

## Book Review

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***Orality, Identity, and Resistance in Palenque (Colombia): An Interdisciplinary Approach***, edited by Armin Schwegler, Bryan Kirschen, and Graciela Maglia. 2017. Volume 54, Contact Language Library. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

*Orality, Identity, and Resistance in Palenque (Colombia)* is the updated English translation of the 2012 edited volume *Palenque (Colombia): oralidad, identidad y resistencia*. Like its predecessor, the current (2017) edition showcases the multifaceted research of a cohort of scholars who are passionate about fostering awareness and understanding of Afro-Colombian Palenquero language, history and culture.

Palenquero is a Spanish-derived creole language whose origins may trace back to the seventeenth-century African slave community of San Basilio de Palenque. Founded in the jungles of southeast Colombia, this long-isolated community is recognized by UNESCO as “a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity (2005).” The present volume is a treasure of foundational and new data on the approximately 3,500 inhabitants. Historically, the area was a walled refuge for fugitive slaves known as a *palenque*. Numerous *palenques* existed in the colonial era, but only San Basilio has survived to the present. The community has evolved into one of the inimitable spaces in the world, blending ancient African roots with European and Latin American influences to encompass unique social, linguistic, musical, religious, and oral traditions.

This collection of papers represents a broad trajectory of questions on language, collective knowledge, and culture. Since language encodes knowledge systems that ultimately encode cultural practices, Palenquero logically emerges as a dominant theme in the book. Palenquero (called *Lengua* by in-group speakers) is essential to the social and cultural systems of Palenque. Although community members speak fluent Spanish (*Kateyano*), knowledge of Palenquero in varying degrees remains vital to internal solidarity and pride among the Palenque residents.

Chapter 1 (Yves Moñino) provides an extensive sociolinguistic description of Palenquero, arguing that the creole possesses only limited African substrate influence. Moñino categorizes Palenquero as an innovative Neo-Romance vernacular in which restructured Kikongo morphology

melded into the Spanish grammatical system, in turn reflecting the social relationship experienced by escaped slaves within the dominant society.

Chapter 2 (Armin Schwegler) asserts that substratal influence from Kikongo can be readily detected in Palenquero. Historical and demographic data are presented. DNA studies then link Palenque residents genetically to African areas where Kikongo is spoken. As Schwegler notes, questions remain as to why Afro-Colombian ancestral rituals (e.g., *lumbalú*) exhibit far less fidelity to the original sub-Saharan languages than does the ritual language Afro-Cuban *Palo monte*.

Chapter 3 (Ludmila Ferrari) deconstructs the Palenque community's complex internalization and externalization of identity. The essay analyzes how representations involved in being "Africans," as well as becoming "Africanized," continually shape (and are shaped by) the growing contact with outsiders, including researchers and academics. "In what way does the representation create the reality that it represents?" (135). The response is exemplified through a visual assessment of the monument to Benkos Bioho, the so-named "Founder of Palenque," as a fluid (mis)representation of identity perpetuated as the visual symbol of Palenquero history.

Chapter 4 (Graciela Maglia) examines Palenque's oral traditions. Demonstrating a deep understanding of "community as a creolized expression" (160), Maglia evaluates the intrinsic value of *Lengua* as "a symbol of semiotic resistance" (165) within the dominant, Euro (white)-based esthetic of high culture, authorship, and written literature. Culling corpus data from recent fieldwork, Maglia provides an eloquent explanation for the relative lack of assimilation to Euro standards in the oral traditions of Palenque.

Chapter 5 (José Alejandro Correa) employs experimental methods to investigate intonational patterns of declarative sentence structures in Kateyano and Palenquero. Secondly, this study identifies features motivating the African-language substrate hypothesis. Spectrographic analyses are carried out on four variables. The findings suggest that in declarative utterances, the two languages act as a potentially simplified system and are largely indistinguishable in terms of pitch accents and nuclear structures. Correa reports on previous Bantu studies as evidence for substrate effects.

Chapter 6 (María Cristina Navarrete) focuses on social interactions in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century maroon communities in coastal Colombia. Comprehensive linguistic and historical data include citations of actual slave names and dates. Navarrete portrays (fugitive) slaves as agentive, self-aware individuals actively participating within the heterogeneous, multilingual cultural and social networks that they constructed.

Chapter 7 (Aline Helg) presents a comparative study on the historical institution of slavery in the United States and Latin America. The author skillfully links the absence of written records within a literate society to the erasure of the subaltern individual's voice (orality) and to the inevitable death of his/her history.

The book does not follow an a priori organization, thus chapters can be read in any sequence. Many topics are reiterated and reinforced throughout the volume, with individual authors contributing

distinct areas of expertise and interpretations in their essays. Moreover, authors frequently reference other chapters in the collection, reinforcing cohesion among the diverse research topics. Cohesion, however, does not signify consensus: several points of contradiction are found. For example: “American Indians and blacks had virtually no social contact” (54), versus, “Slaves interacted with nearby indigenous communities or in haciendas” (274). These differences mirror the lack of consensus present in the general field.

All chapters contain copious footnotes that are valuable accompaniments to the main texts. The historical accounts throughout the volume are riveting, but unsettling. To the authors’ credit, they do not shy away from recounting in detail the injustices and atrocities to which African- and American-born blacks have been subjected. Indeed, these narratives are more powerful since the effects of these evils continue to plague Afrodescendants today. Unique to the volume are the candid and contemporary photos of the Palenque community members and the excellent cartographic resources that provide further contextualization. Minute flaws include a sparse index and certain awkward English translations (e.g., “We still ignore who the actual founders of Palenque were” [21]).

A final observation underscores Schwegler’s concession that “to date, not a single African-born Bantuist has participated” (104). Similarly, Afro-Colombian authors are absent from the current volume. Non-Afrodescendant authors have succeeded in transmitting to the reader their appreciation for the beautiful humanity and the strength of spirit that continually bolsters Palenque’s centuries-long resistance. This said, the most significant advances in Palenquero studies will emerge as the community takes on a greater role in its own scholarship.

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