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Importing Ethnicity, Creating Culture

Currents of Opportunity and Ethnogenesis along the Dagua River in Nueva Granada, ca. 1764

Juliet Wiersema

In eighteenth-century Nueva Granada (comprising today’s Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, and Venezuela), the Dagua River region was a multicultural backwater inhabited by Europeans, Indians, and Africans. The greatest majority of the region’s residents, however, were African, brought against their will to extract gold along the river’s shores.

In this chapter, I attempt to sketch out a very preliminary notion of what emerging ethnicity looked like in a remote corner of the Spanish Empire in the final decades of colonial rule. In this essay, I argue that people forcibly displaced from West and Central Africa came to construct new societies and identities. Africans in the Dagua River region quickly adapted to the physical and political environment, controlling terrestrial and river commerce, effectively fighting Crown monopolies, purchasing their freedom, and establishing free communities. Africans’ ability to master an inhospitable landscape, together with their critical mass, the great need for their labor, the region’s remoteness, and the lack of Spanish colonial oversight all worked to create opportunities for both enslaved and free. On the margins of empire, people from elsewhere engaged in ethnic intermixing, laying the foundations for an emergent multicultural Afro-Colombian population. Their descendants would remain until the early twentieth century.

This chapter looks specifically at African ethnogenesis and place making along the Dagua River in the later eighteenth century. By focusing on a concrete geographic area at a specific moment in time, this study adds to the growing scholarship on emerging identities and ethnicities of frontier regions in the Spanish Empire. (For other case studies on emerging identities in this volume, see Chapters 1, 4, and 8.)

With the aim of teasing out subtle clues about ethnicity in the Dagua River region, I look to a large, hand-drawn, watercolor map with an extensive legend dating to the late Spanish colonial period (Map 11.1). This manuscript map of 1764, corresponding to today’s southwestern...
Map 11.1 Manuscript map of the Dagua River region (1764). This map, oriented with south at top and west at right, depicts an area of roughly 900 km² that begins southwest of Cali and ends in the port of Buenaventura. The Dagua River bisects the map horizontally, flowing into the Pacific Ocean at right. The largest settlement is the free town of Sombrerillo. Library of Congress, Geography and Maps Division, https://www.loc.gov/item/2001622517/.
Colombia, pictorially documents a gold-mining region and a vital corridor to the Pacific (Wiersema 2018). The map’s central feature, the Dagua River, was a fluvial highway linking the interior of the country to the port of Buenaventura. In this area, where acidic, humid soils hampered local crop cultivation (Romero 2017:25), the river acted as a lifeline to miners, slaves, and its few residents. A more critical examination of this cartographic work, together with information drawn from archival documents, reveals that Africans not only adapted to the local environment but quickly became central actors in the region’s economy.

Rendered in brilliant watercolor, the Dagua River map (60 × 86 cm) stretches across eight sheets of laid paper, depicting an area of approximately 900 km². Striking is the absence of towns, plazas, and churches, features that are ubiquitous on nearly every other map documenting the Spanish Americas. These omissions underscore the Dagua region’s great distance from larger administrative centers in Nueva Granada such as Cartagena, Tunja, and Santa Fé de Bogotá. Even Cali, the town nearest to the Dagua River region, lay beyond the parameters of the map.

The map is oriented with south at top and west at right, and the river is framed by dramatic color-coded topography: blue represents mountain ridges, green indicates dense jungle, and brown reflects steep escarpments. Along the river, haciendas, small settlements, and mining claims are marked by tiny structures. At the map’s center are the two largest settlements, the hacienda of Las Juntas and the town of Sombrerillo. Las Juntas was one of the few cultivable zones in the area and was a nexus point for the region, where goods like tobacco, meat, and aguardiente (cane brandy) were imported from Cali and other fertile parts of the Cauca Valley before they were redistributed to the mining regions of the Chocó (Martínez Capote 2005:38–39; Romero 1991:142; West 1952:112). The largest settlement on the map, Sombrerillo, was a free town whose residents worked as overland carriers (cargueros) and canoe polers (bogas), effectively linking the Cauca Valley to the port of Buenaventura (Lane and Romero 2001:35).

**THE DAGUA RIVER REGION: A VITAL CORRIDOR BETWEEN CALI AND BUENAVENTURA**

The Dagua is one of the few rivers that flow to the port of Buenaventura. From the beginning of the Spanish conquest, Buenaventura was identified
as a strategic port controlled by Cali’s elite. It was the only Pacific port that permitted access to the Andean interior (Valencia Llano 2014:235). Goods brought into Buenaventura from Spain via Panama would travel through the Dagua River region to Cali. Conversely, gold mined along the Dagua would sail out of Buenaventura, ideally to Spain. As such, the Dagua River area represented a potentially lucrative economic corridor. Getting to Cali from Buenaventura, however, was no easy task. One of the earliest documented Spanish attempts was made in 1541. Torrential downpours, rising water levels, impassable terrain, unnavigable paths, and a dwindling food supply thwarted every step of the journey. In the end, it took the party 30 days to arrive to Cali and cost the lives of 17 Spaniards and 20 horses (Arboleda 1956:1:46–47). While initially of interest to Spain, the Dagua’s isolation and its challenging topography relegated it a frontier region, one largely beyond the reach of colonial authorities.

If the Dagua River region was distant from the nearest town of Cali, it was seemingly light years away from Nueva Granada’s principal port, Cartagena. The journey from Cali to Las Juntas (depicted in the center of Map 11.1) could take up to a week’s time. Travel from Cartagena to Las Juntas, meanwhile, required around 50 days (West 1952:125) and necessitated the navigation of steep mountains, slippery paths, dense forests, and treacherous rivers. Apart from being time-consuming, the trip was costly and dangerous. A 1776 letter to the viceroy emphasized that getting from place to place happened only at tremendous expense and great risk to one’s life (AGN Militias y Marinas, tomo 126, fol. 203v [1776]).

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF NUEVA GRANADA

To better understand the peculiarities of the Dagua River region, it is worth briefly discussing the unusual nature of Nueva Granada itself. Nueva Granada was discovered and colonized in the first quarter of the sixteenth century, with the Caribbean coastal cities of Santa Marta and Cartagena founded in 1525 and 1533, respectively. Nueva Granada was not, however, established as a viceroyalty until 1719 (McFarlane 1993:26–28). Its first iteration was short-lived. By 1723 the Crown had concluded that the cost of maintaining it outweighed any benefits (McFarlane 1993:192). Another fifteen years would pass before this viceroyalty was reinstated, in 1738 (McFarlane 1993:194–195).
Nueva Granada was less densely populated than New Spain or Peru. In 1778–1780, only 800,000 people inhabited the entire viceroyalty. Its capital, Santa Fé de Bogotá (home to just 20,000), was one-fifth the size of Mexico City in 1790 and one-third the size of Lima in 1791 (McFarlane 1993:32–34; Miño Grijalva 2002:xiv). Differing from New Spain and Peru, Nueva Granada did not have sizeable indigenous, Spanish, or criollo representation. By the mid-seventeenth century, Nueva Granada’s indigenous populations had been decimated in many areas (McFarlane 1993:34). Its remoteness and its relative economic impoverishment meant there were few incentives for Spaniards to come or to stay. By 1770 nearly half of Nueva Granada was comprised of free people of mixed ethnicity (46 percent), with just over a quarter European (26 percent). Indigenous people comprised 20 percent of the population, and 8 percent were African enslaved (McFarlane 1993:34–38).

The viceroyalty’s dramatic topography (including three formidable mountain chains, which divide it vertically) made travel from the interior to the coast and vice versa unusually onerous (McFarlane 1993:40). Urban centers like Santa Fé de Bogotá and Tunja were not easy to get to from ports of entry, meaning that once the month-long trip by sea from Cádiz to Cartagena was complete, another one to two months awaited the traveler before reaching the capital of Santa Fé de Bogotá (Helg 2004:49). The roads most traveled were rivers (West 1952:123). Other areas were accessed by mule train and narrow paths, which washed away in the rainy season. All modes of communication were unreliable, hazardous, and slow (Helg 2004:49). Most of Nueva Granada’s population lived deep in the country’s interior (McFarlane 1993:32), yet travel to these parts presented formidable challenges to imperial administrators.

**IMPORTING ETHNICITY**

In the early period of discovery and colonization, the Cauca Valley (including the Dagua River region) was inhabited by dozens of indigenous groups and subgroups, many of whose origins remain mysterious (Romoli 1974:376). Sixteenth-century Spaniards described these Indians as docile and good-natured (Escobar 1991 [1582]:346), a factor that decidedly worked against them. In 1536 there were approximately 30,000 indigenous people, but by 1634 populations had dropped to 420 (Escobar
1991 [1582]:345; Romoli 1974:382). Indigenous numbers in the mountains near Cali also saw precipitous decline, falling from 8,000 to 600 (Escobar 1991 [1582]:346). While native people were afflicted by epidemics and exploitation (McFarlane 1993:34), decimation of the indigenous in the Dagua River region was attributed to forced travel between Buenaventura and Cali. In Gobierno de Popayán: Calidades de la tierra (1582), Fray Geronimo Escobar relayed that each Indian was obligated by his encomendero (holder of an encomienda, or grant of native labor and tribute) to make three trips per year transporting goods from Cali to the port of Buenaventura and bringing cargo from the ships in port back to Cali. The trip of 25 leagues (140 km) took 12 days each way, in part due to the condition of the terrain but also because each Indian was required to carry over 22 kilos (2 arrobas) of weight (Escobar 1991 [1582]:346). In the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, unsuccessful attempts were made to repopulate the area (Romero 2017:35–36).

Gold mines had been discovered in the neighboring mountains of Raposo (to the south) by 1579, leading to mining expansion along the Pacific (Valencia Llano 2014:236). By the late seventeenth century, mines had been established along the Dagua River. Many were prosperous by 1719, leading to an increased need for labor (Arboleda 1956:2:22; Colmenares 1975:101–105; Valencia Llano 2014:237). It was enslaved Africans who comprised this labor force as work gangs, or quadrillas (Barona 1986:61–66). Africans quickly became the majority of the Dagua region’s inhabitants.

**ETHNICITIES ON MAPS**

Ethnic realities are not explicitly inscribed on maps, but they can be gleaned from a careful reading of details (Leibsohn 2014). On the Dagua River map, the river and its streambeds, which were worked by African quadrillas, is our first clue to the African presence in this area. The roads, some of the worst in the Americas (many too narrow to accommodate mules), were traversable only by human porters, many of whom were African. The canoe depicted along the Dagua’s shores at the center of the map (Map 11.2) was a primary mode of transport in this region, one controlled almost exclusively by African polers. It is worth noting that the only human figures appearing on the Dagua River map are those navigating a canoe down the river’s rapids. Further evidence of African presence
can be found in the map’s largest settlement, Sombrerillo (Map 11.2). This free community was inhabited by families of free blacks, Indians, mestizos, mulattoes, and a few white merchants (Arboleda 1956:2:102; Lane and Romero 2001:35–36). At first glance, they appear nowhere, yet a closer reading reveals that the African presence is everywhere.

**ETHNOGENESIS: DEFINITION AND DISCUSSION**

Where specifically in Africa did the Dagua River region’s inhabitants come from, and what circumstances led to their successful adaptation to this new environment? (For case studies of successful adaptation in this volume, see Chapters 1, 4, and 8.) In the arrival and settlement of people
to this area from different parts of the African continent, can we find convincing evidence of ethnogenesis?

Ethnogenesis (from the Greek *ethnos* [ἐθνός], “group of people, nation,” and *genesis* [γένεσις], “beginning, coming into being”) has been defined as the formation or emergence of an ethnic group (*Merriam-Webster*). Ethnos refers to those sharing a common language, ancestry, culture, and/or territory (e.g., an ancestral homeland). Through the process of ethnogenesis, a group of people becomes ethnically distinct from others.

In their essay “Mapping Ethnogenesis in the Early Modern Atlantic,” James Sidbury and Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra (2011) note that enslaved Africans in the Americas were first enslaved in Africa through warfare. Most communities included enslaved people. African polities were constantly integrating ethnic outsiders before, during, and after the era of the Atlantic slave trade. Taking captives from their natal communities and forcing them to adapt to new cultures was an “endemic condition” in precolonial African polities, one that led to ongoing ethnogenesis (Sidbury and Cañizares-Esguerra 2011:185). In short, ethnogenesis was not an outcome particular to Africans displaced to the Americas because this phenomenon was happening much earlier in Africa itself. Given the histories of warfare and slaving in Africa, James H. Sweet has noted that ethnogenesis unfolded in West Africa much as it did in the Americas. Dislocated peoples, in their efforts to reconstitute social connections, often found themselves searching for the “broadest expressions of cultural sameness” (Sweet 2011:210).

**IDENTIFYING ETHNOGENESIS**

Given colonial realities—where local populations were annihilated and relocated and their lands repopulated through the introduction of non-native groups brought in forcibly or voluntarily—it seems reasonable to conclude that ethnogenesis took place across the Americas and in Nueva Granada specifically. Barbara Voss (2015:658) has emphasized, however, that ethnogenesis must be demonstrated, not assumed. In identifying ethnogenesis, we must determine (1) whether ethnic identities were important in a given context and (2) if ethnic identities were substantively transformed in the process.

For Nueva Granada, a primarily mixed-race society with a comparatively small percentage of Europeans and criollos, racial divisions mattered
much less than they did in societies with more rigid ethnic hierarchies (McFarlane 1993:38). From the 1778–1780 census, Anthony McFarlane identified four primary socioethnic categories: whites, black slaves, Indians, and “free people of all colors.” Whites, which referred to Spaniards, criollos (descendants of Spaniards born in the Americas), and Europeans (French, Italian, etc.), comprised 26 percent of the population. Indians, or those indigenous to the Americas, represented 20 percent. Slaves, or enslaved Africans, formed 8 percent of Nueva Granada’s population in 1778–1780 (McFarlane 1993:32–34, 353). The overwhelming majority (46 percent) was comprised of *libres de todos colores* (free people of all colors), a catch-all term that came to encompass various subgroups, including mestizos, negros, mulatos, zambos, pardos, and montañeses (Garrido 2005:167–168). As a socioethnic category, *libres de todos colores* underscored the race mixing that had transpired over generations, making it impossible to determine mixtures of ethnicity. (Nueva Granada’s large number of free people [46 percent] was equivalent to indigenous populations in other parts of the Spanish Andes [Garrido 2005:167–168].) Despite these attempts at classification, these socioethnic categories served only to further obscure the geographical origin and cultural affiliation of the people referenced.

In the Dagua River region, the demographic percentages were notably different from those in the larger Viceroyalty of Nueva Granada. Along the Dagua, Europeans and criollos made up just 3 percent of the area’s population, with Indians representing 9 percent and free people making up 17 percent. Significantly, enslaved Africans comprised 71 percent of the Dagua River’s population (McFarlane 1993:356). As the overwhelming majority (and in spite of their enslaved status), Africans were able to assert their rights and fight Crown policies that went against their interests. In the paragraphs that follow, we will examine who had migrated into the Dagua River region by the eighteenth century and from where they came. Later in the chapter, we will look at the emergent ethnicities resulting from this displacement.

**AFRICANS IN NUEVA GRANADA**

Africans were brought to Nueva Granada from West and Central Africa as a result of the Atlantic slave trade. The earlier trade (1570–1640) forced migration of people from Upper Guinea, Lower Guinea, and Angola
(Colmenares 1997:20–21; Mathieu 1982:160–161; Wheat 2011:12). The later trade brought individuals from a more concentrated area of the Lower Guinea Coast: the Gold Coast and the Bight of Benin, corresponding to today’s Ghana and Nigeria (Borucki et al. 2015:446). Slaves in the earlier period were sent to cities to undertake domestic labor. The later trade (specifically between 1740 and 1760), however, brought slaves to remote mining areas on the Pacific coast, specifically Chocó and Raposo, where they replaced the decimated indigenous labor force (Barona 1986:61; Colmenares 1997:41, 56; McFarlane 1993:75–76; Soulodre-LaFrance 2001:89–90). Their arrival to the area coincided with the exploitation of mines from 1714 to 1736 (Colmenares 1975:62).

**THE DAGUA RIVER REGION: A LOCUS OF ETHNOGENESIS?**

Africans brought to the Dagua River region came via Cartagena. From this Caribbean port, they were transported by canoe along the Magdalena and Cauca Rivers (see West 1952:124). Africans undoubtedly arrived through back channels as well, coming into the port of Buenaventura (Valencia Llano 2014:240), the body of water featured prominently on the Dagua River map.

Information on the African origins of the Dagua River region’s inhabitants can be gleaned from slave censuses and mining inventories, where slaves are listed by first name and ethnonym, or “nation” designation. Ethnonyms such as Mina, Araras, Popo, Chamba, Carabali, and Congo often became an enslaved individual’s last name (Colmenares 1997:21–25). For example, Africans coming to Nueva Granada between 1703 and 1740—noted in sales and inventories as Mina—referred those from the Mina coast but may have included Fante, Asante, Ga, and Akwamu, among others. Meanwhile, those noted as Popo, Araras, and Chamba corresponded roughly with the Bight of Benin, between the Volta and Niger Rivers. After 1730 Central Africa became an important source for slaves. In archival documents and inventories, those from Central Africa are noted as Congo. Some Africans arriving to Cartagena between 1740 and 1780 are described in documents as Carabalis, Ibos, and Ibibo-efik. These ethnonyms suggest an origin in the Bight of Biafra (at the mouth of the Cross River).
The challenge with ethnonyms is that they are inherently unreliable. Ethnic nomenclature, assigned by Europeans, provides only an approximation of an African's place of origin (Colmenares 1997:21–22; DeCorse 1999:135–136; Lovejoy 1989:378). Ethnonyms might refer to the West African port of embarkation rather than to an enslaved person's nation of origin (Curtin 1969:184–185; Lohse 2002:74). Underscoring the notion that port of embarkation and ethnicity could be poles apart was the observation made by a Frenchman in 1715 that only 5 percent of the slaves sold at Ouidah originated within that kingdom (Lohse 2002:80; Law 1991:184). Further complicating matters, Spanish slave masters ethnically classified and reclassified the same African-born individuals using different terms throughout their lifetimes. Meanwhile, slaves, when asked about their ethnic origins, often volunteered a different term from that used by their masters. Slaves might have seen themselves as part of a smaller, more specific ethnic group or, in other cases, part of a broader linguistic, cultural, or sociopolitical sphere (Lohse 2002:82–84). Identity and the formation of identity for Africans forcibly exported to the New World as a result of the Atlantic slave trade was shaped by many factors and often transcended ethnicity or original group identity (Hall 2005:26–54).

The ethnonyms documented for the Dagua River region suggest that Africans came from the Gold Coast, the Bight of Benin, the Bight of Biafra, Central Africa, and Senegambia. Corresponding ethnonyms include Mina, Popo, Mandinga, Nango, Arara, Chamba, Congo, Carabali, and Angola. While these ethnonyms suggest a range of ethnicities and cultural backgrounds, individuals were, in fact, associated with a relatively small number of linguistic groups. More than a third of the slaves arriving to Cartagena shared a common tongue or understood one another using a similar Bantu language (Castillo Mathieu 1982:256).

Mining inventories from this region dating to the first half of the eighteenth century reflect a preponderance of African ethnonyms (ACC Signatura 8806 Colonia Judicial 1-17 Minas [1762–1766]). This suggests that the slaves listed were recent arrivals to the Americas. By the second half of the eighteenth century, however, most African slaves inventoried were designated as “criollo/a,” indicating they had been born in the Americas (Colmenares 1975:107). Given the propitious conditions along the Dagua River, there is evidence for an increasing number of negros libres (free blacks).
These mining inventories (embedded within wills and testaments) are an important source of information on emerging ethnicities. The 1752 mining inventory of Santa Barbara del Salto lists 26 slaves, including children. While an admittedly small sample, the majority is ascribed the ethnonym Mina (corresponding to the Gold Coast). Also represented are Carabali (Bight of Biafra) and Chamba (Bight of Benin), with one slave designated as Congo, suggesting a Central African origin. The second largest number after those from the Gold Coast (Mina) are designated as “criollo/a,” indicating African heritage but American origin (ACC Signatura 8806 Colonia Judicial I-17 Minas, fols. 58–62 [1762–1766]). Two decades later (1772–1773), slaves associated with the Dagua mines of Triana de San Geronimo de las Benediciones were inventoried. Of the 19 slaves listed (including children), criollos comprised the largest percentage, with smaller representation from Central Africa (Congo), the Bight of Benin (Chamba), the Bight of Biafra (Carabali), and the Gold Coast (Mina) (ACC Signatura 11347 Colonia Judicial I-17 Minas, fols. 4r–5r [1772–1773]).

These two mining inventories are particularly valuable because, in addition to first name and ethnonym, they document age, name of spouse, and spouse’s ethnonym. Also provided are names and ages of corresponding children. Essentially, we are given a glimpse of emergent family units along the Dagua River. For example, from the 1772–1773 inventory, we have Negro Isidro, captain of the quadrilla, designated as Chamba. He is 40 years old and is married to Negra Rita, Caraballi, also 40 years of age. They have two children: a 14-year-old son, Tomas (designated as Zambo), and a 6-year-old daughter, Negrita Antonio. The inventory continues with another ethnically mixed couple, Negro Simon, Conga, of 40 years and his wife, Flora, Negra Criolla, 30 years.

Mixed-ethnicity family units are also found in the earlier inventory (1752) from Santa Barbara del Salto. Hipolito, Mina, captain of the quadrilla, and 37 years of age, is married to Juana Maria, criolla of 37 years. Meanwhile, Luis, Mina, 28, is married to Phelipa, criolla, 15. Tomas, criollo, 46, and his wife, Caterina, Mina, 36, have a daughter, Casia, who is 8 years old. Alejandro, Chamba, 28, is married to Maria, criolla, who is 17 years old. Vicente, Mina, 30, is married to Maria, Conga, 22. Their son, Alberto, is 1 year old (ACC Signatura 8806 Colonia Judicial I-17 Minas, fols. 58v–59r [1762–1766]).

Through these mining inventories we catch a glimpse of the insipient foundations of an emerging multiethnic Afro-Colombian population in
the Dagua River region. Inventories chronicle the unions of Africans who may have originated in different regions, cultures, and language groups—Chamba married to Caraballi, Conga married to criolla, Mina married to criolla, Chamba married to criolla, Mina married to Conga—but who forged new identities and communities through multicultural marriage alliances and shared experiences.

To return to the question of ethnogenesis for the Dagua River region, we can revisit those conditions for ethnogenesis laid out by Voss (2015) that hold the most relevance for the Dagua River region. The first would be migration and displacement, in which place-based identities lose relevance and are supplanted by new ethnic identities. The second would be the emergence of new ethnic identities as a result of shared experiences of oppression from or resistance to a dominant group or institution (Voss 2015:658). In the Dagua River region, all first-generation Africans would have come as a result of forced migration and displacement. All would have experienced the horrendous Atlantic crossing, or Middle Passage, in the hold of a slave ship. These same individuals would have then undertaken the arduous two-month trip from Cartagena to the Dagua River region. Others may have been part of contraband expeditions coming into the port of Buenaventura, where a shorter but equally taxing overland trip to the Dagua region awaited them. Even if these journeys were not made together, these collective experiences, stories, and memories likely paved a path to unity and collective identity. Second-generation criollo slaves would have been spared the trauma of transatlantic displacement but would have shared with their parents and other first-generation slaves the same oppression imposed by Europeans and, eventually, would participate in resisting the Spanish colonial system. As a result, African place-based identities likely lost their relevance in the Dagua River region, supplanted by new identities based on experience and oppression as opposed to geographical origin or cultural heritage.

THROUGH MASTERY OF ENVIRONMENT CAME AUTONOMY

In the Dagua River region, gold mining, fluvial and overland transport, and subsistence agriculture were the primary industries. (In essence, all of these were tied to gold extraction.) Those Africans who had been forcibly imported to this region either possessed or acquired the skills
necessary to meet these local needs. Was this knowledge—placer mining, cultivation in tropical climates, and the skillful navigation of watercraft—brought from West Africa or developed in situ? Many African slaves sent to mining areas in Nueva Granada stemmed from agrarian cultures with rich gold-working traditions. Slaves from these regions (the Gold Coast, the Bight of Benin) were likely sought for their native skill sets, including gold mining and crop cultivation (Maya 1998:45–48, 2010:113). Those from the Bight of Benin, an area with early metallurgical traditions, were familiar with techniques for exploiting and extracting gold (Maya 1998:41–42, 2010:113). A seventeenth-century source, Jean Barbot’s extensive and illustrated *Description of the Coasts of North and South Guinea* (based in part on Barbot’s observation from 1678–1682), discussed methods used on Africa’s Gold Coast to collect raw material: “The natives either dig [the gold] out of the earth, or gather [it] from the bottom of rivers and streams” (1732:5:145). Given their familiarity with placer mining, Africans coming to the mineral-rich Dagua River region from the Gold Coast (Mina) and the Bight of Benin (Araras, Popo, Chamba) would likely have understood the work they were expected to undertake. This knowledge may have enabled them to quickly adapt to their new environment and become more autonomous (Maya 1998:45–46).

One of the significant ways Africans in the Dagua River region gained autonomy was through the navigation of canoes. The lack of roads in this region meant the Dagua River was the principal artery for trade and transport. It was also the most efficient means of supplying mines downriver with staples brought into Las Juntas (see Map 11.2). Those possessing the skills to navigate the Dagua and move goods down its currents were in demand and well-paid. Such place-specific skills were also developed by offspring of *cassare* unions at the early Portuguese garrison at Elmina (see Chapter 1).

Africans may have learned to navigate dangerous river currents, including the Dagua, from indigenous inhabitants (Romero 2017:69). Nonetheless, many Africans in the Dagua region came from lands where river and sea navigation in small and large canoes was a way of life. Many lines of evidence support that they had mastered the canoe (both its construction and its navigation) in West Africa long before their arrival to Nueva Granada (Dawson 2018).
The canoe played a significant role in West African trade and commerce (Smith 1970:521–524). Its importance for coastal, lagoon, and riparian peoples has been equated to that of the horse for the history of the savannah states (Smith 1970:532). In early accounts of the Guinea Coast, a distinction was made between canoes used in the open sea and those confined to the rivers and lagoons (Smith 1970:516). Canoes varied in size and carrying capacity, with smaller crafts carrying one to four people and larger crafts holding up to one hundred (Smith 1970:518).

Specifics about canoe navigation were recorded by nineteenth-century explorers. Mungo Park, on travels through Bamako in Mali along the Niger River, noted that canoes were moved through rapids by first tying them with ropes to the shoreline and then pushing the canoes forward with long poles (1838:51). Similar methods are described for the Dagua and Magdalena Rivers (Helg 2004:49; Pombo 1850:108–110; Saffray 1948 [1869]:312). John Duncan (1846:146), writing for the Royal Geographic Society of London in 1846, described canoe travel through lagoons near the Gulf of Guinea, between Popo and Ouidah, where crafts were propelled by long poles, with four men to one large canoe. James A. Croft (1873–1874:188–189), exploring the Volta River between Ada Foah and Kpong in 1873, wrote of canoes over 12 m long and .5 m wide, sharpened at each end and propelled by five men who paddled on occasion but found poles most useful in navigating boulders and rapids. (Croft notes that extra poles were brought along, as many got stuck between the rocks and could not be freed.) Poles were also a primary mode of propelling crafts through the Dagua (Pombo 1850:109–110), as depicted in Figure 11.1.

Barbot highlighted the skill and dexterity of “Mina blacks” who deftly paddled canoes through rough waters near Ouidah “without being sunk, overset, or split to pieces,” avoiding both death and considerable loss of goods (1732:5:157). Nineteenth-century French explorer Charles Saffray observed that navigation in the upper Dagua was as difficult as it was dangerous; the life of the passenger often depended upon a shout, a gesture, a glance from the person navigating the canoe. So swift were the currents of the Dagua that Saffray lost a friend who traveled just fifteen minutes behind him (1948 [1869]:311–312). The raw nerve and shrewd ability of Afro-Colombian canoe polers made an indelible impression on Gaspard-Theodore Mollien as well. Traveling down the Dagua nearly fifty years earlier, he described the black pilots as brave and daring, able
Figure 11.1 View of Las Juntas. While likely romanticized, this image conveys the perils of travel by canoe along the Dagua River and the dramatic topography of the area. This image suggests that even in the mid-nineteenth century, Las Juntas was more of an outpost than a town. Of particular note are the men in canoes who navigate using long poles. Illustration by François Louis Niederhäusern-Koechlin, based on a sketch by Charles Saffray published in “Voyage à la Nouvelle-Grenade par M. le Docteur Saffray (1869),” in Le tour du monde: Nouveau journal des voyages, vol. 26 (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1875), 92.
to skillfully avoid rapids and dodge rocks and whirlpools without fear of capsizing the canoe (Mollien 1944 [1823]:296). The accounts of Saffray and Mollien emphasize that the Dagua’s torrents and currents were extreme, yet Barbot’s writing leaves little doubt that West Africans’ ability to navigate such waters ran in their blood.

**EXERTING RIGHTS, CONTROLLING COMMERCE, PURCHASING FREEDOM, AND BUILDING FREE COMMUNITIES**

Other factors paved the way to opportunity and autonomy for enslaved and free Africans living along the Dagua River. (For the economic autonomy of the Ifugao in the Philippines, see Chapter 8.) The great demand for labor enabled many slaves in the Dagua River region to rent themselves out as prospectors (mazamarreros), canoe polers, and porters on their days off (Romero 2017:145ff., 196; ACC Signatura 11501, Colonia Civil IV-11 gobierno, fol. 99v [1773]). A canoe poler could make four patacones, or pesos (a silver coin of eight reales [see Marzahl 1978:198]), per round trip from Las Juntas to El Salto (a short but dangerous trip), where the mines of Aguasucia were located (see Map 11.2, where the small structure at far right marked with [14] identifies the Aguasucia mines). Additionally, porters were entitled to a pound of meat and a ration of bananas for each trip. They became skilled at skimming off the top, opening up sacks of meat, filling them with rocks, then sealing them up again so that nothing appeared to be missing when the cargo was weighed (Romero 2017:176; BN Fondo Comuneros RM 370, fols. 69v–75 [1780]). Through these various modes of employment, Africans were able to earn a significant amount of money. Extrapolating from the wages of canoe polers alone—four patacones made on a given Sunday—we might hypothesize that a person could work 52 Sundays a year and earn 208 patacones, a sum that would enable him to buy his freedom or that of a family member (costing between 300 and 400 patacones) in less than two years’ time.\(^5\)

Contributing to their autonomy was the fact that Africans and their descendants comprised the majority of the Dagua River region’s inhabitants. Given the frontier conditions along the Dagua River, Spanish landholders and mine owners were often in absentia, remaining in Cali
while their paid administrators ran operations in the interior (Colmenares 1975:106; Lane 2000:47, 94ff.). A similar phenomenon is discussed for haciendas in Nejapa in Stacie King’s case study (Chapter 4).

This lack of oversight enabled slaves and free slaves living in the greater Dagua River region to successfully fight Crown monopolies that went against their interests. For example, in 1766 a successful revolt against the estanco de aguardiente (Crown monopoly on the sale of cane brandy) took place in Las Juntas, Sombrerillo, and Calima, where rioters attacked, drank, and sold jugs of aguardiente without anyone to stop them (AGN Militias y Marinas, tomo 126, fol. 199–204 [1776]; McFarlane 1984:26).

Aguardiente was an especially important commodity in mining regions. The monopoly oversaw the alcohol’s distillation and distribution and forbade local production (McFarlane 1984:22, 1993:199–200). The monopoly met with great resistance in both rural and urban areas. Just the year before, in 1765, the plebeian population of Cali rose up against colonial authorities, protesting the monopoly (Anonymous 1937:247; McFarlane 1984:26). Because the 50 Spaniards residing in Cali could not defend themselves against the much larger plebeian population, which exceeded 3,000, the cabildo voted to suspend the monopoly rather than face the wrath of the populace (Anonymous 1937:251–252; Arboleda 1956:2:329–331; McFarlane 1984:26).

With the recent plebeian disturbance in mind, Pedro García Valdez, teniente de la compañía de forasteros españoles de la ciudad de Popayán, wrote desperate letters to Cali’s cabildo in March 1766 and the viceroy in April 1766. Because the only people in the Dagua River region on a regular basis were African slaves, he noted, a successful revolt against the monopoly had taken place, threatening the safety of the estanquero (the official in charge of overseeing the aguardiente monopoly), who fled to Cali for safety (AGN Militias y Marinas, tomo 126, fol. 200v [1776]). The dearth of Spaniards in the region equated to an “absence of leadership.” More men were needed to defend the area than the quadrillas de negros who worked the mines. Fighting them would put the Spaniards in grave danger because, armed, the quadrillas would be pushed to extreme measures (AGN Militias y Marinas, tomo 126, fols. 200r–203v [1766]). Rather than punish the perpetrators, it was recommended that for the safety of all involved, the monopoly be abolished.
In addition to exercising their rights, resisting Crown policies, and controlling the flow of goods into and out of the area, Africans could also curtail the flow of goods when it served their interests. In the same letter to the viceroy that advocated for the abolishment of the monopoly, Garcia Valdez reported that the porters who brought supplies and staples into the region had gone on strike, leaving him without meat for five days (AGN Militias y Marinas, tomo 126, fol. 200v–201r [1776]).

Over time, Africans in the Dagua River region would purchase their freedom and establish free communities. One of the largest free towns in the area, Sombrerillo, features prominently on the Dagua River map ([11], seen in Map 11.2). Occupying a strategic location downriver from Las Juntas (Map 11.2), Sombrerillo was one of two places from which the Dagua River could be navigated. (Because of its strong currents, sudden turns, and myriad waterfalls, only 50 of the Dagua’s 150 km could be traveled in the Spanish colonial period, and then only by small canoe [Martínez Capote 2005:36].)

As early as 1739, Sombrerillo was described as a hedonistic place whose residents did not participate in mass, drank to excess, committed robberies and attacks, and lived scandalously (Arboleda 1956:2:102). The canoe polers here were accused of inciting the slaves, establishing “little shops along the road where they get drunk with the slaves” (Lane and Romero 2001:36). Nevertheless, other documents reveal that little to no effort was exerted by Spanish colonial authorities to curb this activity.

Sombrerillo was home to 150 porters in addition to “indios, negros, mulatos, mestizos y aún blancos” (Arboleda 1956:2:102), all of whom came from remote regions. Some were runaway slaves, while others were white merchants, yet all lived by the transport trade linking the Pacific coast to Cali. Sombrerillo’s residents, particularly canoe polers and overland carriers, were highly mobile and well-informed (Lane and Romero 2001:35–36). As a critical stop along the Dagua River, Sombrerillo was also one of the few places on the river with an aduana (customs stop), which charged a tax on merchandise that passed through it (Romero 2017:175).

PERSISTENCE

In a remote mining area, Africans’ ability to overcome challenges of topography and Spanish colonial oppression led to their persistence in the
Dagua River region. Their physical distance from Spanish administrators and their ability to adapt to their challenging environment enabled them to control terrestrial and river commerce, resist royal aguardiente monopolies, purchase their freedom, and build free communities. Their descendants would continue to inhabit this area until the early twentieth century (Martínez Capote 2005:22, 115, 123–124; Romero 2002:182–186). The fact that displaced Africans came to comprise the largest portion of the area’s population created conditions ripe for the emergence of new cultural groups. The ethnic intermixing of people from different parts of Africa (reflected in mining inventories and slave censuses) gave rise to today’s Afro-Colombian population in the Dagua River region. The Dagua River map helps to document the emergence of new African-based ethnicities in this area and highlights the critical role that Africans played in the region’s society and economy.

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NOTES

1. A future project examines all represented ethnicities in this area—Europeans, Indians, and free people of all colors, as well as Africans. Wiersema, “The History of a Periphery: Spanish Colonial Cartography from Colombia’s Pacific Lowlands, 1710–1810.”

2. Mestizos refer to those of mixed indigenous-European parentage; negros refer to those of African origin; mulatlos refer to mixed African and European parentage; zambos refer to mixed indigenous and African parentage; pardos refer to those with brown skin, ostensibly with some African parentage; and montañeses refer to indigenous people living in the mountainous areas of the Cauca Valley.

3. The indigenous population was not local but had been brought from Raposo and elsewhere in the 1750s and 1760s (AGN Visitas SC.62, Raposo y Dagua: Diligencias de Visita [1761–1762]; AGN Caciques e Indios, tomo 11, fols. 633–663 [1754]).

4. For problems with this larger text, see Law (1982).
5. For manumission transactions, see sale of a female slave, 390 patacones (AHC Escribano notaria segunda, libro 4, fols. 95–98 [1773]); another female slave, 400 patacones (AHC Escribano notaria segunda, libro 4, fols. 222v–223r, 400–400v [1773]); and a male slave, 290 patacones (AHC Escribano notaria segunda, libro 5, fols. 279–279v [1774]).

6. This title can be loosely translated as “lieutenant in the company of Spanish forasteros from the city of Popayán.” This was a military regiment posted to the Americas during the viceroyalty that was composed entirely of peninsular Spaniards. In this instance, forastero alludes to a nonnative outlander or incomer.

REFERENCES


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**ARCHIVAL SOURCES**

**ABBREVIATIONS**

Archivo Central de Cauca, Popayán, Colombia (ACC)
ACC Signatura 8806 Colonia Judicial I-17 Minas (1762–1766)
ACC Signatura 11347 Colonia Judicial I-17 Minas (1772–1773)
ACC Signatura 11501 Colonia Civil IV-11 gobierno (1773–1774)
ACC Signatura 11511 Colonia Civil IV-10 ea (1764–1766)
Archivo General de la Nación, Bogotá, Colombia (AGN)
AGN Caciques e Indios, tomo 11, fols. 633–663 (1754)
AGN Militias y Marinas, tomo 126, fols. 199–204 (March–April 1776)
AGN Visitas SC.62, Raposo y Dagua: Diligencias de Visita, fols. 595–715 (1761–1762)
Archivo Histórico de Cali (AHC)
AHC Escribano notaria segunda, libros 4 and 5 (1773–1774)
Biblioteca Nacional, Bogotá, Colombia (BN)
BN Fondo Comuneros RM 370 (1780)