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Source: *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (May, 1995), pp. 341-357
Published by: Blackwell Publishing on behalf of the American Anthropological Association
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/646706
Accessed: 18/05/2010 12:26

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# the cultural politics of blackness in Colombia

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## introduction

A decade ago, Benedict Anderson made this claim: "The dreams of racism actually have their origin in ideologies of *class*, rather than in those of nation" (1983:136). In Latin America and the Caribbean, however, ideas about race—that is, about people labeled as blacks, indians,[1] whites, and mestizos—have long been important in representations of nationhood (cf. Gilroy 1987:44). Certain ideas about race are commonly privileged at the expense of others, however: the idea of a racial democracy in Brazil, the Jamaican national motto of "Out of Many, One People," the Trinidadian national anthem's "Here ev'ry creed and race find an equal place," or the view that Colombia is, or will become, an essentially mestizo nation. In all these cases, equality and/or racial and cultural fusion are official and often popular representations. Blackness and indianness are not necessarily ignored: both have long histories and often form part of national representations. But colonial values that privilege lightness of skin color as a sign of social status or as the putative national destiny are still pervasive.[2]

In many countries other voices have contested these images, claiming discrimination exists against blacks and indigenous people and asserting "black power" or "indigenous authorities" (Findji 1992); these social movements self-consciously draw on roots of resistance that reach back into colonial times.[3] In Colombia, the mobilization of black people around issues including human rights, racial discrimination, history, and land has flowered in the last few years; the state has also created some institutional space for blacks and consolidated that for *indígenas*, indigenous peoples. This raises issues for the understanding of the cultural politics of blackness and nationhood in Latin America and the Caribbean, and for anthropology in general. First, how has such a mobilization come about in a country where the "invisibility" (Friedemann 1984) of blacks was so entrenched and where pervasive race mixture had apparently blurred racial boundaries to the point where mobilization was structurally inhibited?[4] How does black mobilization relate to indigenous peoples' organizations and to a state involved in redefining official representations of Colombia as a primarily mestizo nation? Second, how are anthropologists to relate to this kind of mobilization? In recent years there has been much debate about the invention of culture and the deconstructions of invention. Minority peoples seeking a space in national arenas of culture and power may resent anthropologists' assertions that their traditions and self-representations are "inventions." Ethnic mobilization seems to trade in the essentializations and reifications of identity and culture that anthropologists are determined to

*Recent political mobilization by blacks in Colombia challenges notions about the "invisibility" of blackness there and the structural difficulties of political mobilization. It also raises issues about the analysis of cultural politics and the deconstruction of cultural "inventions" without thereby invalidating them as a locus of ethnic solidarity.* [cultural invention, identity, black culture, politics, Colombia]

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deconstruct, especially when these involve reference to "race." Various solutions have been proposed to this dilemma, but I think none of them engage sufficiently with the political nature of the process they analyze.

In this article I look at the recent growth of the black movement in Colombia, tracing its history and its interaction with indígena mobilization and with the state, and analyzing the various competing representations of blackness that have emerged. This, in turn, lays the basis for a discussion of the issues I have enumerated in this introduction.

## early black organization in Colombia

Colombia has one of the largest black populations in Latin America. Especially notable is the concentration of black people in the poor, underdeveloped Pacific coastal region, where they form perhaps 80–90 percent of the population. The literature on blacks in Colombia is important but still relatively sparse, and even less exists on recent political mobilization.[5]

Blackness as a concept in Colombia predates the Spanish conquest, since black Africans, slave and free, were part of Iberian populations long before 1492 (e.g., Saunders 1982). Black slaves in Colombia and elsewhere were often simply called *negros* and slavers sometimes called *negreros* (Jaramillo Uribe 1968; Levine 1980). There is rather little evidence on how black people in colonial Colombia referred to themselves, but by the 19th century the black poet Candelario Obeso refers straightforwardly to *negros* (Friedemann 1984:524). Generally, however, the term *negro* was stigmatized in colonial and postcolonial society (Jaramillo Uribe 1968; Mörner 1967) and, for example, free blacks in the northern Pacific Coast region called themselves *libres,* free people, a usage that continues today (Sharp 1976; West 1957; Whitten 1974).

In the 1970s and with the emergence of organizations that alluded more assertively to blackness, some people began to use the term *negro* in a rather different way. These developments were mainly the work of a small urban intellectual elite of university students and graduates who identified vigorously as blacks and were influenced by radical movements in Latin America and elsewhere. A number of small and often transient movements appeared during the seventies, but two organizations still exist and are quite representative of the scene: the Center for the Investigation and Development of Black Culture, and Cimarrón (the National Movement for the Human Rights of Black Communities in Colombia). The first, based in Bogotá, was formed by students and other educated people from the Pacific Coast region. The organization became known for the production of a monthly newspaper, *Presencia Negra* (financed mainly by UNESCO) and for annual seminars aimed principally at *personal docente en cultura negra,* teachers of black culture. A number of books were also produced, mainly by the movement's leader, Amir Smith-Córdoba. Smith-Córdoba also gained notoriety by selling his newspaper in the city center and loudly addressing people whom he regarded as black (using a more North American than Latin American classification), calling out *"¡Hola, negro!"*—a practice that provoked hostile reactions from individuals. The Center for the Investigation and Development of Black Culture still functions, but with minimal funding, especially since UNESCO withdrew its financial support. The organization's platform is clearly the product of Smith-Córdoba's perception of North American civil rights movements that have mobilized around blackness.

The second organization, Cimarrón, has had a wider influence because of its more decentralized structure. It stemmed from a study group, Soweto, formed in 1976 by university students from the Pacific region living in Pereira, a provincial capital of the interior of the country. Cimarrón itself was formed in 1982 and consisted of study groups that were established all over the country under the auspices of the national headquarters in Pereira, and were comprised of people who identified themselves as black. The organization has even less funding than

Smith-Córdoba's agency and, consequently, produces only photocopied circulars and bulletins. It takes as its icon the *cimarrones,* runaway slaves of the colonial era who are cast as a symbol of the struggle for freedom and human rights, but it also takes as a model those aspects of North American movements—such as Black Islam, the Black Panthers, and Martin Luther King Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference—that members perceive as salient.

Both Cimarrón and Smith-Córdoba's organization have had a limited impact: they never involved the mass of people who might be classified—or classify themselves—as blacks: many of these were isolated in the Pacific region and were illiterate and poor, while others subscribed to the official image of Colombia as a mestizo society and a racial democracy. Nevertheless, these movenents are important in understanding how people have organized as blacks in Colombia and in analyzing the gradual changes in the representations of "black culture" that this involved.

The context from which these movements emerged involved both national and transnational elements (Fontaine 1981). In the 1970s in Colombia, regional indigenous movements were growing fast against a background of proposals for land reform, the reform of church-state relations, and the emergence of left-wing guerrilla groups (Findji 1992; Gros 1991; Pearce 1990). The civil rights and Black Power movements in the United States were also major influences, and both the Center for the Investigation and Development of Black Culture and Cimarrón make explicit reference to black U.S. leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. Of course, U.S. movements had already had an impact in Jamaica, Trinidad, and Guyana (Craig 1982; Nettleford 1970; Waters 1985): the Colombian organizations were part of a Caribbean-wide change. Also influential were the independence movements of various African states and the work of Léopold Senghor, president of Senegal (1960–80) and proponent of the ideology of *négritude.*[6]

Although the national context of political change was important, these organizations looked to other experiences and notions of blackness to inform their own positions. This created some difficulties. There were major differences between the militant separatist nationalism of the Black Muslims or the Black Panthers and King's more integrationist approach. Some of these movements overtly posited ideas of a black nation, however, thereby challenging standard notions of "American" nationhood, and all employed North American notions of blackness, which played on the relatively clear-cut definition of "black." On the other hand, references to African independence struggles also invoked specific ideas about national self-determination, the freeing of avowedly black identities from the colonial yoke, and the rediscovery of autochthonous African values.

The problem was that such a construction of blackness resonated poorly with the Colombian situation, even among many people who identified as blacks. Since the time of Colombian independence the official and widely accepted image of Colombia has been that of a nation of mestizos with, perhaps, remnants of "pure" blacks, indians, and whites, often seen as being absorbed into a steadily lightening mestizo majority (Friedemann 1984; Stutzman 1981; Wade 1991, 1993; Whitten 1974, 1985). The exclusive nature of this ideology was, of course, one target of black (and indigenous) social movements, but juxtaposing reifications of North American or African "black nations" with the official Colombian "mestizo nation" was liable to tip in favor of reaffirmations of Colombian nationhood; and any mention of black separatism—then as now—immediately drew accusations of "racism in reverse" not only from those who did not identify as blacks, but from many of those who did.

Out of this dilemma came the development of the ideology of *cimarronismo* by the organization Cimarrón. *Cimarrón* in Spanish literally means "feral" and is typically applied to something domesticated, like cattle, that has "run wild." In colonial times it was applied to runaway slaves or maroons (Price 1979:1). All over the Caribbean and Latin America, runaway slaves established fortified villages (called *palenques* in Colombia); in North America, where

control over slave runaways was greater, however, these communities had a lesser presence—perhaps their presence was less notable in the historiographical literature than in reality.[7] The perception that palenques played a greater historical role outside North America meant that they were more easily taken as symbols of Latin American experience.

Cimarronismo[8] took the cimarrón and the palenque as symbols of resistance to oppression and the continuity of African traditions, since palenques were relatively insulated from Hispanic society. Palenques are famed for their resistance, generally because they crop up in colonial records when the authorities mounted expeditions to crush them, and the martial overtones of cimarronismo harmonize nicely with African independence struggles and with the militancy of the North American and Caribbean black power movements—a clenched black fist is one of the images Cimarrón uses in its publications. Palenques tended to form in certain areas, and there are indications that links existed between them, so the image is more of a network of communities than of a nation. Indeed, cimarronismo goes further than this with the Cimarrón slogan, "Let us make of every community an organized palenque and of every black person a cimarrón": it is a network of individuals as well as of communities.

The symbols associated with maroons were not confined to Colombia: it had international connotations. In Jamaica, an organization called Abeng (from *abeng,* the cowhorn bugle used by 18th-century maroon warriors) was formed in 1969 in the heat of the Black Power movement there (Nettleford 1970:131; Waters 1985:95); in Brazil, from the late seventies Quilombismo drew on the image of the *quilombo,* or Brazilian maroon community (Nascimento 1980); and in Haiti in 1968, Duvalier had erected a monument to the *marron inconnu* (Nicholls 1979:229). In Colombia, however, the image of the palenque was all the more powerful because of Palenque de San Basilio, a village near Cartagena where the black descendants of a historically identifiable maroon community still live, speak a unique creole language, and remember their ancestors (Friedemann 1979; Friedemann and Patiño Rosselli 1983).

Cimarronismo constructs a history of Colombian palenques that is somewhat at odds with that decipherable from historical sources. These sources suggest that palenques were a richly varied set of communities. Some had trade relations with nearby haciendas, some requested priestly visits for religious purposes, some negotiated their own freedom with the colonial authorities. Occasionally, the term palenque was applied to very heterogeneous communities outside Spanish control: these included people identified by contemporary observers as indians and mestizos. In general, maroons did not fight for the abolition of slavery as such. Their struggle was ultimately waged in pursuit of their own freedom. But organizations such as Cimarrón represent a tradition of *cimarronaje,* in which all the palenques were crucibles of cultural resistance and a struggle for human rights. Although the cimarrones were not numerous compared to the slave population, the ideology of cimarronismo invokes a "community of suffering" (Werbner 1991:26), which invites people to connect certain aspects of their phenotype (their physical "blackness") to a history of oppression that is initially national but also continental and even global. This is what James Carrier (1992:198) calls a process of "ethno-Orientalism," that is, an essentialist construction by blacks of their own history and society. It is worth noting here that ethno-Orientalism is not necessarily a collective process. Not all Colombians who call themselves blacks identify with cimarronismo: to many it still smacks of separatism and opposes their vision of a future characterized by increasing integration and homogeneity; they subscribe to the widespread notion that the mixing process—understood in this view as the dissolution of all distinctions—is a democratizing process. This raises the issue of "authenticity" and "invention" to which I have already alluded.

## recent developments in black organization

During the 1980s, a rather different current of organization began to develop, accelerating rapidly around 1990 and still strong today. The representations of blackness involved, although

overlapping with the previous ones, have been influenced by indígena and state agendas. The effect of such influences reflects the complex dialectics at work in these cultural politics that go beyond the simple oppositions between colonizer and colonized. To understand these developments, two areas of background need to be sketched in.

**the Pacific: a "new dimension" for Colombia** Especially since the mid-1980s, the Colombian government has taken measures to increase linkages to the global economy. The Pacific coastal region, mostly abandoned by the state since the abolition of slavery in 1851, has assumed a new importance in this context. This region has been consistently exploited for natural resources such as gold, platinum, and timber. Most of these resources were ultimately controlled by foreign multinationals or by entrepreneurs from the interior of the country, often via networks of debt-credit relationships: these people would generally identify, and be identified by locals, as mestizos or whites. At the same time, large areas of the region had been declared a national reserve in a 1959 decree and the ownership of land is still largely unregulated (Wade 1993; West 1957; Whitten 1974; Whitten and Friedemann 1974).

Geopolitical dominance is reportedly shifting from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and Colombia wants to take full advantage of the change. Grandiose development plans for the Pacific region have been presented; these fundamentally consist of infrastructural projects: roads, ports, pipelines, railways, electricity grids, and an interoceanic canal.[9]

Existing forms of natural resource exploitation intensified during the 1980s, and this affected relations between blacks and indigenous people in the region. Since emancipation the former have steadily pushed the latter into the headwaters of the region's myriad rivers: relations have not been openly hostile, but neither have they been free from tension. Each group maintains fairly definite ethnic boundaries. In the Chocó province in Colombia's northern region, for example, blacks may refer to themselves as *libres* (free people), as *morenos* (brown people), or as *gente negra* (black people). All these are categories that are for blacks conceptually and referentially clearly distinguished from *cholo* or *indio,* their common terms for indigenous people. Relations between the two groups are mediated by occasional intermarriage and by relations of exchange and *compadrazgo* (godparenthood). The blacks are more closely tied to the cash economy, via gold mining and timber extraction, and to the local bureaucracy; they often act as a channel through which indigenous peoples may gain access to these spheres. In turn, indigenous people may loan the blacks land, sell them agricultural products, and provide them with traditional medical treatments (Córdoba 1983; Whitten 1974). As exploitation of natural resources intensified, those black people connected to the cash economy and seeking timber and gold began to encroach on lands that had previously been rather insulated from market forces. This created ethnic conflict with indigenous people. In a few areas, houses and canoes were burned.

The church was an important mediator in this conflict. Its Indigenous Pastoral Program had been instrumental in setting up organizations lobbying for the land rights of indígenas, notable among them OREWA, the Regional Organization of Emberás and Waunanas, formed in 1986 in the Chocó province of the northern Pacific region. It had also set up peasant organizations. While the names of these organizations—for example, ACIA, the Integral Peasant Association of the Atrato River, formed in 1984—included no overt references to blackness, they were set up by the church's Afro-American Pastoral Program to help "Afro-American" peasants organize in the face of rapid change and colonization. OREWA organized meetings in order to defuse the ethnic conflicts: in 1989 the First Meeting for the Unity and Defence of Indigenous and Black Communities took place and a joint organization, ACADESAN, the Peasant Association of the San Juan River, was born.

This alliance between blacks and indigenous people has been tenuous but significant. "Indians" have a rather different place than do blacks in the social order of Colombia. While

Colombia is officially a mestizo nation, indígenas have always had a particular—though by no means privileged—institutional and intellectual place, as exemplified in an 1890 law that defined them as minors to be "protected" and ratified separate *resguardos* (reserves) and local *cabildos* (councils) for them. Equally, indigenous history and ethnography are the focus of state institutions such as the Gold Museum and the Colombian Institute of Anthropology. The possibility of state recognition of the separateness of indígenas has therefore been greater than for blacks, who have never had this kind of status (Wade 1993:29–37). Modern indigenous political organization began earlier and, crucially, has better financing and advisory backup from national and international sources (Findji 1992; Gros 1991). As I will explain in greater detail, this discrepancy has prompted some Pacific coast black leaders to associate themselves politically with indígenas in an implicit effort to create an "indian-like" identity in the eyes of the state.

In sum, the intensification of development processes in the Pacific region created local protest and also engendered a tenuous but significant alliance between people organizing as indígenas and as blacks.

**political reform** Colombia's political system has been characterized by two-party rule since independence. Other parties have mounted transient electoral challenges to this arrangement, but guerrilla groups, formed from about the mid-sixties onwards, were the main threat throughout the seventies and into the eighties (Bushnell 1993; Pearce 1990).

In the early eighties, beginning with the government of Belisario Betancur, the state began a series of attempts to demobilize guerrilla movements and incorporate them into traditional politics. To date—and despite murderous repression of nonviolent left-wing organizations by paramilitary and, reportedly, government forces—several guerrilla movements have in fact demobilized; the best known was M-19, which became a political party in March 1990. One of the concessions that the government offered to guerrilla movements to facilitate the "peace process" was constitutional reform: the Constitution, in force since 1886, was rigid and restricted institutional change despite various reforms during the 20th century.

This process of political reform was not aimed overtly at what the state might have called ethnic minorities. On the contrary, in the negotiations that had taken place between the government and M-19 before the latter's demobilization, "there was no debate at all about the rights and territories of ethnic groups" (Arocha 1989b:14). Similarly, the government's National Rehabilitation Plan, another measure aimed at alleviating poverty and reducing violence, did not "propose solutions to violence [directed] against ethnic minorities" (Arocha 1989a:36). These initiatives did not include people classed as indígenas, much less people labeled as blacks. Some of the violent insurgence against the state, however, had been carried out by organizations such as the Quintín Lamé guerrilla movement, which took the name of a famous early 20th-century Paéz rebel and represented itself as an indigenous movement: indígenas thus had political leverage vis-à-vis the state (Findji 1992; Gros 1991; Pearce 1990). More generally, frontier colonization in Colombia has tended to encroach on blacks' and indigenous peoples' land. Issues of violence, the development of peripheral areas of the national territory, and the growth of ethnic protest were linked, pressuring the state to consider concessions to minority populations, and perhaps thus facilitate frontier development by defining some of the sources of conflict in those areas. In short, the process of constitutional reform created a vital forum for issues of ethnicity and nationality (Arocha 1989b; Findji 1992).

## the process of constitutional reform

The process of reform consisted of the deliberations of a Constituent Assembly, elected in December 1990. In the pre-assembly phase, groups such as Cimarrón lobbied those commis-

sions coordinating preliminary discussions. New groups also emerged. The First Meeting of Black Communities was held in July 1990, and from this was born the so-called Coordinator of Black Communities. More peasant organizations were set up in the Pacific region. Members of Cimarrón were involved in these organizations and in the Coordinator.

A document was produced by the Subcommission on Equality and Multiethnic Character in response to lobbying by black spokespeople and by academics who had studied *los negros* in Colombia and spoken up for their rights (e.g., Nina de Friedemann and Jaime Arocha). The document talked about "indigenous peoples, blacks and other ethnic groups" and made proposals for their rights to be protected by the new constitution. This document dispensed with the common academic and official practice of limiting the term "ethnic group" to people classed as indígenas.

During this preliminary phase, a number of black candidates for election to the Constituent specifically mentioned blackness or the Pacific region as part of their platform. Several candidates aligned themselves with traditional Liberal party politics. One the other hand, Carlos Rosero, an anthropology student from the Pacific region, represented the Coordinator; another candidate, Juan de Dios Mosquera, a mainstay of Cimarrón, occupied a lowly place on an alliance ticket formed around candidates of the Patriotic Union party, the legal political wing of FARC, the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces guerrilla movement.

Not one of these delegates was elected: funding was insufficient, and the vote for a black platform was divided among the candidates. Underlying these factors was the weak politicization of the issue of blackness in general. Two indigenous delegates were elected, and one of these, Francisco Rojas Birry, an Emberá from the Chocó, had campaigned from a platform that addressed both indigenous peoples and blacks in the Pacific region who, he said, faced common problems of colonization, land loss, and environmental degradation. Many people from the Pacific region voted for him because his platform was regional rather than "racial" in orientation and because the greater solidity of indigenous organizations and made his candidacy a safer bet. Lorenzo Muelas, the other indigenous delegate and a Guambiano from the Cauca region, had been a signatory to the subcommission document that had broadened the definition of "ethnic groups" to include blacks. Both delegates had several black advisers, two of them members of Cimarrón.

During the deliberations of the Constituent Assembly, the weakness of the ethnic alliance between people organizing around indianness and around blackness became obvious as the subcommission document was ignored: Lorenzo Muelas denied all knowledge of it, and then produced another document with an M-19 delegate, Orlando Fals Borda, which did not mention "blacks" at all and restricted its proposals to "indigenous peoples" (*pueblos indígenas*) and "ethnic groups," without defining the latter term.[10] The general tone of the assembly denied that people labeled as "blacks" had any status as an ethnic group. Other delegates asked how many ethnic groups there were among the blacks, a question based on notions of ethnicity drawn from the history of politicization of indianness—and one that Muelas or Rojas would have easily answered in that context. The head of the Colombian Institute of Anthropology declared that *los negros* were not an ethnic group but were peasants and proletarians.

The new Constitution, ratified on July 5, 1991, contained clauses recognizing the "multiethnic and pluricultural" character of the nation, which theoretically helped the cause of people seeking to push blackness into the political arena (Article 7). "Indigenous communities" won concrete prizes, such as the right to elect two senators to Congress (Article 171). One concession, however, was made to "black communities." This was Transitory Article 55, requiring the promulgation of a law (subject to study by a government-created special commission) that "in accordance with their traditional production practices, and in areas to be demarcated by the same law, recognizes collective property rights for black communities which have been occupying *tierras baldías* [public or state lands] in the rural riverine zones of the

rivers of the Pacific Basin." The law had also to establish "mechanisms for the protection of the cultural identity and rights of these communities, and for the promotion of their economic and social development." The law also specified that its provisions might apply to other regions of the country which "presented similar conditions," without clarifying how this could transpire (see Presidencia de la República, 1991:162–163). The article dictated that Congress had to pass the law by July 5, 1993.

## after the new constitution

Not surprisingly, following the ratification of the new constitution, political organization in the Pacific region intensified: the main aims were to publicize the article and to get representatives from the region's black communities onto the Special Commission formed to draft the requisite law. Although some of the individual blacks involved were not from the Pacific region, community organization was centered there. The church, Cimarrón, and the old Coordinator (now renamed the Organization of Black Communities) were all active in the process, and government development organizations also became marginally involved as community organizations that took an interest in the article sprang from their development programs. In this efflorescence of association, land rights were the main focus of attention but a cultural and ethnic dimension generally also appeared. Some of the priests involved were local members of Cimarrón. The community-based didactic workshops arranged for peasant associations by Cimarrón, the church, the Organization of Black Communities, and even the government development corporations, devoted some time and resources to the history of Africans and their descendants in Colombia, showing videos with titles such as "The African Presence in Colombia" or playing recordings of songs called "Roots" or "Black Claims."

Throughout this phase, organizers presented the past suffering and resistance of black people as part of the reason why black people should organize to promote new claims to land rights and recognition of cultural specificity. One of the central tenets of groups such as Cimarrón and Smith-Córdoba's organization—and of more academic supporters of black mobilization (e.g., Friedemann 1984)—is that blacks have given but have not received: they have suffered the injustices of slavery and have helped build the nation by contributing to its culture and material fabric, but have been objects of discrimination or—at best—have simply been ignored. The issue of ownership follows naturally from this observation of inequity: blacks have a right to a part of their nation by virtue of their historic labor and suffering, but in the Pacific region they rarely own legal title to the land they have been working since before abolition (cf. Williams 1991).

Detailed work remains to be done on the construction of local collective identities, but it is clear that recent initiatives often fall on fertile ground. Around Tumaco, in the southern Pacific region, land conflicts have been violent at times as capitalist shrimp-farmers destroy mangrove swamps and let saltwater waste run onto peasants' farmland in their attempts to cash in on a booming international market. Since the shrimp-farmers are mostly whites and mestizos from outside the region, while local peasants are blacks, the notion of fighting for rights for black communities harmonizes easily with local experiences. I interviewed women who had started small production cooperatives in the same area with the support (advice and funding) of governmental agencies and nongovernmental agencies. Training programs (*capacitación*) involving these women include workshops on women's rights and on black identity and history; through workshops they form links with many other women's groups in the region. Notions of black identity thus intertwine with everyday economic activity, local and regional social relations, and gender issues.

On the official front, after some heel dragging the Ministry of Government issued a decree on April 1, 1992, that defined the Special Commission's membership. It listed a host of

community organizations that would be allowed to elect 12 delegates to the commission. Other delegates named were the vice-minister of government, officials from various government institutions (land reform agency, natural resources institute, geographical institute, and so on), plus a handful of party politicians and academics.

The progress of the commission was uneven and involved some confrontation. By the beginning of November 1992, black organization delegates signed a document refusing to assist at further meetings until they considered that the government had fulfilled its obligations as stated in the new Constitution and fully guaranteed the real participation of their communities. Negotiations resumed, and a bill agreed upon by both black delegates and the government was finally ratified by the president as Law 70 on August 27, 1993 (see Ministerio de Gobierno 1993). The law recognizes black communities as an ethnic group (although only in one sentence) and focuses on defining the titling of collective land rights to whole black communities on the specified rivers of the area defined as the "Pacific basin." The law also nominally covers other zones of the country where black communities occupy rural riverine public lands. The uncomfortable balance between regional specificity and national coverage is obvious: the law applies to all black communities living in specified conditions, but the emphasis on the Pacific zone reveals the primary focus. In terms of content, the law first awards landholding rights to black communities but then excludes community control over natural resources, subsoils, National Park areas, zones of military importance, and urban areas; it prescribes the ecologically sustainable use of resources by the communities (although resource use by others is not directly mentioned in this respect). Second, the law contains articles designed to improve education, training, access to credit, and material conditions for black communities: black community participation in these spheres is ensured via proposed black representatives on the National Planning Council, regional planning corporations, and a Consultative Commission to be created for the purpose of following the progress of the law; the Ministry of Government will also create a division for black community affairs. Discrimination against black communities is outlawed, and cultural specificity was ruled a requisite component in education for black people. Finally, the law establishes a special constituency to elect two representatives to Congress from the black communities.

The image of black society and culture exemplified in Transitory Article 55 and its consequent law is modeled on the indígena experience of political negotiation with the state.[11] Neither the article nor the law claim to represent something called black culture: they principally specify land rights for certain communities, giving limited material benefits to people whom most would identify as black; although they mention national coverage, this is equivocal and "ethnic group" is defined in terms of black communities living in specified legal and economic conditions. But since the article and Law 70 are to this day the only official statements that mention "black communities" explicitly, and since they have become the focus of political organization around blackness, it is necessary to examine how they implicitly reify an image of "black culture."

As it is represented by Law 70, black culture has a number of representative elements (Article 2): (1) the black community, defined as a "collection of families of Afro-Colombian descent which possess their own culture, share a history and have their own traditions and customs" that "reveal and conserve consciousness of identity that distinguish them from other ethnic groups" (the grammar of the clause, reproduced here, is full of confusions); (2) communally occupied land, defined as "ancestral and historic settlement"; (3) traditional production practices, or specified activities used "customarily"; and (4) the Pacific region itself. Blacks in the region are also given official status as invaders occupying *tierras baldías,* public lands. Cultural identity is located as secondary and derivative of elements relating to geography and economics.

This representation of black culture mirrors in many ways an image of the constituent elements of native American society in Colombia: the established indígena community,

communally held land, and production practices dating from time immemorial. The emphasis is strongly on historical rootedness, and black communities as defined in the law are officially charged with the protection of the environment, just as indigenous peoples are seen, and claim themselves, to be the guardians of the land. As with the politicization around indianness, the central feature is land rights, and it is no coincidence that in the Constituent Assembly, whatever the weaknesses of the indígena-black alliance, it was an Emberá and a Guambiano who were partly responsible for lobbying for rights for people from the Pacific coast. The critical differences were the inclusion of a regional focus and the institutionalization of the blacks as invaders, in contrast to indigenous peoples who have always had *original* land rights.

As with cimarronismo, the representation of blackness is guided by a specific political agenda and is partial. The locals' production practices are notoriously varied, spatially extensive, and nearly always include logging or mining in ways shaped by the changing cash economy. To specify "traditional" production practices in this case is difficult and became a point of contention between government advisers and black delegates. Commerce, for example, was not included as a "traditional" practice, despite delegates' arguments. Again, rootedness is a difficult point given that people are highly mobile in this region (Wade 1993; Whitten 1974). More to the point, of course, the image of black culture portrayed tends to exclude all black people who live outside the Pacific region: those who live in the Atlantic region or in the Cauca valley—not to mention the growing number living in cities in the interior of the country—have entirely different settlement and production patterns. Whereas cimarronismo invokes a national or even international community of blacks who share a history of suffering, the article addresses "black communities" with a common regional history of settlement and production and, more implicitly, of recent threats from exploitative colonization.

This official representation of blackness in Colombia has emerged through a complex set of relationships. Organizations push for recognition of their claims about blackness from the state, in ways often mediated by the church and other institutions, and largely following models of ethnicity set up by organizations that talk about indígenas and their history of relations with the state. State officials at many levels are interested in developing the peripheral areas where blacks and indigenous peoples live, creating an image of ecological responsibility (which it partially devolves to indígena and black guardians), and legitimating state power as democratic. All these state interests can be furthered by concessions made to blacks and indigenous peoples, and won, in part, through protest and resistance. For blacks, therefore, specific institutions within the state open a concessionary space that these institutions also try to control, using a preexisting indígena model, limiting the issue to regional land rights, and restricting the definition of "ethnic group" to a specific type of black community. Werbner (1991:15–17) outlines a scheme in which political organization proceeds from a growing network of affiliation, reaches an ideological convergence in which common goals and interests are defined vis-à-vis the state, and may then become a public protest movement. In a sense, organization around blackness in Colombia has already reached the second stage while the first stage is still nascent. This has occurred because, as Werbner rightly stresses, the process of politicization is inherently a dialectic, with the state generally constituting the main interlocutor and controller.[12]

In the new "multicultural and pluriethnic" nation there is still reason to think of Colombia as a mestizo nation with black and indigenous adjuncts located on special reserves (usually in peripheral areas). Indígenas have long occupied this position, and *some* blacks have now officially been incorporated into this model. Of course, this was not a simple imposition by the state: black community organizations, including many Cimarrón members, were instrumental in the negotiations, and the notion of community fits well with that of palenque. Nevertheless, some blacks in the Cauca valley region, for example, expressed little interest in the article since private ownership of land has been "traditional" there (Taussig 1980). Not all black communities agreed on this representation of blackness.[13]

Blacks are no longer as "invisible" as they once were (Friedemann 1984); the "smooth maintenance" of racial inequality has been disrupted (Hasenbalg 1979; Winant 1992); and while blackness has not entered mainstream politics in the same way as in Jamaica, Guyana, or Haiti, it has entered the political arena, albeit in a marginal position. Centuries of race mixture do not, then, necessarily paralyze ethnic mobilization by blurring the boundaries of a potential membership. As I mentioned in my introduction, some scholars have emphasized the structural ambiguities undermining black politicization: no one can agree on who is and is not "black," therefore it is impossible to mobilize a well-defined mass (see note 4).

In contrast, I argue that we must shift the focus to the "political economy" (Fontaine 1980, 1985) of cultural struggle. The emphasis is not now on the apparently simple structural "fact" of ambiguous collective identities, but on the political contexts in which identifications are made. The relationship of indigenous peoples and blacks to the state in Colombia has been very different from the conquest on: indigenous identity was institutionalized, black identity was not. It is this—more than the simple existence of race mixture—that has defined the possibilities of black and indigenous mobilization. These possibilities can change as people's identifications alter in new political contexts, and Colombian blacks now occupy an institutional place of sorts—a place partly won, partly conceded. The political economic context in this case includes the increasing colonization of frontier zones where blacks and indigenous peoples live, the state's interest in the Pacific as a geopolitical focus, and the need for an official image of ecological sensitivity to secure international development loans. It also includes ethnic minority mobilizations continentwide that set the tone for new definitions of democratic nations. Blacks and indigenous peoples directly affected by all these developments have mobilized in protest at land loss, environmental degradation, and discrimination. In response to such protests, the state is prepared to engage in redefinitions of nationhood and to open up spaces for ethnic minorities. The state is also, however, attempting to control ethnic minorities and indeed to channel them in directions that serve specific interests. A struggle over cultural politics ensues, and the result is increased black mobilization and the promulgation of Law 70. It is interesting to note, however, that Amir Smith-Córdoba, with his tactic of calling out *"¡Hola, negro!"* to people on the street, today encounters fewer hostile reactions than ten years ago.

While black mobilization can proceed in a context of structural ambiguity about who is "black," it seems to depend on representations of identity that tend to reify "blackness." To use Taussig's words in a different context, mobilization then becomes one of those things that "take on a life of their own, sundered from the social nexus that really gives them life, and remain locked in their own self-constitution" (1992:88).

One of the tasks of anthropological analysis is to show these constitutive processes at work, not as an end in itself, but because by their very nature these processes hide the basis of their construction and because they may exclude certain categories of people and even perpetuate essentialist notions of race. This deconstruction of cultural "inventions" may also undermine ethnic mobilizations that, as anthropologists, we support on the basis of equality and human rights. Some anthropologists tackle this dilemma by emphasizing that inventions are not invalid. Jackson (1995) encourages anthropologists to reject value judgments about culture as either genuine or spurious, and Clifford (1988:336–343) resists an emphasis on cultural wholeness and historical continuity in assessing whether identities are "valid." Neither author really addresses people's possibly hostile reactions to anthropologists' deconstructions of their traditions any more than does Hall (1992:24) with his view of the "production" and the simple recovery of identity as equally valid. Hanson (1989) emphasizes that all culture is invented so deconstruction need not invalidate. This argument did not prevent antagonism from some Maori people whose "inventions" were the subject of his analysis. Later, he contended that "invention"

was a "systematically misleading" term (Hanson 1991:450). Linnekin advocates applying the "thesis of cultural invention to Western discourse" (1991:448), and Gable et al. emphasize that "mainstream traditions are equally invented" (1992:802). The latter suggestions are especially valuable for the Colombian case, where there are two competing representations of blackness, one more state-sponsored or mainstream than the other. If I deconstruct the minority construction of blackness as continuous resistance, then I am bound to unveil the state-directed alternative of blackness as a regional rooted-in-community phenomenon. Rather than just reveal the fact of "invention"—which, as Hanson notes, is ubiquitous—the point is to uncover the political agenda and the political consequences of each construction: why and how it has emerged, whom it empowers, and whom it excludes.

This emphasis on political context is helpful in another way, because some of the efficacy of these constructions seems to lie precisely in their tendency to essentialize and even naturalize, excluding certain sectors of the black population and, in the case of cimarronismo, implying that "if you're black, your real nature is to resist." If I can reveal the construction of "blackness" as a *properly political process,* rather than something determined by the geographical concentration of blacks in the Pacific region (as in Law 70) or by the supposedly resistant nature of a reified construct called black culture (as in cimarronismo), then there is the possibility of destabilizing essentializations without losing the political force of mobilizations. People can find the motive force of their actions in their politics rather than in their or others' natures or in reified histories. Ideas about essences and ancestral history are bound to be important in ethnic mobilizations and challenges to mobilizations, but the significance attached to them may be lessened by an emphasis on the objective at which people are *aiming* rather than the place from which they *have come.*[14] This approach is as liable to find favor with the people mobilizing—as with anthropologists who, although loath to accept essentializations, support human rights and cultural autonomy.

This is all the more important when representations are connected to ideas about "race." To accept the identification between phenotype and history that cimarronismo makes runs the risk of colluding in the tendency of this ideology to essentialize blackness with its easy connection between an unproblematic physical appearance called "black" and a continuous history of resistance. As an anthropologist I may support cimarronismo's demands for cultural autonomy and a shift in Colombia's mestizo image that favors the reaffirmation of difference. As an antidote to the essentialization of blackness I can contribute an understanding of the complex political context in which affirmations of difference are made. For example, I can emphasize how the change in a person's self-identification from "mulatto" to "black" is not a recuperation of a "natural" identity, a return to the fold, but is instead a result of changing social contexts, a choice made in the light of perceived common interests with other people making similar identifications. The problem here is that the deconstruction of racial identifications may be seen as part of a "postmodern critique of the 'subject' [that surfaces] at a historical moment when many subjugated people feel themselves coming to voice for the first time" (hooks 1991:28) and may thus be thought to silence this voice. This is a real dilemma, but I think it is possible to resist essentialist notions of an authentic black identity by showing the political contexts in which people choose, or are forced, to identify as black in different and varied ways. Not only can we articulate, we can also actively empower the basis on which people have formed collective identities by emphasizing how they have "actively constructed an elective community of belonging through a variety of practices" rather than expressing a "fully constituted, separate and distinct identity that was always already there" (Mercer 1992:33).

Supporting black mobilization in Colombia can take a variety of forms: destabilizing mainstream images of a mestizo nation, investigating and publicizing black history and ethnography, and participating in political negotiations. Nina de Friedemann and Jaime Arocha have been active in all these fields, for example. It seems to me also useful to publicize the

political conjunctures of identification as they occur so that blacks and non-blacks alike can see what is happening in Colombia as something that draws on the past. But far from being simply a recuperation of the past, a liberated expression of something present but repressed, these changes constitute something new, drawing on new political conjunctures; and these changes will be legitimated not so much by the past as by the future, not so much by what blackness was as by what it may become.

## notes

*Acknowledgments.* Research on which this article is based was carried out during the summer of 1992 with a grant from the British Academy. This supplemented earlier research throughout the 1980s. Earlier versions of this article were given at the Centre of Latin American Studies, Cambridge, England, and the Department of Social Anthropology, Manchester. I am grateful to my colleagues there for their comments. Thanks are also due to the many people in Colombia who provided me with assistance and information during research. Thanks also to the anonymous readers of *American Ethnologist.*

1. I purposely do not capitalize "indian" in order to parallel my, and others', use of "black," since they seem to me to be categories of the same order: neither is a national grouping, and both are culturally constructed and varying over space and time.

2. The literature on race and nation includes, on Latin America: Graham 1990; Skidmore 1974; Stepan 1991; Stutzman 1981; Taussig 1987, 1992; Wade 1993; Whitten 1974, 1981, 1985; Whitten and Torres 1992; Winant 1992; and Wright 1990. For the Caribbean: Brown 1979; Craig 1982; Deosaran 1987; Heuman 1981; Kuper 1976; Lewis 1983; Márquez 1989; Nettleford 1970; Nicholls 1979, 1985; Palmer 1989; Ryan 1972; Waters 1985; and Williams 1991.

3. I will not detail here the literature on indigenous resistance, but useful guides to texts on black resistance include Beckles 1988, Heuman, ed. 1986, Price 1979, and Whitten and Torres 1992. See also, for example, Campbell 1988; Price 1983, 1990; and Taussig 1978, 1980.

4. Analyses of Brazil by Degler (1971), Hasenbalg (1979) Skidmore (1972), and Toplin (1971) suggested that black mobilization was unlikely. In contrast, see Andrews 1992, Burdick 1992, Fontaine 1985, and Winant 1992.

5. Early texts include Escalante 1964 and West 1957. Whitten has written extensively on the Pacific coast region (e.g., 1974), and Taussig on the Cauca valley region (e.g., 1980). Nina de Friedemann has been very prolific (for example, her review of 1984, and Friedemann and Arocha 1986). Wade 1993 also contains a full bibliography. Arocha 1992 and Arocha and Friedemann 1993 have information on recent political developments.

6. See, for example, Nicholls 1979 on négritude.

7. However, see Price 1979:420 on North American marronage. See note 3 for literature on slave resistance generally. For Colombia, see Borrego Pla 1973; Friedemann 1979; Friedemann and Patiño Rosselli 1983; Taussig 1978, 1980; and other references in Wade 1993:Ch.5.

8. The term *cimarronaje* is generally used to refer to the practice of slave flight (although see Jaramillo Uribe 1968); the term *cimarronismo* is used to refer to the modern ideology that takes the *cimarrón* as its icon (Mosquera 1985).

9. In 1989, the Presidency of the Republic published *The Pacific: a New Dimension for Colombia,* outlining a plan that has not yet received funding. Road construction continues apace regardless. In the more recent *Plan Pacífico,* published by the Departamento Nacional de Planeación (DNP) in 1992, over 40 percent of the projected budget goes to infrastructure: energy, roads, and telecommunications. This supplemented the previous *Plan de Desarrollo Integral para la Costa Pacífica,* published in 1983 by the DNP and a government regional development corporation, a plan that had operated unevenly until then (Wade 1993:144).

10. For the text of this document, see Fals Borda and Muelas 1992. For the text of the subcommission proposal mentioned earlier, see Jimeno 1992.

11. A telling sign is Article 37, which specifies that the state should use, where necessary, "the languages" of the black communities. Since Palenque de San Basilio is the only Colombian black community that has a non-Spanish language, the use of the plural here is highly suggestive of an "indian" agenda.

12. In fact, in its definition of the Special Commission the government included Pacific region community organizations (apparently named by church leaders and other black organizations) that did not yet exist—"imagined communities" indeed!

13. Nevertheless, some of the black delegates on the Special Commission came from the Cauca valley and the Atlantic coast regions. There is perhaps an analogy with what Jackson (1991) observed in the Colombian Amazon, where lowland indians are having to represent themselves with images purveyed by highland indians who have more experience of political organization.

14. Of course this cuts both ways: we can challenge the racist link between essence and behavior, without thereby dismantling racists' hatred of blacks as a "different" group. This must be contested in moral and political terms.

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submitted December 22, 1992
revised version submitted August 24, 1993
accepted December 5, 1993