.

BLACK WOMEN, PRACTICES OF “SPIRITUAL CITIZENSHIP” AND THE CREATION OF “PLACE OF ENUNCIATION”

Racialized subjects can use religion to define their ethnic and class identities, as well as to occupy leading roles in religious and cultural celebrations (Hernández, 2005). In the rural context of la Concepción in the Valle del Chota, Moreno (2014, 70)

identified how Afro-Ecuadorian women use the public sphere for religious celebration, positioning themselves as “deeply spiritual women.” Spirituality in this context has a political character since it is used as a cohesive element to transform women’s lives through links with social, cultural, and political projects. In the case of the study conducted by Fernández-Rasines (2001, 120), for an Afro-Ecuadorian, “being a Christian” produces an equivalent to “being a citizen” with the need to be treated equally because “we are all Christians,” regardless of “race,” ethnicity, class, and religious affiliation. Afro-Ecuadorian women use their religious affiliation with Evangelical Christianity as an element to perceive themselves as superior in their social and ethno-racial identity (Fernández-Rasines, 2001, 157). While in the case analyzed by Vera Santos (2015) Afro-Ecuadorian women who associate themselves with Catholic religious institutions strengthen their ethno-racial identity, by contrast, some Afro-Ecuadorian women who do not position themselves in terms of their ethno-racial identity try to distance themselves from the activities organized by the *Pastoral Afro*.⁴ Worthwhile here is the concept of “transnational spiritual networks” based on the “practice of spiritual citizenship” coined by Castor (2017), used in the context of her ethnographic research in Trinidad. This concept defines the power of the sacred and spiritual epistemologies to inform new ways of belonging not limited to the national, but also inclusive of the diasporic, global, and transnational. For Castor (2017, 7) “spiritual citizenship” encompasses “a dual process of self-making and being-made within webs of power linked to the nation-state and civil society.” “Spiritual citizenship” examines the performance of religion and ritual as situated within the context of transnational diasporic religions in order to achieve liberation and freedom. In this sense, religious and spiritual practices are political practices. This concept is relevant for this research because, for the Afro-descendants, citizenship was historically negated since the very construction of the nation-states. The influence of scientific racism and the imposition of the ideology of *mestizaje* excluded Afro-descendants as part of the nations.⁵ Their recognition was only possible after a process of resistance and public protests (accompanied by the *Pastoral Afro*) against racial violence from the police and discrimination in the city of Quito (see Ocles, 2009). This led to the implementation of the National Day of the Afro-Ecuadorian People and the recognition of Alonso de Illescas as an Afro-Ecuadorian national hero since 1997. In this context of moving away from multiculturalism, the homogeneity of the mestizo-nation was discursively overcome, recognizing ethnic diversity, and including Afro-descendants as citizens with collective rights since the Constitution of 1998 (see Góngora Mera et al., 2019). In this sense, “spiritual citizenship” is a tool for political mobility and access to rights that historically were and are still denied to Afro-descendants. Spirituality and religious practice have a historical connotation of freedom and resistance. For instance, the canonization of Saint Martin in 1962 took place in the context of the Civil Right Movement in the United States, where Vatican II initiated a series of reforms by the Roman Catholic Church to address issues of “race” internationally and condemn all forms of racial injustice. Saint Martin had become an icon of resistance and was used to promote interracial harmony, racial justice, and improved race relations (Murchison, 2002, 603; Cussen, 2014). Other example, the 3-day celebration of John the Baptist in Curiepe (Venezuela) by the Afro-descendant communities or the outstanding celebration of Saint Martin in Canchimalero in Esmeraldas (Ecuador) by the Afro-descendant communities from the Pacific coast of Ecuador and Colombia takes place in territories that were used for slave labor, so their celebrations have been having a strong sense of resistance and euphoric freedom, since the religious celebrations for the saints implied “days off” from slave labor (Guss, 1993; Antón, 2014; Rowe, 2019). In the oral memory, the days for celebrating the saint are “days off” and were the only days when the ancestors were free from white domination and control; that is why, strategically, the enslaved were trying to “gain days” to celebrate the catholic saints (García cited in Antón, 2014). Within the strategies of cultural resistance, the enslaved used the Catholic religion as a way of preserving their Deities, Orishas or spiritual forces. In fact, African Deities and Orishas were hidden in the catholic Saints and virgins, creating a religious syncretism of Indigenous, African, and Spanish roots (see Antón, 2017).

In the cultural or religious celebration, it is also possible to show how racialized and marginalized subjects in society use their cultural, social, economic, and symbolic capital (see Bourdieu, 1986) in order to create a space of articulation that brings together various actors, where they themselves can generate communities, and “place of enunciation” and “spiritual citizenship” from where they can speak for themselves, tell their story with their own voice. They are undoubtedly spaces of empowerment and political action, which allow the creation of counter-narratives and representations outside the hegemonic “racialized regime of representations” (Hall, 1997, 245). The “place of enunciation” is the space of power. Hall (1997, 263) indicates that the “*discursive*” form of power, which operates as much through culture, the production of knowledge, imagery, and representation, as through other means. It is *circular*, it implicates the subjects of power as well as those who are subjected to it. In this sense, although the “place of enunciation” could be a space with little power, nevertheless, it is a space that has power. This is the case of the Community of Saint Martin & The Martinas, the reason for this study. This group of Afro-Ecuadorian women sometimes overcome their differences between being “invaders,” “reinvaders” or “deed holders,” create social cohesion and community in the neighborhood by strategically using spirituality and religious practice to carry out their cultural, social, and political actions. Indeed, the Community of Saint Martin & The Martinas with its actions produces “places of enunciation” and “spiritual citizenship,” reflecting their situation as women and as Afro-Ecuadorian or Black women, seeking solutions to their problems both in the neighborhood and within Ecuadorian society. It is without a doubt a space of “spiritual citizenship,” which allows the creation of representations often linked to *Negritude*, Africanity, Afro-Ecuadorianity, gender and racial empowerment, the same ones that are located outside and against the hegemonic “racialized regime of representation,” which until now has positioned the Afro-Ecuadorians as the “ultimate others” (Rahier, 1998, 422).

“COMMUNITY OF SAINT MARTIN” & “THE MARTINAS”

For religious activities, the group of Afro-Ecuadorian women present themselves as the Community of Saint Martin, and for political activities as The Martinas, since 2018 they use the name “*Martinás de Piedras Negras*.”

As the Community of Saint Martin, they belong to the *Pastoral Afro*. The relationship with *Pastoral Afro* has allowed The Martinas to become acquainted with Black organizations in the city and with the African Diaspora at the international level through “transnational spiritual networks.” The services that *Pastoral Afro* offers by organizing meetings of Afro-Ecuadorian families, educational and training workshops, and even the creation of the *Instituto de Formación Afroecuatoriana* (IFA), provide tools to educate and support the positioning of the ethnic and gender identity of these women and expanding their social, cultural, economic, and symbolic capital.

As The Martinas they collaborate with the *Federación de Organizaciones Negras de Pichincha* (FOGNEP), the *Coordinadora Nacional de Mujeres Negras* (CONAMUNE), the Municipality of Quito and international organizations. This relationship has allowed them to participate in the meetings, political debates, and training courses that the institution provides.

Since the creation of the community in 2005, The Martinas try to meet twice a month. One meeting is organizational and the other meeting is to visit families in the neighborhood. The Martina’s work is based on listening to the problems that the families might experience in the neighborhood, in the schools their children attend, or in their places of work. They counsel families on their rights and provide a network of contacts to help them find legal advice or access educational, cultural, or work opportunities. In the event of separation or divorce, The Martinas support women in filing alimony proceedings. In cases of gender violence, they support women in filing complaints with the police, look for organizations that can assist victims, or simply create “safe spaces” to talk through grief and emotional pain. The most important aspect is that they generate empowerment processes through spirituality, solidarity, sharing experiences and demonstrating that it is possible to get ahead and enforce their rights as Black or Afro-Ecuadorian woman.

Alba, as the leader of the group, pointed out that her mission as a Martina is to make sure that the women of the neighborhood who have problems know their rights as women, as single mothers, and as Afro-Ecuadorians. In fact, during this period of extreme racial violence in the neighborhood, which ended with the murder of Juan Pabón, Alba also experienced separation from her partner and with it, having to face the costs of caring for her daughters alone. Alba learns about her rights and decides to file a lawsuit for payment of alimony.

The problem is definitely that the women were living in submission, but it is because we did not know our rights. We did not know (...) what is good and what is bad, because, so to speak, they painted us or they colonized our minds in a way that, as the Indigenous people say, “despite being your husband, he hits you and kills you,” so you live colonized by that, and in this way, you yourself assume an attitude. When you assume a cultural identity, you have better arguments to interpret a lot of things in life and to overcome many things (Alba Pavón, Interview, August 2012).

Alba advised the women of the neighborhood to access their rights, mainly the payment of accumulated alimony for years, which generated significant economic improvements for the families of the neighborhood. Many of these women decided to be part of the Community of Saint Martin & The Martinas, and with that, they began to participate in women’s meetings and political and religious activities. In this process, they assume a gender and ethnic identity that allows them to understand how to overcome these barriers and stop “living in submission” by starting a process of “decolonization of the minds” through self-empowerment and the use of rights, information, knowledge, and their social and cultural capital.

In addition, The Martinas hold multiple celebrations: Among others, Mother’s Day, Children’s Day, in November they celebrate Saint Martin and in December they celebrate the Christmas Novena with a Black baby Jesus. However, the most representative and recognized event by the people of the neighborhood and the surrounding areas is the feast of Saint Martin.

The strategic use of Saint Martin allows the positioning of Afro-Ecuadorian people in the neighborhood as devotees, as good, humble, organized people in support of the community and this contrasts with the negative racial stereotypes associated with the Afro-descendant population in the neighborhood, especially those living in the lower part. In the neighborhood, Afro-Ecuadorians in the lower part are associated with disorder and poverty, they are considered aggressive, uncultured, and thieves. Even the Afro-Ecuadorians from the upper part associate the other Afro-Ecuadorians from the lower part with these stereotypes. In contrast, the Afro-Ecuadorians from the lower part position themselves as invaders, re-invaders, or founders of the neighborhood, as a family, as good people who worked hard to improve the conditions of the neighborhood, even though so far, they do not have title deeds (Comments from neighborhood residents, August 2012). That is why the use of the image of Saint Martin allows a positive positioning of the Black population of the neighborhood. This produces a collective ethnic identity as an Afro-Ecuadorian, positioning *Negritude*, Africanity and practice “spiritual citizenship” based on “transnational spiritual networks.” Indeed, The Martinas indicated that the connection to the images of Black Saints including Saint Martin came through Sister Mary from Kenya, who was visiting the neighborhood doing catechesis together with other Comboni missionaries. Sister

Mary even gave the leader of The Martinas, Alba, the image of a Black Jesus and the image of Saint Martin. The Martinas have two images of Saint Martin: A large one that they call Saint Martin “El Grande” (the Great), which was bought in Peru with the financial support of The Martinas and the religious parish and is used in the procession and the Afro Mass, and a smaller one that they call Saint Martin “El Peregrino” (the Pilgrim), which is used in the novenas in his honor and when The Martinas visit the families in the neighborhood. The image of Saint Martin “the Pilgrim” allows them to get close to the Afro-Ecuadorian, mestizo, and Indigenous families located in the upper and lower part of the neighborhood. The Martinas even have their own prayer, which on the one hand highlights their collective and multiple identities as “Black or Afro-Ecuadorian women,” as “single mothers,” as “working women”—most of them as domestic workers—, and on the other hand, their ethno-racial and class identification with Saint Martin because of his Blackness, poverty, and humility. This special prayer for Saint Martin is normally used when a woman in the community has a problem or a difficulty:

God bless those women who are constantly struggling to sustain their families.

God bless those women who work to improve the quality of life even forgetting themselves.

May God protect The Martinas who have been victims of abuse, humiliation and suffering caused by malevolent and cruel people.

May God bless those women who have given everything for their loved ones without expecting anything in return.

May God protect The Martinas for being followers of Brother San Martin and may they be worthy of his path because of their humility (Diary of The Martinas).

The prayer shows how The Martinas perceive women and themselves, who are represented as responsible for the household’s sustenance, as women who fight not only for themselves but also for their community. This deconstructs the gender stereotype of the male provider, positioning the woman as responsible for the family and economic independence but also reproduces some gender roles that linked women with care, support, and sacrifice. And on the other hand, the ethno-racial and class aspect, since they recognize themselves as Black, poor women, who suffer mistreatment and humiliation because of the “matrix of domination.” In the prayer they ask for protection of The Martinas for being followers of Saint Martin and the path they have chosen to follow.

THE CELEBRATION OF SAINT MARTIN DE PORRES

Novena

The preparation of the novena, procession, Afro Mass, and fiesta is begun approximately a month in advance. The group of The Martinas are in charge of organizing the contents of each day of the novena and the Afro Mass, while the almost 12 *priostes* women and men organize the fiesta, which concludes the novena on the celebration of Saint Martin, on the 3rd of November. The *priostes* are the benefactors of the religious celebration, thus contributing financially to it. For those who participate with devotion in this festivity, it is an honor and a privilege to be elected. Each year, a *prioste* is also chosen. This has a very important meaning for the community and the *priostes*, and it brings a great sense of pride and commitment to the fiesta and the saint. Being a *prioste* implies an economic status since the fees for the party are high, but it also implies a symbolic status, since the whole neighborhood recognizes the *priostes*, greets and respects them. For the male *prioste*, there is a link between social and economic recognition and does not necessarily have a religious connotation. The male *priostes* only participate in the organizational meetings of the *priostado* “because they talk about money,” the *women priostes* or the wives of the *priostes* always participated in the novenas, which is evidence of a marked gender division in the participation of the meetings and novenas. While the *priostes* have economic capital, The Martinas have cultural capital since they have the knowledge required to perform the novenas: prayers, songs, the life of the Saint and reflection. Both The Martinas and the *priostes* have an important symbolic capital within the neighborhood.

At one preparatory meeting, the contributions necessary to buy the offerings were discussed. One of The Martinas proposed “collecting alms for the Saint” (Field Diary, Martina’s Meeting, September 2012). Others suggested that each contribute an offering, and still others proposed that everyone contribute five dollars, including the *priostes* of Saint Martin. Finally, it was decided that The Martinas would be in charge of the offerings, while the *priostes* each contributed 150 dollars to fund the organization of the celebration. This shows that the image of the Saint not only has symbolic, cultural, and spiritual value, but economic value as well. This type of religious celebration implies the circulation of a significant amount of monetary and symbolic capital for the participating families.

Each year a theme is defined for the Novena, the themes are associated with the different values of Saint Martin. In this occasion (2012) the theme of the Novena was the humility of Saint Martin as an example for the Black community. “Talking of humility and that to be humble one must have integrity, honesty, simplicity, and respect for others” Alba stressed (Field Diary, Martina’s Meeting, September 2012).

The novenas usually take place at eight in the evening. Saint Martin “the Pilgrim” accompanies the novenas and is placed on the altar of the houses surrounded by flowers and candles. The ritual of the novena begins with a song, followed by an oration of thanks to God, whom they ask for blessings upon the house which they are visiting. They then proceed with a story from the life of the Saint—mainly about their gifts and miracles and a passage from the Bible—passages referring to humility, faith, and solidarity. The participants achieve a common reflection, applying the contents of the lessons to everyday life situations. They conclude with a final oration and a farewell song while holding hands. Both the opening and closing songs incorporate elements that revindicate the Afro-Ecuadorian identity, for example, it is mentioned: “as Afros that we all are, we feel the identity, donated by a past that today we want to rescue.” It is also indicated that “Black Jesus gives us strength in our great journey.” Alba insisted that it is important to know the origins they have as a people in order to know who they are and where they want to go, and that is why it is important “to rescue” the stories of their origins, to know their culture and their rights as an Afro-Ecuadorian people (Field Diary, Martina’s Meeting, November 2012).

In the novenas, The Martinas reflect on the life of Saint Martin, who lived in a context of colonialism and slavery, in which Black people could not become priests, regardless of whether they were slaves or free. The Martinas emphasized that because of the color of the saint’s skin it was not easy for him to enter the church, however Saint Martin surmounted these barriers of “race” and status and was able to become a lay brother: “He had to enter as a *donado*,” explained Alba, because at that time they did not accept Blacks in religious institutions (Alba, Field Diary, Novena Meeting, November 2012).

In the novenas, it is common to hear connections between the life of the Saint and the lives of The Martinas: poverty, discrimination due to their skin color or hair type or the clothing and shoes they wear. The life of the Saint teaches them to let go of material things and strengthen themselves in the spiritual, which gives the lives of the faithful meaning, when they live in very difficult conditions and fulfil subordinate roles in their work, like the Saint did: “He had to endure racism and discrimination like us,” “he had to do the most humble tasks like us,” and in spite of everything “he finally came to be recognized as a Saint by the Catholic Church and by the whole world” (comments of The Martinas, Field Diary, Novena Meeting, November 2012).

In these reflections Saint Martin becomes an example to follow, a symbol of resistance but also of denunciation, with regard to many of the participants relating their experiences of racism and discrimination, in which, frequently “the Black race has to suffer and lower its head,” and in which these practices are normalized in the society: “They have insulted me so often—for being Black—that like Christ, I don’t let it affect me” (The Martinas’ Novena Meeting, November 2012). One Martina, on the other hand, said that no one had the right to humiliate others, mentioning afterward that both racism and discrimination are prohibited and can be punished by law (Martinias Novena Meeting, November 2012). Alba pointed out that “humility that one can demonstrate as a person is one thing, and humiliation is another.” She explained that “we do not live in the same century as Saint Martin; now we can be humble, but no one has the right to humiliate us” (Alba, Novena Meeting November 2012).

Indeed, in the colonial period not only the enslaved, but also free Black people like Saint Martin faced cruelty and mistreatment because of racial prejudice (Rowe, 2019, 185). Saint Martin cruelly self-flagellated to save himself from his sins and “cleanse” his soul. The hagiographies written about Black Saints in the 17th century usually began their works about Black saints by invoking widely known Christian ideas of “light” related with the soul and “dark” with the Black body. However, those who experienced the “truth of God” lived in “light” rather than darkness, regardless of physical appearance (Rowe, 2019, 181). Hagiographies tried to use these elements so that despite their Blackness, Black Christians could attain heroic virtues and holiness and with this to defuse the audience’s potential rejection of Black saints because of racial prejudice; the color of a person’s skin or the place of birth was irrelevant to God, relevant was the state of the person’s soul (Rowe, 2019). In the hagiography of Saint Martin, written from Medina in 1673, Saint Martin’s soul is represented as “white” and is associated with the prestige and power of the Spanish/ Creole class by the nobility of his paternal lineage, while his body is “dark” and associated with his mixed lineage of his slave mother and with the servitude, humiliation, and submission of the lower classes (Brewer-García, 2012, 24). For The Martinas “to be humble” is associated with poverty, leading a simple life, offering help without expecting anything in return, while humiliation is related to mistreatment because of their Blackness and class; yet, for them “being humble” does not mean accepting mistreatment, insults, or racial discrimination. The message left by The Martinas in the novenas is clear: times have changed, and now racial discrimination is punishable by law, no one has the right to treat them badly or discriminate against them because of their social condition or “race.”

Procession

On the final day of the novena, the procession takes place. The procession has a great significance for the devotees; it is interpreted as a connection to the image of Saint Martin: To be blessed by its protection and its miracles. Saint Martin “the Great” is positioned on an altar of roses in the street where the church is located.

FIGURE 1 Procession in honour of Saint Martin de Porres, neighbourhood Caminos a la Libertad, Quito, November 2012. Copyright Rocío Vera Santos, 2023.



While the image of Saint Martin “the Pilgrim” accompanies the procession in the hands of a Martina proudly dressed in an outfit made of cloth brought especially from Africa. Each year, a new *prioste del Santo* is chosen. This *prioste* carries a tray with the cape for the Saint. One of the women of the neighborhood carries a picture of the “Virgin Mother of Africa,” also called the “*Virgen Morena*” and then passes the picture on to a boy from the neighborhood. Saint Martin “the Great” is later transported to the church by a young Afro-Ecuadorian, who leads the procession together with the child. While they walk, they sing, pray, and leave a trail of rose petals until reaching the church where they celebrate the Afro Mass (Field Diary, Procession, November 2012) (see Figure 1).

THE AFRO-ECUADORIAN MASS

The Afro Masses show a religious syncretism with African, Indigenous, and Afro-Ecuadorian cultural elements. The Afro masses were incorporated into the religious celebrations within the *Pastoral Afro*, adapting songs, music and dances from the traditional communities of the Chota Valley with the Bomba or Esmeraldas with the Marimba.

Upon entering the church, a youth presents the statue of Saint Martin “the Great” to the priest, and it is placed in front of the altar. The image of Saint Martin “the Pilgrim,” the picture of the “*Virgen Morena*” and the new cape for the Saint are placed on the table of the offerings, which are made up of two white candles, wine, sacramental bread, and fruits and vegetables “of our earth” (Field Diary, Afro Mass, November 2012). (see Figure 2).

It is understood that the religious ceremony is the moment of the presence of the Saint, as a transcendental figure descending from heaven. The dance of the offerings is performed, and is considered a “sacred dance,” because through it, the offerings are presented in a symbolic manner. The female dancers surround the altar with flowers and lit candles. In the Afro Mass, the candles are understood as instruments which transport light; they are the guides to the knowledge necessary for progressing along the roads of life. The white flowers symbolize love, joy, and hope (Field Diary, Afro Mass, November 2012).

In the ceremony, there is a moment to give peace, during which—in other congregations—everyone shakes hands with each other. This shows a certain distance. In the context of the Afro Mass they sing: “I am going to give you a Black embrace,” and hug each other, inviting the participants to share a space of communion, since “we are all children of God” and, thus, equal despite differences in “race,” ethnicity or class, transcending the social conflict between the inhabitants of the neighborhood; “we all need a hug, because God loves all of us equally” (Diary Field, Afro Mass, November 2012). The “Black embrace” can be read as an act of resistance and of imposing one’s presence in the neighborhood in a manner that is positive, inclusive, and fraternal.

Before the end of the ceremony, The Martinas and *priostes* are asked to go to the front, to thank them for the work they do in the neighborhood and for keeping the tradition of the novena, Afro Mass, procession, and celebration of Saint Martin alive. Without a doubt, this act creates a special symbolic status for those involved in the event.

The priest blesses the new cape of Saint Martin and places it on the saint. The *prioste* takes the image of Saint Martin in her arms, and once outside, both she and the participants place dollar bills of different denominations in the cape. In this way it is converted into a symbolic space of prayer and thanks, demonstrating the magical quality of the rite.



FIGURE 2 Table of offerings, Afro Mass, neighbourhood Caminos a la Libertad, Quito, November 2012. Copyright Rocío Vera Santos, 2023.



FIGURE 3 Saint Martin “the Great” and Saint Martin “the Pilgrim” in a wooden display case, neighbourhood Caminos a la Libertad, Quito, November 2012. Copyright Rocío Vera Santos, 2023.

Finally, everyone walks to the location of the celebration—on the same street as the church, that is, in the upper part of the neighborhood. The Martinas place Saint Martin “the Great” and Saint Martin “the Pilgrim” in a wooden display case, so that passers-by can see them and give alms and prayers to the Saint (see Figure 3).

The fiesta

The fiesta makes the encounter between believers and non-believers possible. In this occasion (2012) the fiesta includes *chancho hornado* (roasted pork, which is a typical food) and *chicha* (traditional drink which is made from ground corn kernels), music

provided by DJs, who only play the traditional music from the Chota Valley: Bomba, as the majority of the inhabitants are originally from this region, and *piñatas* for the children to play with.

For the participants, Saint Martin is the “patron saint” of the “Black race,” “*morena*,” “Afro” (Diary Field, Fiesta, November 2012), thus, he is a symbol of unity and of faith among the Afro-Ecuadorians and also with the other ethnic groups in the neighborhood. For one of The Martinas, also a *prioste*, Saint Martin represents the union and the organization of “all of the Afros and Blacks” (Diary Field, Fiesta, November 2012). This signifies the political and cultural aspect, but she also mentions that Saint Martin invites “us to get close to not just the Blacks but also the Indigenous people, *mestizos*, and whites” in the neighborhood (Diary Field, Fiesta, November 2012). Getting close to each other is highly relevant in a context of conflict and racial stigma; it is an invitation to live in harmony and cultural exchange. Another one of the participants described Saint Martin as being “of my race” (Diary Field, Fiesta, November 2012) which creates a positive positioning of the ethnic identity both at the individual and the collective level. And on the next day the fiesta continues, but this time in the lower part of the neighborhood, in the soccer fields. That is important because it shows that Saint Martin belongs to both the upper and the lower part of the neighborhood. For The Martinas, the Saint “can participate in the celebration” which, despite the cold night and the wind, continues until dawn the next day, with the presence of many more participants from neighborhoods close by, predominantly Afro-Ecuadorians (Diary Field, Fiesta, November 2012).

CONCLUSION

Turning to religious images allows the inhabitants of the marginalized urban neighborhoods to get organized and form spaces for dialog and for cultural, religious, and political expression. In these spaces, their organizers occupy a position of leaders with power, gaining the recognition and respect of all the neighbors and inhabitants, thus achieving a certain status. Religion becomes a kind of symbolic compensation which helps them to live, to leave a private or working environment where they usually play a subaltern role, and to enter a public sphere through the organization, in this case religious, whose political scope plays a leading role.

The figure of Saint Martin represents resistance and unity for the Afro-descendant population of the neighbourhood as well as in Ecuador and the African diaspora around the world in general. In the case of the community of Saint Martin & The Martinas, they have constructed a form of positive representation of the ethnically Afro-descendant group through the image of Saint Martin, thus countering the stereotypes and prejudices that are still entrenched in Ecuadorian society. Through their activities, they preserve the links between the groups in the neighborhood, overcoming at times class, racial, ethnic, and location differences. Their work is important, because in a context of serious racism and discrimination, by visiting the houses of Afro-descendant, Indigenous, white, and *mestizo* families, The Martinas create a “place of enunciation” and practice of “spiritual citizenship,” promoting social cohesion and expanding community ties. The Martinas spread the teachings about the life of the Saint, link facets of his life with their own histories and experiences and offer counselling on topics such as gender and ethnicity rights; they strategically employ religion and spirituality to carry out their political and cultural activities. With their actions, The Martinas are creating traditions and there is a constant production of new ideas, practices and representations which serve as tools for the inhabitants of the neighbourhood, both young and old, to position themselves as Black or Afro-Ecuadorian. Without a doubt, The Martinas maintain leadership in the neighbourhood, which in turn generates status and recognition for them. Their social capital is not only used for their own benefit, but also to support families facing problems marked by violence, racism, sexism, and discrimination. In this sense, The Martinas create community and “spiritual citizenship” and Saint Martin represents an icon for social justice and their rights as an ethnic group and as Black or Afro-Ecuadorian women.

ORCID

Rocío Vera Santos  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8281-868X>

ENDNOTES

¹ *Concertaje* or debt bondage was a kind of contract through which an Indigenous (or Afro-descendant) person was obliged to carry out agricultural work for life, hereditary and free of charge or for a minimum wage. *Huasipungo* was a small parcel of land. In exchange for the *huasipungo*, peasant families agreed to provide free agricultural labour and serve as domestic servants for the hacienda owner.

² Saint Martin (1579–1639) was born in Peru. His father was a Spanish American, while his mother was a former slave of African descent born in Panama. Saint Martin entered the Dominican Order in 1594. In 1606 he became a friar. Saint Martin was beatified in 1837 and canonized in 1962 (see Cussen, 2014).

³ In 2014 Alba Pavón received the Illescas de Oro Award from FOGNEP, for her work with children and adolescents, she founded the Dance and Theater Scholl “*Con Alma Africana*.” In 2002 she received the Manuela Espejo Award from the Municipality of Quito, for her struggle and work to demand women’s rights. That same year she was one of the protagonists of the documentary Piña, “Why is the Sky Blue?” about ancestral knowledge which was presented at the Julia Stock Collection in Berlin, Germany. In March 2023, at the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO-Ecuador) Alba Pavón presented the *Cimarrona* Exhibition: “I am black because the sun looked at me.”

⁴ The Comboni Missionaries of the Heart of Jesus is a Catholic clerical religious congregation of pontifical right. The congregation was founded on June 1 1867 by Daniele Comboni. In Ecuador, particularly in Esmeraldas, the presence of the Comboni Missionaries dates back to 1965 and in Quito to 1981.

⁵In the Ecuadorian context, *mestizaje* was understood as a process of acculturation of the Indigenous people to the dominant urban mestizo culture. Afro-Ecuadorians were excluded from the ideology of the mestizo nation (see Góngora Mera et al., 2019; Clark, 1999; Rahier, 1998).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Open access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

REFERENCES

- Antón, John. 2014. *Religiosidad afroecuatoriana*. Quito: Instituto Nacional de Patrimonio Cultural.
- Antón, John. 2017. *Celebraciones afrocatólicas en Ecuador. manifestaciones de la religiosidad popular afrodescendiente en las provincias de Esmeraldas y en el Valle del Chota*. Quito: Abya Yala.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1986. "The Forms of Capital." In *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by John Richardson, 241–58. New York: Greenwood.
- Brewer-García, Larissa. 2012. "Negro Pero Blanco de Alma: La Ambivalencia de la Negrura en la vida prodigiosa De Fray Martín de Porras (1663)." *Cuadernos Del CILHA* 13(17):112–45.
- Caicedo, José. 2006. "Representaciones internas y externas de barrios negro(as) en Quito y Cali. Dos estudios de caso en Carapungo y El Retiro." Thesis, Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar.
- Castor, N. Fadeke. 2017. *Spiritual Citizenship: Transnational pathways from black power to Ifá in Trinidad*. Duke University Press: Kindle-Version.
- Crenshaw, Kimberly. 1989. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1(8):139–67.
- Clark, Kim. 1999. "Raza, Cultura y Mestizaje. El Racismo oculto en la construcción de la Nación Ecuatoriana, 1930-1950." In *El racismo en las Américas y el Caribe*, edited by José Almeida, 14–35. Quito: Abya Yala.
- Cussen, Celia. 2014. *Black Saint of the Americas: The Life and Afterlife of Martín de Porres*. Cambridge University Press: Kindle Edition.
- De la Torre, Carlos. 2002. *Afroquiteños, ciudad y racismo*. Quito: CAAP.
- Dosch, Paul. 2010. *Demanding the Land. Urban Popular Movements in Peru and Ecuador, 1990-2005*. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Fernández-Rasines, Paloma. 2001. *Afrodescendencia en el Ecuador—Raza y género desde tiempos de la colonia*. Quito: Abya-Yala.
- García, Jorge. 1985. "Las Organizaciones de Pobladores en Quito (Análisis y experiencias)." *Ecuador Debate* 1(7):175–200.
- Góngora Mera, Manuel, Vera Santos, Rocío, and Sérgio Costa. 2019. *Entre el Atlántico y el Pacífico Negro. Afrodescendencia y regímenes de desigualdad en Sudamérica*. Madrid/Frankfurt am Main: Iberoamericana/Vervuert.
- Guss, David. 1993. "The Selling of San Juan: The Performance of History in an Afro-Venezuelan Community." *American Ethnologist* 20(3):451–73.
- Hall, Stuart. 1997. "The Spectacle of the Other." In *Representation. Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, edited by Stuart Hall, 225–90. London: Sage Publications.
- Hernández, Katty. 2005. *Sexualidades Afroserranas, Identidades y Relaciones de Género*. Quito: Abya-Yala.
- Hernández, Katty. 2010. *Discursos hegemónicos y tradición oral sobre los cuerpos de las mujeres Afroecuatorianas*. Quito: FLACSO-Ecuador, Abya Yala.
- Hill Collins, Patricia. 2000. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York and London: Routledge Classics.
- Moreno, Francia. 2014. *Mujer Afroecuatoriana como sujeto político*. Quito: Abya Yala.
- Murchison, Gayle. 2002. "Mary Lou Williams's Hymn Black Christ of the Andes (St. Martin de Porres): Vatican II, Civil Rights, and Jazz as Sacred Music." *The Musical Quarterly* 86(4):591–629.
- Newspaper Diario Hoy, March 28, 2004.
- Ocles, Juan. 2009. *La discriminación racial en el ordenamiento jurídico ecuatoriano*. Quito: Distrito Metropolitano de Quito.
- Puyol, Verónica. 2009. "La negritud como símbolo fundamental en la construcción de la identidad en las mujeres negras. El caso del grupo Africa Mía." Thesis, Universidad Politécnica Salesiana.
- Rahier, Jean. 1998. "Blackness, the Racial/Spatial Order, Migration and Miss Ecuador 1995." *American Anthropologist* 100(2):421–30.
- Rowe, Erin. 2019. *Black Saints in Early Modern Global Catholicism*. Cambridge University Press: Kindle-Version.
- Santillán, Alfredo. 2006. "Jóvenes negros. Cuerpo etnicidad y poder. Un análisis etnográfico de los usos y representaciones del cuerpo." Thesis. FLACSO-Ecuador.
- Serrano, Claudia. 2016. "Lugares de la memoria: producción social de territorialidades urbanas afroecuatorianas en Carapungo." Thesis. FLACSO-Ecuador.
- Vera Santos, Rocío. 2015. *Dinámicas de la negritud y Africanidad. Construcciones de la Afrodescendencia en Ecuador*. Quito: Abya Yala.

How to cite this article: Vera Santos, R. 2024. "Saint Martin de Porres "The Black Saint of the Afro-descendant community in Quito-Ecuador": Between segregation, racism, and black resistance." *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 29: 92–102. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jlca.12712>