

# The Afro-Paraguayan Community of Cambacué

## Introduction

**C**ambacué is an Afro-Paraguayan community of 300 families (c. 2,000 individuals) located some 15 km to the east of the Paraguayan capital Asunción in the municipality of Fernando de la Mora. Just over 30 years ago the community was violently dispossessed of over 90 per cent of its land by the Paraguayan state. Since then, in the face of human rights abuses, immense poverty and racial discrimination, the community has been immersed in a struggle both to retain its identity and to have its traditional land restored. This is the story of that struggle.



by Juan Pedro

## Being black in Paraguay

**T**o be black in Paraguay is to be almost invisible to the rest of society. Most Paraguayans are unaware of the existence of a black community in Paraguay and assume that any black people are Brazilian. Nevertheless, Afro-Paraguayans, despite their lack of numbers and the daily racism to which they are subjected, maintain a distinct identity characterized by a vibrant and continually evolving culture. Since Afro-Paraguayans are not included as a separate category within the national census their exact numbers are unknown; however, along with the indigenous population – who comprise 2 per cent of the population – they are among the most impoverished groups in the country. While the Paraguayan Constitution recognizes the existence of indigenous people – and guarantees them the right to land and the freedom to practise their distinct cultures – Afro-Paraguayans as a separate category are absent from any national legislation, as if it were assumed that black culture either has disappeared, or should do so.

Most contemporary Afro-Paraguayans find their roots in the slave trade which was practised by Spain in its South American colonies prior to the struggle for independence in the early nineteenth century. During the colonial era, Afro-Paraguayans were known locally as *pardos*. They were a significant presence in Paraguay and, in 1785, comprised 11 per cent of the population. Indeed, a number of contemporary Paraguayan towns – such as Areguá, Emboscada and Guarambaré – were originally established as black communities. While a number of Afro-Paraguayans achieved their freedom during Spanish rule, after Paraguay's independence in 1812 many were forced back into slavery. However, in 1842, the Paraguayan government declared the Law of the Free Womb which stipulated that any children born of slaves after that date were to be set free on their twenty-fourth birthday. This law stimulated a rapid



increase in the birth-rate among the slave population, although it was only in 1869 that slavery was finally abolished.

However, the origins of the present-day Afro-Paraguayans of Cambacú are not found among the former slaves of Paraguay. The community's founders were a regiment of 250 black Lancers, male and female, who accompanied the Uruguayan leader José Artigas into exile in Paraguay in 1820, following his overthrow by his deputy Francisco Ramírez. While Artigas was provided with a farm in distant Curuguatí, the Lancers were given 100 ha of good agricultural land 15 km from Asunción. The land was equitably distributed, and every family was provided with a cow, a team of oxen, a plough and seeds with which to begin farming.

Once settled, the Lancers developed a relatively prosperous community based on cattle-raising and small-scale agriculture. They produced enough for their own subsistence needs and also sold their surplus in the markets of Asunción. The community integrated very well into Paraguayan life while retaining a distinct culture that incorporated many elements derived from its African roots.

The peace of the community was shattered during the Triple Alliance War of 1864–70 when Paraguay fought the combined power of Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay. Many men from the Cambacú community were enlisted into the Paraguayan army but, along with the rest of the country, they suffered tremendous losses. Such was the slaughter inflicted on Paraguay that, by the end of the war, it is estimated that 20 women remained for every man. Cambacú almost certainly suffered a similar demographic disaster. It was as a result of this acute gender imbalance that a strongly matriarchal society developed in Paraguay.

The Cambacú community eventually recovered from the war and, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was able to re-establish a strong agricultural economy that was well-placed geographically to take advantage of the market in Asunción. However, with the installation in power, in 1940, of the military dictator General Higinio Morinigo the integrity of the community was again threatened.

## Dispossession from their land

The source of the community's problems was its lack of a formal land title. Although the President of Paraguay Gaspar Rodríguez Francia (president from 1811 to 1840), had given 100 ha to the Lancers, the state had retained ownership of the land and no document existed to validate the Cambacú community's possession of it. Prior to Morinigo's coming to power this had not been a problem: the community could claim 120 years of continuous residence and occupation. However, the land of Cambacú was becoming increasingly valuable to outsiders. Asunción was expanding and, in the immediate vicinity of Cambacú, the municipality of Fernando de la Mora was gradually transformed into a suburb of the capital city. Improvements in transport meant that Fernando de la Mora was a much more desirable place to live for those working in Asunción, and the Cambacú community lands were increasingly coveted.

Morinigo therefore issued a presidential order that removed some of the community's most productive land and handed it over to his close allies. This was a significant blow to the community. In 1967, their situation further deteriorated when Alfredo Stroessner – who had become president in a coup in 1954 – removed 50 ha of the best of the remaining land. It was given to the National University and the government subsequently sold further land to private individuals. All that the community had left were 7 ha. No compensation for the loss of the land has ever been paid to the members of the community.

Although the inhabitants of Cambacú did not willingly accede to the loss of their land, resistance was futile. Both the police and the army were ordered into the community and used arrests, beatings and threats of further violence against unarmed civilians in order to remove people from their homes. The violence experienced in Cambacú was part of a much wider repression against the poor and minority groups as Stroessner waged an internal war against 'communism'. Elsewhere in the country indigenous communities were also violently ejected from their ancestral lands, while thousands of people were allegedly imprisoned, tortured and, in a number of cases, 'disappeared'.

## Poverty in Cambacú

This drastic loss of land plunged the community into poverty. Farming was no longer a viable option and community members sought jobs (which were poorly paid) in Fernando de la Mora and Asunción. Increasingly, people abandoned the community and many set up homes in other suburbs of the capital.

For those who remained in Cambacú, the women assumed a far greater role as providers. Due to the racism of Paraguayan society, it was harder for the male members of the community to find work than the women. The latter were regarded as eminently suitable domestic servants; they were obliged to work long hours while the men stayed at home to take care of their children. Although wages are extremely low they are, nevertheless, the key to the community's survival.

The inhabitants of Cambacú are also greatly disadvantaged in their access to education and health services. The poverty of the community has meant that parents are unable to pay for their children either to go to local schools or to enter the private school system, which is almost the only way of obtaining a reasonable education in Paraguay. Although most members of the community have completed primary education, few have graduated from secondary school and, at present, only five

youngsters are at university. Most young people assume it will be impossible for them to finish their education and this belief has a negative impact on their willingness to study. Furthermore, the lack of trained people in the community is also holding back its development.

The health system in Paraguay is divided into public and private sectors and most people in Cambacú have no choice but to use the Public Health Service. Its quality can be poor and medicines – which can be expensive – still have to be purchased. There is a hospital for children in the community but adults have to travel 10 km to Asunción for treatment, or for emergencies.

## The Cambacú community's culture

The community's religious beliefs and practices are essential to the Cambacú people's culture. Although their ancestors were obliged to accept Christianity following their arrival from Africa, they developed a syncretistic form of Christianity that incorporated many elements of their traditional religion. In this way, they kept alive their links with their ancestral home as evidenced by their choice of St Baltazar, an African, as the patron saint of the community.

The worship of St Baltazar is the focus of much community life. There is a small chapel at the centre of the community which contains an image of the saint. It is within the chapel that most of the rituals associated with the saint take place. The main festival is on 6 January, an event that is organized by the community's social club. Each year Paraguayans flock to see the festival and the dancing of the Ballet Cambacú. It is an opportunity for the community to show its pride in its traditions and to reassert its resolve to resist assimilation.

The principal aim of the dancing and drumming of the Ballet Cambacú is the worship of St Baltazar, as it has been for the past 180 years. During the festival the entrance of the saint to the chapel is preceded by a slow beating of drums that gradually increases in tempo until it becomes almost frenetic. Two dancers accompany the drums and their energetic movements are reminiscent of the African dances from which the contemporary dances originate. Community members feel that the dances play an important role in reminding them of their ancestral values and in reinforcing their identity as Afro-Paraguayans. The festival also plays a crucial role in transmitting the community's cultural values to the children. They become increasingly proud of their Afro-Paraguayan identity in the face of the daily racism that they experience outside the community.

The Ballet Cambacú has also been extremely important in communicating the plight of Afro-Paraguayans to the international community. The Ballet is known throughout Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay and is proof to all that a vibrant black community continues to exist within Paraguay, despite the many pressures it has been subjected to.

## Struggling to recover the land

Ever since the Cambacú community lost its land in 1967, its members have struggled for its return and for the preservation of the community's culture. Indeed, both aspects are intimately related; by keeping the culture alive, the fight for the land has retained its meaning.

However, the community's struggle to regain its land has also had a more overt political dimension. For example, in 1967, the community occupied its former land. However, this was ultimately unsuccessful and the people were violently ejected

by the police. Women have been significant protagonists in the struggle. They have been at the forefront of any resistance, and on numerous occasions they and their children have walked to Asunción to protest and to meet with politicians and government officials.

The Cambacú community has also attempted a number of judicial and political interventions aimed at recovering its land and in this it has been supported by the international black movement, which has sought to exert pressure on the Paraguayan government. During the past five years the Afro-American Organizations Network has closely followed this process, publicizing the issue internationally and organizing conferences in Paraguay, Brazil and Uruguay.

It has only been since the fall of Stroessner and the restoration of democracy to Paraguay in 1989 that a solution has appeared to be possible. Even so, progress has been slow. In the 1990s the community had its first victory when the National Parliament decided to declare the community's former land an area of 'cultural interest'. A law was passed calling for the expropriation of the land on behalf of the Municipality of Fernando de la Mora with the explicit intention that it should subsequently be transferred to the community.

Unfortunately, Paraguayan law states that land can only be expropriated once the former owner has received compensation. The level of compensation is calculated on the basis of the commercial value of the land – which is extremely high – and, since the state refused to contribute, the responsibility for payment was left to the Cambacú community. Given the community's poverty and the short time that it had to pay, it has been unable to raise sufficient funds; as a result, the leaders of the community saw no alternative but to come to an agreement with the owner of the land for the free transfer of just 3 ha.



## Minority Rights & Development

The Minority Rights & Development programme addresses issues of the exclusion and marginalization of minority communities and indigenous peoples in and as a result of development interventions.

MRG works with partner organizations and with minority and indigenous communities to research and document minority experience of development at micro- and macro-levels and to disseminate the findings and advocate better practice at state, regional and international levels.

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The author, Juan Pedro, is a researcher and community activist based in Asunción.

This study is published as a contribution to public understanding. The text does not necessarily represent in every detail the collective view of MRG or its partners.

## Mundo Afro

Mundo Afro is a non-governmental organization working to promote rights for Afro-Latin Americans.

Mundo Afro  
Ciudadela 1229 Piso 1  
Mercado Central  
CP 11.100  
Montevideo  
Uruguay  
Tel/fax: 598 2 915 0247  
Tel: 598 2 916 8779  
e-mail [mundafro@chasque.apc.org](mailto:mundafro@chasque.apc.org)

## Minority Rights Group International

MRG is a non-governmental organization working to promote rights for minorities and cooperation between communities.

Minority Rights Group International  
379 Brixton Road  
London SW9 7DE  
United Kingdom  
Tel: 44 020 7978 9498  
Fax: 44 020 7738 6265  
e-mail: [minority.rights@mrgmail.org](mailto:minority.rights@mrgmail.org)



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## The future

The community's relationship with the Afro-American Organizations Network made it realize that it would have to strengthen its internal social organization. As a result, it has formed a non-profit civil association – the Afro-Paraguayan Association of Cambacú – which has taken on the responsibility of dealing with the state. It also aims to promote the development of the community, and to continue the fight against racial discrimination and the abuse of the community's human rights.

An immediate priority for the Association is the development of the 3 ha of recently recovered land. Among its plans are the construction of 116 houses, a bigger church, a community centre, internal roads, offices (for the Association, community use and for commercial purposes), and a sports field. The Association believes that these projects are essential for the maintenance and continued development of the community's unique identity as Afro-Paraguayans, and for the alleviation of poverty among the residents of Cambacú.

## Recommendations

1. The Paraguayan state should constitutionally recognize Afro-Paraguayans as a distinct ethnic minority and uphold their rights as a minority.
2. The Paraguayan authorities should urgently set up an independent and impartial investigative panel to examine the removal of the Cambacú community from its land from 1967 onwards and related events, such as the alleged arrests, beatings and violent threats made by the security forces against unarmed Cambacú people in 1967.
3. On the basis of the results of the investigation, urgent measures should be taken for restitution of the lands occupied by the Cambacú community prior to 1967. Should restitution be deemed inappropriate or unfeasible, adequate compensation for the loss of the land and for the violence allegedly suffered at the hands of the security forces should be awarded.

MundoAfro 2000 website:

[www.sicor.ciom.uy/afros](http://www.sicor.ciom.uy/afros)

Minority Rights Group website:

[www.minorityrights.org](http://www.minorityrights.org)