

*Excerpted from*

# THE FESTIVE STATE

Race, Ethnicity, and  
Nationalism as Cultural  
Performance



**DAVID M. GUSS**

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## *Chapter 2* The Selling of San Juan

the performance of history  
in an afro-venezuelan community

Si Dios fuera negro

todo cambiaría.

Sería nuestra raza

la que mandaría.

If God were black

all would change.

It would be our race

that held the reins.

“si dios fuera negro,”

salsa composition

by roberto angleró

Even the most casual perusal of anthropological literature over the last fifteen years will reveal an increasing, if not obsessive, preoccupation with what some have called “the selective uses of the past” (Chapman, McDonald, and Tonkin 1989).<sup>1</sup> The growing awareness that histories (and not merely History, writ large) are more than simply static traditions inherited from a neutral past parallels an equally significant realization that the most common subjects of anthropological study (that is, oral-based tribal cultures) actually possess historical consciousness. The erosion, therefore, of functionalism’s long-dominant view of Primitive Man as an ahistoric, mythic being has gradually given way to one of contested realities in which any purported absence of history becomes

suspect as part of a privileged construction of it. In this sense, the acknowledgment of history or, inversely, its denial is not about the accuracy of memory; it is about the relationship to power. Although Arjun Appadurai, in a 1981 article, attempted to rein in what he called the “widespread assumption that the past is a limitless and plastic symbolic resource,” he nevertheless insisted that it is through the “inherent debatability of the past” that cultures find a way not only to “talk about themselves” but also to change (1981: 201, 218).

This view, that history is primarily about the contemporary social relations of those who tell it, has important repercussions for the way in which any group defines itself in relation to another. It is for this reason, Raymond Williams writes, that “much of the most accessible and influential work of the counter-hegemony is historical: the recovery of discarded areas or the redress of selective and reductive interpretations” (1977: 116). Nowhere, perhaps, is this observation more true than in the experience of the African-descended populations of the Americas. Brought to the New World under brutal conditions that quickly severed them from all ethnic, linguistic, and familial ties, these populations have been systematically denied the histories that others accept as a birthright. Yet many of these groups have shown, through often brilliant and resourceful strategies, that the past *is* recuperable and that proud and autonomous histories may be hidden within it. One such group that has demonstrated this is the Afro-Venezuelan community of Curiepe, a village located just two hours east of Caracas (see map). For the people of Curiepe the dramatic vehicle with which to tell this history has been the performance of a three-day drum festival dedicated to San Juan.

### san juan bautista

The Fiesta de San Juan, known in English as either Saint John’s Day or Midsummer Eve, is considered one of the oldest of all church festivals (James 1963: 226). Strategically placed six months before Christmas, it celebrates the birth of Saint John the Baptist, herald of the New Era and, as Jesus said, “the greatest prophet among those born of women” (Luke



Map of Venezuela showing festival locations

7: 28). But San Juan, falling as it does on the 24th of June, also celebrates the summer solstice and thus has led many to speculate that it predates the Christian era by many centuries. Saint Augustine, writing in the fifth century, saw the advantage of locating this holiday on a date already widely celebrated throughout Europe. He discouraged the church from attempting to prohibit the inclusion of pagan elements, foreseeing that their appropriation could accelerate Christianity's growth (Fuentes and Hernández 1988: 6). This openness resulted in not merely one of the most widely diffused holidays but also one of the most syncretic. Dominated by rituals of fire and water, typical San Juan celebrations also included divination, fertility rites, matchmaking, harvest ceremonies, and even carnivalesque inversion (Burke 1978: 194–195; Frazer 1953 [1922]: 720–732).<sup>2</sup>

With such a wealth of associations, San Juan was easily transported to the New World. In each country throughout Latin America, it was adapted to the particular character of the population that developed there. In Argentina, for example, with its principally European population, descended mainly from Spaniards and Italians, the festival was celebrated with little variation. Bonfires were lit for couples and individuals to jump over and eventually, when the flames died, to walk through. The forms of divination were also the same: eggs dropped in glasses, mirrors read in the dark, cloves of garlic placed under beds, hair cut at midnight, gunpowder and melted tin sifted into water (Coluccio 1978: 74–76).

In the Andes, with its predominantly Indian population, however, San Juan took a decidedly different turn. In Bolivia the saint was known as Tata, or Father San Juan, and was revered as the protector of cattle, llamas, and sheep. Although San Juan also served this function in Peru, his identification with the Inca solstitial celebration of Inti Raymi provided the Catholic Church with an expedient mode of appropriation (Morote Best 1955: 169–170). In Ecuador the festival developed in still another direction. Seen as an opportunity to momentarily reverse both economic and social oppression, it became the occasion for a carnivalesque satire in which all members of the community participated. Indians dressed and performed as whites, while the latter assumed the

subservient role of those they normally dominated. So important was this counterhegemonic performance of political subversion that Muriel Crespi refers to San Juan as “the Indian Saint” and to the zone surrounding Cayambe-Imbabura in northern Ecuador as a “St. John culture area” (1981: 488, 501).<sup>3</sup>

In Venezuelaitwas neitherthemestizo populationnor theindigenous one that adopted San Juan. Rather, it was the large black population inhabiting the many coastal plantations stretching west of Caracas to Yaracuy and east to an area commonly known as Barlovento. However, it was with the latter region, settled in the seventeenth century by cacao growers and slaves, that San Juan became most closely associated. A pie-shaped piece of land bounded by the Caribbean on the north and mountains on the south and east, Barlovento is less a political or geographical entity than a cultural one. Although it covers nearly 2,000 square miles, its name, derived from a Spanish nautical term meaning “whence the wind comes,” rarely appears on any map or legal document. Nevertheless, its population, descended principally from the African slaves brought there in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, reveals a striking uniformity both economically and culturally. Despite the improved access to Caracas, which can now be reached in less than two hours, and the dramatic rise in beach-front speculation, Barlovento is still an agricultural area dominated by small landholders.<sup>4</sup> And although each community has its own patron saint and local celebrations, the region as a whole shares a cultural heritage, as witnessed in the performance of such seasonal rites as the Easter Week processions, the Cruz de Mayo, and the Parrandas de Navidad. But of all of these, none has become so thoroughly identified with Barlovento as has that of San Juan. In fact, so widespread and passionate is the cult among these coastal communities that San Juan has become commonly known as “the saint of the blacks” (Monasterio Vásquez 1989: 107).

Unlike the northern Ecuadorean celebrations of San Juan, which joined landowner and Indian in a parody of quotidian life, the celebrations in Barlovento have always been performed solely by the blacks. This does not mean, however, that the festival was not also converted into an important expression of resistance. The time allotted for San Juan

was the only free time allowed the slaves, who were compelled to work six and a half days a week, 362 days a year. It was a time when they were permitted to gather freely, not only to dance and play drums but also to conspire and plan revolts. As the only moment of freedom given them during the year, the festival could not help but become associated with the reversal of an oppressive social order. As Bernardo Sanz, a leading drummer in the community of Curiepe, recently observed:

The Festival of San Juan isn't just a festival. The Festival of San Juan has its meaning. It was the three days given the slaves. And you know why the 25th of June is so popular? For the following... As they were about to end the days given them to celebrate freely, they cried and jumped all over. That was the most joyous day of all... because they thought, "Caramba, let's take advantage of this, because from now till the end of next year... Look, let's go. We're not going to serve that man or that one or that one over there any more."

And I'd flee. I'd go up to one of those mountains there, and then the next year I'd come down just for those days. Because on those days no one was put in jail. They were free.

And that's the way people would run off, taking advantage of that chance. And that would be the day to enjoy and let loose. And some would cry because it was the last day of freedom they gave us.<sup>5</sup>

Recognizing these dangers, colonial authorities tried to prohibit the mingling of slaves and free blacks during the festival. Yet as threatening as these occasions may have been to the slaveholders, outlawing them altogether was considered even more dangerous. It was seen as essential to give the slaves some "illusion" of freedom, some release from their insufferable social condition, some connection to an African past of dignity and meaning (Acosta Saignes 1967: 201, 205).

But why was San Juan chosen as the saint with whom to express this? Was it, as Norman Whitten suggests, that, as the prophet of a new era, San Juan symbolized "the transformation from savage (sinner) to civilized (absolved Christian)" (editor's note in Crespi 1981: 502; see also Monasterio Vásquez 1989: 108)? Or was it that his festival evoked the memory of an African solstitial ritual in a climate not unlike that of Venezuela? Certainly the cacao harvest and the initiation of the rainy

season encouraged the celebration of a holiday at this time. And as some have suggested, “along with Carnival, San Juan is the most plebeian festival on the ecclesiastical calendar” (Liscano 1973: 66). Its use of divination, amulets, baths, and fires was easily absorbed into a preexistent African tradition. It was also, as Saint Augustine had observed centuries earlier, a convenient means by which the church could sanction and hence incorporate behavior that would otherwise be repellent. For San Juan, in keeping with his syncretic and adaptive history, appears to have been added to this celebration like a new frame through which to experience it (Fig. 2). Isabel Cobos, a teacher and organizer in Curiepe, explained it this way: “The twenty-third, fourth, and fifth is San Juan. And they gave them to the slaves to celebrate their saint. They played their drums and sang *malembe*.<sup>6</sup> The whites, they had no idea what saint that was. And so they said, ‘You want a saint? Okay, here, take this.’ And they set down San Juan.”

Some have suggested that San Juan may actually be Shango, the Yoruba god of thunder, whose color, like that of San Juan, is red.<sup>7</sup> But the importation of slaves to Venezuela ended long before the Yoruba began arriving in the New World. This greater separation from Africa, and the fact that Venezuela’s slave population was much more heterogeneous than was that of countries like Cuba and Brazil, makes it difficult to ascribe any prior native identity to this saint (Brandt 1978: 7–9; Garcia 1990: 87; Liscano 1973: 69). What is not difficult to ascribe is the African origin of most of the festival’s performative elements. For although certain features, such as bathing, divination, church liturgy, and propitiation of the saint, do recall its Spanish heritage, the principal elements remain those imported from Africa.

Beginning at noon on the 23rd of June and continuing almost nonstop through the night of the 25th, the festival’s activity focuses on two different sets of drums. The first, called the *mina*, in memory, perhaps, of the area in Ghana from which it came, is composed of two different drums, the *mina* proper and the *curbata*. The *mina* itself is a six-foot-long hollowed trunk set upon a cross brace of two poles (Fig. 3). It is played with sticks on both the body of the drum and its deerskin head and is accompanied by the smaller, upright *curbata*. The second set comprises



*Figure 2.* San Juan Bautista. (Photograph by David M. Guss)



*Figure 3.* The mina. (Photograph by David M. Guss)

three cylindrical, double-skinned drums called the *culo e'puya*. Of probable Bantu origin, these three-foot-long instruments are nestled between the legs of the drummer, who plays them upright with a stick in one hand and with the bare fingers of the other.<sup>8</sup>

The corpus of rhythms, dances, and songs of each of these ensembles is completely different, as is its structural relation to the saint. For it is the music of the drums that satisfies the *promesas* that are repaid during the three days and nights of the festival. These *promesas*, which may be based on any favor granted by San Juan, require that a *velorio* be offered, with the sponsoring household paying for all the alcohol and food consumed. During the *velorio*, which lasts an entire night, the image of San Juan, dressed in red and covered with flowers, is installed in a place of honor. Immediately in front of it, the *culo e' puya* drums are played, while outside, in the street, another group of celebrants dances and sings to the *mina* and *curbata*. These *velorios* continue from house to house until the conclusion of the festival.

### san juan nacional

While local colonial authorities may have seen an advantage to encouraging this unusual celebration of San Juan, the earliest written records reported it with horror. Not only were the borders between San Juan and the African deities he seemed to represent dangerously blurred, but so were those between male and female. In short, the celebration appeared too erotic. Hence when Bishop Mariano Martí visited the parishes of Barlovento in 1784, he concluded that all such celebrations should be strictly prohibited. Of Curiepe in particular he wrote:

These people are led by a passion for dancing, not just at parties or celebrations on holidays or when some baptism occurs but also at what they call *velorios*, both for dead children and on the eves of festivals;<sup>9</sup> all of which leads to a sorry disorder, with men and women in a confused mess, especially at night. And they go on this way during these festivals with endless dancing for nearly the whole night, so that they wake up worn out and tired, unable and prohibited from satisfying the

Precept of Mass, burdening their consciences, and, knowing the risk to which they expose themselves, still do not avoid these ridiculous and earthly diversions. Therefore, in order to end these so-called disorders, we must of course prohibit under penalty of excommunication such *velorios*, in which wild dances and other suspect gatherings occur; and we must send and order that the priest of that congregation in frequent sermons and exhortations make his parishioners understand the pernicious effects resulting from such dances of which one Church Father has said, "They are a circle whose center is the Devil and circumference his Ministers." (Chacón 1979: 33)

Such behavior was not entirely new to the Catholic Church, of course. As Enrique González pointed out, a fundamental role of saints had always been as substitutes for ancient deities.<sup>10</sup> In medieval Europe in particular, they not only provided a more direct access to God but also, through the dances with which they were celebrated, a critical re-access to the body (González 1989). The church, then, would seem to have vacillated between tacit acceptance of such rites and, as Bishop Martí implored, unequivocal repression. As Michael Taussig noted in his work among African-descended groups in neighboring Colombia, such ambivalence between license and restraint led to "almost insuperable contradictions that made social control difficult for colonialists everywhere" (1980: 44). It also led to the paradox of dominant groups appropriating the very magical powers they were purportedly trying to destroy—the image of the Inquisitor with his African healer (1980: 42). Yet most significant of all were the consequences of this attempted repression. With numerous examples from throughout Latin America, but in particular the Andes, Taussig shows how religious repression, time and again, has stimulated cultural creativity, leading to the fashioning of new forms of resistance from old structures of belief. And so it is too that, despite the interdictions of Bishop Martí, the celebration of San Juan has continued in Barlovento to the present day, responding rather than yielding to the changing conditions in which it is performed.

Nearly 160 years elapsed between Bishop Martí's unflattering report of the festival and any other written mention of it. In 1939, however, a young poet from Caracas named Juan Liscano began making regular

journeys to the village of Curiepe, in the heart of Barlovento. Curiepe had changed little since the bishop's visit there in the late eighteenth century. To reach it, one still had to go either by mule or by foot or to take a steamer to the port of Higuerote, just a few miles away. Its population too had changed little, rising to just over 3,000 people (Acosta Saignes 1959). As in Martí's time, the villagers were mainly farmers with small orchards of cacao, citrus, and avocado. And festivals too were still times for social ties to be renewed, for families who spent much of the year isolated in the mountains to come to town to visit friends and to pay debts, both religious and otherwise. They were also times for people to drum and sing, activities at which Curiepe was said to be the very best. It was for this reason that Liscano went there, dragging his antique record-making machine with him.

Liscano had grown up in France and Switzerland. His stepfather, who had an enormous influence on him, had been the Venezuelan ambassador to the League of Nations. When Liscano returned home as a young man in 1934, Venezuela was like a foreign country to him. After studying law for three years, he decided to dedicate himself entirely to literature, associating with a movement known as *Nuevo Mundismo*. This movement, in response to the chaos that was engulfing Europe, sought to discover a new spiritual ideal disengaged from both war and politics. The New World for these artists and intellectuals was to be an "Americanist Utopia," free from all the contaminating ideologies now destroying the Old (Machado 1987: 40–41). This desire to discover an authentic American experience led Liscano to Curiepe and to the investigation of its Afro-Venezuelan music and lore. Although Liscano is now credited with initiating the scientific study of folklore in Venezuela, he insists that this was never his intention. In a 1987 interview, he stated: "I began studying folklore as a real life experience, in order to get close to the primitive, down-to-earth man, to what I thought to be that 'integrated' Venezuelan, because he was integrated with nature and tradition" (Machado 1987: 47).

With this predisposition, it is little surprise, perhaps, that the Sanjuanero described by Liscano is strikingly similar to that portrayed by Bishop Martí a century and a half before. But his sexually liberated

celebrants were not objects of scorn to be condemned. Rather, they were ideals for a newly emerging urban population who, dominated by European cultural values, perceived in them an unrepressed and joyous alternative. As Liscano wrote in *La fiesta de San Juan el Bautista*, "Among the blacks of Venezuela, the celebration of San Juan has lost almost all religious inspiration and has been overcome by rhythmicity, orgiastic power, and drunken energy. . . . The vital release achieved through frenetic dances, collective songs, velorios, and processions gave relief from the tensions created by an exploitative social regime" (1973: 47, 51).

Liscano's views, which reinforced not only the rupture between spirit and body but also the stereotype of black eroticism and licentiousness, were to have an important impact on both the future of Curiepe and the celebration of San Juan. Continuing to work in the area of folklore, Liscano was selected to head the Folklore Service when it was formed by the revolutionary junta in the fall of 1946. And then, two years later, when Rómulo Gallegos was inaugurated as the first popularly elected president in Venezuela's history, it was Liscano who was asked to organize the five-day Festival of Tradition, featuring the most representative groups from throughout the country. Of course, at this time the notion of "groups" was foreign to those who performed out of religious devotion in small and isolated rural communities. But Liscano, with the help of a choreographer and dress designer, succeeded in presenting sixteen different acts. There were Indians from the Guajira, Tamunangueros from Lara, the Parrandas of San Pedro, the Giros of San Benito, *comparsas*, *jinetes*, Diablos, Chimbangueles, and, of course, the drums of San Juan. The event, held in a Caracas bull ring and attended by thousands of people, was an extraordinary success. It was as if Venezuela had suddenly discovered itself and, responding to the need of a new democracy, created a people.<sup>11</sup> None of the groups presented had been known nationally or even outside the particular regions in which they resided. Yet, as a result of the festival, they had embarked on a long transformation into national identity.

Within ten months Gallegos was in exile in Mexico, and the dictatorship of Pérez Jiménez was installed. Liscano would renounce his position at the Folklore Service and then, four years later, also flee. But the image of San Juan, and particularly that associated with Curiepe, had become

part of the national consciousness forever. The changes brought about by this new association were nearly imperceptible at first. A group was formed to represent the community nationally. Called the Conjunto Folklórico San Juan de Curiepe, it played at festivals in Caracas and elsewhere. In 1950 the first paved road was completed, making it possible to journey to and from Caracas in a single day. Four years later electricity arrived. Dancers like Yolanda Moreno created arrangements based on San Juan to be performed on television. Articles, records, and even books appeared (Aretz 1953, 1955; Liscano 1947, 1950; Liscano and Seeger 1947; Ramón y Rivera 1951, 1963a, 1963b; Sojo 1943, 1959a, 1959b). The media began to refer to the entire month of June as the "Days of San Juan," treating it as if it were a national holiday. And little by little, tourists began to appear. By 1960 there were so many that the customary *velorios*, held in private households, could no longer be performed. As a result the community, under the leadership of a local doctor, decided to construct a cultural center in which the saint would be housed. They called it the Casa de Folklore "Juan Pablo Sojo, Hijo," after the man who had assisted Liscano and been the first to write about local folklore.

San Juan would no longer be an intimate celebration, sponsored by grateful individuals repaying *promesas* to a miraculous saint. It would now, befitting its new national status, be a public event organized by the community at large and open to all. The three *culo e' puya* drums would still have a privileged position beside the saint, but it would be in front of the stage at the Casa de Folklore. The *mina* and the *curbata*, meanwhile, would remain a half block away on a corner of the plaza. The structural relation of the two drum ensembles would remain the same. However, the space in which it occurred would move from the inside out, that is, from private to public or household to square. While this new manner of presenting the festival was certainly a radical change, it was but a prelude to even greater transformations about to come.

## san juan monumental

Not all the tourists who came to Curiepe for the celebration of San Juan were drawn by interests that articles or television programs had gener-

ated. Many were actually Curieperos who had migrated to Caracas and were now returning to experience contact with their regional heritage. Even blacks from other Barlovento communities began coming to Curiepe, convinced by both media and friends that this was the festival's most genuine expression. The fact that so many participants were emigrants on an annual pilgrimage to their homeland mediated San Juan's adaptation to its new conditions. Unlike descriptions of other festivals that have been converted from local and subregional holidays to national and even global ones, the increased popularity of San Juan did not result in what John Kelly refers to as a "heritage spectacle" (1990: 65), a staged event with a small core of "traditional" performers surrounded by a sea of passive onlookers. Here the majority of those labeled "tourists" did not come to observe and take photos. They came to participate, to dance, to be transported from a life of enforced marginalization to one of active centrality.<sup>12</sup>

Although Barloventeños had been migrating to Caracas for generations, it was not until the mid-1950s that this movement took on large-scale proportions (Pollak-Eltz 1979: 34). Attracted by new jobs in services and construction, immigrants attempting to re-create the conditions of family and support they had left behind began to fill up whole neighborhoods. One such neighborhood was San José, located just blocks above the Pantheon, where the national hero, Simón Bolívar, is buried. It was here that the great majority of those arriving from Curiepe settled. And it was here too that a group of them began to meet in 1969 to discuss ways to "help their community." It was the era of the Alliance for Progress, and Venezuela, like the rest of Latin America, was obsessed with the notion of development. But Venezuela, unlike its neighbors, was on the verge of an enormous boom. The price of oil alone, Venezuela's main export, would rise by more than 700 percent between 1970 and 1974 and then double again over the next eight years (Ewell 1984: 194). The Curieperos who met in the barrio of San José in Caracas thought it unforgivable that their community should be bypassed by this economic miracle. Their philosophy, as Pedro Roberto Ruíz, the self-proclaimed leader of the group, explained, was simple: "A village that does not progress lives abandoned forever. Which is to say, communities must progress.

It's obvious." Yet exactly how to incorporate this remote agricultural community into the growing economy of the rest of the country was not clear.

After several months of discussion, Ruíz's group concluded that Curiepe's main resource was culture, particularly the festival of San Juan. They believed that it would be possible, with proper organization and publicity, to promote this festival to the rest of the country. If they were successful, enough tourists would arrive to generate a permanent infrastructure of hotels, restaurants, and jobs. Eventually they dreamed of an enormous "drum park," so that tourists, as Ruíz put it, "could view the festival in an orderly fashion, with better execution and preparation." Drummers would be brought from all over Barlovento, and at the end of each festival prizes would be handed out. Of course, at the time (and even today), Curiepe had no accommodations whatsoever for tourists. But the Curiepe Prodevelopment Center (Centro Prodesarrollo de Curiepe), as Ruíz's group was now known, felt the most important thing was to first put the village on the map.

The nine-member core of Ruíz's group included individuals uniquely situated to mount a national publicity campaign. Two were journalists, while another worked in advertising, and still another in the census bureau. Ruíz himself was an officer attached to the accounting office of the air force.<sup>13</sup> It was therefore not difficult for him to gain access to the highest levels of government. After winning support from both the national and state congresses, he entered into an agreement with the National Tourist Board (Corporación Nacional de Turismo), which had just adopted a policy to promote festivals and other manifestations of local culture as tourist attractions. They decided that the 1970 San Juan celebration in Curiepe would be the centerpiece of an enormous folklore festival rivaling that organized by Juan Liscano in 1948. It would be promoted both in Venezuela and abroad and would be known as San Juan Monumental, the greatest San Juan ever held.

Working together, they designed a poster that would soon become the symbol of the festival. It showed three drummers playing *culo e' puya*. Shot from below like three great giants, they were dark and sweaty, the image of the black campesino caught in a moment of

authentic celebration. But the poster, which won a national award for photography, was by no means the only form of advertising. Ruíz went on a tour throughout the country, speaking to local groups and government officials. Ads appeared on television and radio. There were articles in magazines and newspapers. Automobiles with loudspeakers circulated throughout Caracas and other cities, announcing the festivities. And handbills floated through the streets everywhere. As Ruíz recalled, “We were really proud of the advertising we did. It got all the way to Japan. The Venezuelan ambassador there contacted us to say that the word was reaching them and that the people there were really interested in finding out more about San Juan Monumental.”

The advertising campaign was so successful that it brought more than 100,000 people to the village of Curiepe in the course of an eight-day period (Fig. 4). For San Juan Monumental included much more than the three days of traditional drumming. It was a *Semana Cultural*, a “Culture Week,” with performances by musical groups from every region of the country. As in the *Fiesta de la Tradición*, there were *Diablos* from Yare, *comparsas* from the Oriente, and the *Parrandas* of San Pedro. There were also groups that had not appeared there, such as the Calypso from El Callao and Luis Mariano Rivera, a famous folksinger from Carupano. And in the center of all the acts were the drummers of San Juan, playing nonstop for three entire days. As described by one of the festival’s organizers:

It was much greater than 1948. What we did was much more extensive. Of course we respected that one, yes. But what we did was to put a type of parentheses around our own folkloric tradition, which was on the 23rd, 24th, and 25th of June, the days of the drums of San Juan. There were no other folklore groups performing then. The days they performed were the 20th, 21st, and 22nd and the 26th and 27th. Because the 27th of June, by coincidence, fell on a Sunday. And so that day we presented Flor García, a popular lyrical singer, who closed San Juan Monumental at nine in the evening, singing his lyrical songs.

The strategy of locating the festival at the center of a new national culture effected a brilliant recontextualization of meanings. From a local saint’s day celebrating both religious piety and ethnic heritage the fes-



*Figure 4.* San Juan being carried from the church, preceded by the culo e' puya and celebrants. (Photograph by David M. Guss)

tival was converted into the main act of a national variety show. The “parentheses” within which it was now enclosed formed an essential part of the new meaning the festival organizers were trying to construct. Illustrating what Goffman characterized as the problem of “brackets” in relation to spectacles and games, San Juan Monumental had encased one ritual event (the game) within another (the spectacle). The resulting ambiguity, as to “whether the outer or inner realms [were] of chief concern” (Goffman 1974: 263) was one the village of Curiepe was not yet ready to confront. For those who had organized the event, however, the festival had been an unqualified success. Their goal had been simple: to incorporate the community into the national economy. Yet their strategy was to start with the culture, and to relocate it as squarely as possible at the center of the national one. While San Juan Monumental clearly achieved this end, its effect on both the festival itself and the local economy was one neither the organizers nor the villagers had foreseen.

The following year, 1971, the festival was celebrated in much the same way. A new committee, composed entirely of people living in Curiepe, took over its organization. To differentiate their events from those of the year before, they renamed the week of cultural activities San Juan Sensacional. For most Venezuelans, this name evoked one of the country's most popular television shows, an eight-hour extravaganza of variety acts broadcast on Saturdays and called *Sábado Sensacional*. This link to the state media was yet another step in the nationalization process begun by Juan Liscano in the 1940s. The government also continued its contribution to this process by naming Curiepe the "National Folklore Village" and at the same time instituting a system of nominal payments for many of the festival's drummers, thus tying local performers not simply to the patronage of the state government but, in a more dangerous way, to the particular party that was giving it out.<sup>14</sup>

While San Juan Sensacional was not quite the success of the previous year's event, it nevertheless established the festival as an annual attraction for people throughout the country. Hence, when the Culture Week program was suspended altogether in 1972, it had little impact on the number of visitors who still came to Curiepe to celebrate. Many of those who came, however, were attracted less by an interest in folklore than by what they perceived as an African bacchanal dedicated to drums, drugs, and free love. It was the image Liscano himself had fabricated twenty-five years earlier, of a people "overcome by rhythmicity, orgasmic power, and drunken energy" (1973: 47). These stereotypes of black hedonism and sensuality generated a new audience for the festival, which in turn imposed its own carnivalesque definitions. Visitors from Caracas regularly spent the day at the beach and then in late afternoon appeared scantily clad in bikinis or shorts. They replaced the traditional dance, in which couples gracefully moved forward and back, with long chains of whirling groups, all howling and shouting in unison. Motorcycle gangs began to arrive, and knifings and fights were not uncommon. Villagers were scandalized and, by the mid-1970s, were spending most of the festival sheltered in their homes. As Angel Lucci, a community organizer who was then a young man growing up in Curiepe, recalled:

In the final years people didn't even participate. Motorcycle gangs came and took over the town. It was an incredible disaster. . . . No one could sleep. My mother and grandmother hid. They were totally terrified because it had become really ugly. Curiepe had handed its San Juan over to the tourists.<sup>15</sup>

But it was not merely the tourists who had invaded San Juan. Commercial interests had begun to arrive as well, particularly tobacco and beer companies. On the days preceding the holiday, they sent groups to hang posters and pennants, not simply to advertise their products but to associate their names as closely as possible with that of the saint. As the tourists entered, they passed beneath enormous banners welcoming them to the drums of San Juan, courtesy of either a cigarette or a rum. And the drummers were now dressed in T-shirts with the name of a beer on the front and that of San Juan on the back. Those setting up stalls to sell alcohol and food were not from Curiepe either, and none of their profits remained in the community. The vision of Ruíz's group had not materialized. The village, which numbered less than 3,000 people (Brandt 1978: 10), still had not a single hotel or restaurant. And instead of enjoying the economic miracle it had been promised, Curiepe now braced itself once a year to be invaded. Those studying the festival at this time all wrote of its serious decline, predicting that, unless changes were made, it would likely disappear (Brandt 1978: 333–338; Chacón 1979: 110; Liscano 1973: 52).

### san juan cimarrón

The mid-1970s was a time of enormous change, not simply in Curiepe but throughout Venezuela. The tremendous influx of foreign currency caused by the rapid inflation of world oil prices was resulting in a massive demographic and cultural transformation. In her book *Venezuela: A Century of Change*, Judith Ewell refers to this period as “the petrolization of the national problems” (1984: 193–226). It gave birth, she notes, to a long list of new programs and organizations initiated by the governments of both Carlos Andrés Pérez and his successor, Luis Herrera

Campíns. Many of these programs, such as the formation of the Biblioteca Ayacucho in 1974 and the Consejo Nacional de la Cultura (National Council of Culture, or CONAC) the following year, were attempts to distribute this new wealth to the cultural sector.

Other programs, however, were responses to the various forms of social dislocation that had accompanied the economic boom. One such program, sponsored by the Ministry of Justice, was the "Cultural Division of Crime Prevention." Despite its somewhat inauspicious name, this small pilot program was a type of urban Peace Corps, sending out small cadres of idealistic men and women to targeted marginal neighborhoods. Their plan was to create "centers of activity" that in turn would generate community leadership, pride, and autonomy. Although Curiepe fell outside the urban mandate for this project, one of its organizers, Jesús Blanco, suggested that it nevertheless be included.<sup>16</sup>

Blanco was aware from previous visits to Curiepe that its youth were extremely disaffected from any organized cultural activities. In fact, the predictions of Max Brandt (1978: 335) and others concerning the future of San Juan were based on the lack of participation or interest of any of the younger generation. Blanco began with an ambitious sports program, bringing young people together to compete on basketball, volleyball, and other teams. It was the first time that such sports had been introduced in any organized way, and the youth of Curiepe responded with enthusiasm. Once these groups had been formed, Blanco had little trouble in translating their energy into other cultural realms. Many of those who participated in the new sports program had been upset by the invasion of tourists and the exploitation it had engendered. With Blanco's help, they developed a plan that would not only limit the impact of these visitors but also restore the community's control over the festival. The group, with twenty-two core members, would eventually become known as the Centro Cultural y Deportivo de Curiepe (the Curiepe Culture and Sport Center).

The initial activities of this group, which began with the celebration of 1975, were both educational and supervisory. They believed that if tourists were only informed of the festival's history and religious significance, much of the destructive behavior would disappear. They dis-

tributed length pamphlets with histories of the community and detailed descriptions of each aspect of the festival. A small museum was created in an old house just off the plaza. Brigades were formed to patrol the village and to enforce a new dress code that would be more respectful of a religious holiday. Shorts and swimwear were now forbidden, as was the use of alcohol in the presence of the saint. The group also attacked the festival's commercialization, and when attempts to discourage the hanging of pennants and banners failed, members pulled them down themselves.

In time, the sale of food and alcohol was also controlled. In order to prevent profits from leaving the community, organizers restricted concessions to local charitable and educational groups. And when drummers were finally convinced to reject all government stipends, a system of food and beverage coupons was established. It was a brilliant rerouting of reciprocity, giving the traditional *velorio* system new life. Instead of being paid directly by a family sponsoring the *velorio*, drummers now registered with the festival directorate and, after playing, were given vouchers that could be used at the concessions of other village members, who were in turn receiving payments from tourists. It took several years before these innovations were fully in place. In fact, only after Jesús Blanco left in 1978 did the Curiepe Culture and Sport Center finally assume total control of the festival, replacing the board that had directed it since the time of Pedro Ruíz.

One of the first decisions of the new leadership was to revive the Culture Week of 1970 and 1971. The group's intentions, however, could not have been farther from those of Ruíz and his San Juan Monumental. Instead of trying to recontextualize the festival within a larger, national framework, the Culture Week of 1979 would attempt to restore it to its original one. As such, there were to be no "parentheses," only a single bracket or arrow leading back to what its organizers called "its true meaning." The events presented, therefore, would all precede San Juan, making it clear that the festival should be understood as an end in itself. They would also help to firmly relocate it within a single community and people. The groups invited would no longer be a sampling of Venezuela's most popular folkloric acts. Instead, they would be a carefully

orchestrated demonstration of what the festival would now represent. For the Culture Week was no longer meant to be a simple entertainment devised to attract as many tourists as possible. It was now to be a heuristic tool, as the slogan heading the program unequivocally announced:

comrade  
we invite you to participate  
in a full week of work and recreation  
join and struggle

A wide range of activities was now presented, including movies, plays, lectures, and even a book party.<sup>17</sup> Yet all of them shared a vision of regional and ethnic autonomy. A special symposium on the question of “indigenism” was held, and the film *Yo hablo a Caracas* shown. This film, which Carlos Azpúrua had just completed, was a dramatic appeal by the Yekuana Indians to have their land and culture respected.<sup>18</sup> This show of solidarity with the indigenist movement underlined the feeling of many that Barlovento’s culture had also been colonized and was in the same need of protection. The language included in the Culture Week program borrowed heavily from the indigenist literature that was just starting to circulate. The culture now in danger, however, was the Afro-Venezuelan, as statements such as the following made clear:

The cultural manifestations of the Barlovento area, which is to say those of Afro-Venezuelan origin, have been heavily attacked—at times to the point of disappearing—by so-called civilization. As such, we have seen how the drum festivals of Barlovento have taken on a cheap and commercial meaning, instead of those of solidarity and struggle. At the same time, we have seen how our cultural and moral values have been replaced by cultural values different from those of our Afro-Venezuelan identity. All of which shows the transculturation and domination by other cultures. (Centro Cultural y Deportivo de Curiepe 1979)

The Culture Week would now attempt to reassert these values. Surrounded by a series of aggressively regionalist, Afro-Venezuelan performances, the festival would be symbolically recast. It would shed its image as a national extravaganza and be “re-Africanized.” If Curiepe

was experiencing a crisis caused by both the loss of citizens through emigration and the influx of strangers through tourism, then the festival would be a tool in reconsolidating its identity once again.<sup>19</sup> To do so, the aspects of San Juan that would be emphasized were those of liberation and resistance. For the Barloventeño, the festival would soon be as much a historical performance as a religious celebration. As such, the focus would now be less on the saint and more on the drums (Fig. 5). Or, as the commonly quoted statement by Juan Pablo Sojo, a local writer, went, “The drum is the cross of the black Christ” (1976 [1943]: 154).

Drums, of course, had served as images of resistance not only in Venezuela but throughout the Caribbean. In neighboring Trinidad they had become the symbol of a carnival that had been transformed from “a high-society affair of elaborate balls” to an ecstatic celebration of emancipated slaves (Hill 1972: 10). When the former European masters attempted to suppress these new expressions of liberation, they did so by outlawing the use of drums, a strategy that was to have disastrous though ultimately unsuccessful results (1972: 6–31). It is interesting that when the steel drums that replaced the originally suppressed ones began to appear in London’s Notting Hill Carnival in the early 1970s, their symbolic power was much the same. As Abner Cohen describes, however, there was also an appropriate transformation:

The steel band has acquired a powerful symbolic significance well beyond the making of loud rhythms. . . . In the first place, there is a feeling of pride and elation at its invention, and many Carnival leaders emphasize that the pan is the only musical instrument invented in the twentieth century. . . . At the same time, with its rust, rough edges, and clumsy appearance, the pan is the symbol of poverty and social disadvantage, a protest that in lands of plenty, endowed with so many sophisticated musical instruments, a people should be forced to pick up abandoned shells to express their artistic feelings. (1980: 71)<sup>20</sup>

The close symbolic connection of drums to expressions of freedom and protest, particularly during carnival, has led more than one government to convert this holiday into a celebration of political independence. In Cuba, for example, carnival has been moved to the beginning of January,



*Figure 5.* San Juan drummers playing the mina. (Photograph by David M. Guss)

where it now commemorates the overthrow of the Batista government by Fidel Castro. And in Antigua it is celebrated not during the days before Lent but rather on August 1, the date on which the slaves were emancipated. It is therefore not surprising that its celebration is characterized, as Frank Manning noted, by “regional awareness [and] expressions of racial solidarity” (1977: 269).

Although the Festival of San Juan should not be confused with carnival, it nevertheless has a similar historic relation to the experience of liberation and slavery that many New World carnivals have. In redesigning the program for the new Culture Week, its organizers were attempting to highlight this relation and to present a past not of docile submission but rather of proud, resolute resistance. For them, San Juan embodied this history, and the performance of the festival was a sacred re-creation of it. Its performance was not simply the fulfillment of a promise or the reenactment of an ancient fertility rite; it was a magical return to a moment of origin, which, as Duvignaud noted, following Eliade (1959) and Caillois (1959), is what “gives life to history” (1976: 21). The transformation of the festival into such a “paradigmatic event” (Eliade 1959:34) depended on the invocation and recharging of a number of symbolic associations. Most of these derived their power, however, from a concept known as *cimarronaje*.

Difficult to translate into English, particularly because the closest word we have, “maroon,” is already a Spanish cognate, *cimarronaje* is the quality or ethos of a *cimarrón*, an escaped slave. In Venezuela, as elsewhere in the New World, the escaped slave, whether in a *cumbe*, *quilombo*, *palenque*, or free village, was a source of inspiration for those still in bondage (García 1990: 53).<sup>21</sup> They represented a refusal to submit either physically or culturally to the brutalizing institution of slavery, for the *cimarrón* communities hidden away in the mountains and swamps of the Americas often still maintained a rich African cultural heritage (García 1989, 1990; Guerra Cedeño 1984; Price 1983; Price and Price 1980). When invoking the concept of *cimarronaje* today, the Afro-Venezuelan refers not merely to a past history but to a living tradition still determined to resist the domination of a European ruling class. It recognizes that the black Venezuelan remains a marginalized,

economically oppressed citizen who must find solutions within his or her own community.

Conversely, when elements of Afro-Venezuelan culture have already been absorbed into the centralized system of power, it is claimed that the community must *cimarronear*, or “cimarronize” them, which is to say, they must “re-Africanize” them, repositioning both their control and their meaning in the society that generated them. This, of course, is precisely what the new directors of the San Juan Festival were now trying to do. They were attempting to “cimarronize” it by showing the festival’s direct links to an ongoing tradition of autonomy and resistance. Several of the strategies used to connect the contemporary reality of Barlovento to that of its cimarrón history have already been mentioned. With its performances, lectures, and conferences, the Culture Week, which has continued with brief lapses up to the present, sought to effect this recontextualization and to provide the people of Barlovento with a new language in which to speak about both their traditions and themselves.<sup>22</sup> It was not long, therefore, before people began to speak of the festival, as Bernardo Sanz did, as the commemoration of the three days of freedom that the slaves had in order to plan either rebellions or individual escapes.

Even the origin of the festival was firmly relocated in the cimarrón experience (see Fig. 6). Participants claimed that the songs and other musical powers of the celebration derived from an escaped slave named José Larito. Larito, also known as José Hilario or Calvarito, had arrived in Venezuela on a French slave ship from the Gold Coast. With him was an African prince who, upon discovering that he was about to be sold into slavery, took a piece of tin and slit his throat. As the prince was dying, Larito reached down and scooped up the prince’s blood, quickly covering his entire body with it. After a brief period of enslavement, during which he was particularly abused, Larito fled into the mountains and formed his own *cumbe*. But on the 23rd of June each year he would appear in Curiepe for the celebration of San Juan, leading the drumming and singing, and then, on the evening of the 25th, would escape once more with a new group of cimarrones. The Spanish, of course, did all they could to catch him. But the power of the prince’s blood allowed Larito either to become invisible or to take another form.



*Figure 6.* “Africa Is Also Our Mother Country,” mural by Javier Rodríguez on the Casa de Folklore, Curiepe. (Photograph by David M. Guss)

The tale of José Larito, which exists in both written and oral versions, is a perfect example of the “cimarronizing” process (Sojo 1959b; Uslar Pietri 1975). By locating the germinating force of the festival in the deeds of a culture hero such as Larito, there is a transference in the locus of power from that of a Catholic saint’s day to one of historical remembrance.<sup>23</sup> This is particularly significant when one realizes that the name José Larito is directly derived from that of Don Joseph Hilario Tinoco, the priest sent to Curiepe in November 1731 to establish the first church there (Castillo Lara 1981b: 144; Chacón 1979: 21). Thus, on another level, the tale is also “cimarronizing” the community’s origin, converting the priest credited with its founding into a cimarrón hero. But of all the attempts to identify the festival with an African past of struggle and liberation, none has been so important as the Africanization of San Juan himself.

## san juan congo

The pale-skinned San Juan Bautista, with his burnished red cheeks and painted nails, was not always the figure carried through the streets of Curiepe and sung to for three days and nights. In fact, Curieperos, though reluctant to speak of it, acknowledge that this saint is something of a newcomer. Until at least 1870 there was another San Juan, the one claimed to have been the original. Referred to as San Juan Congo, this figure was also carved of wood and coated in plaster. Yet unlike the one that replaced it, San Juan Congo is said to have been black. He also had a phallus, a common feature for many African figures but totally unknown for a Christian one. Like many other icons, San Juan Congo was the personal property of a single family, who, on the saint's day, lent it to the community to be celebrated.<sup>24</sup> Toward the end of the nineteenth century, possession of "the Congo," as he is commonly known, passed to a local doctor named Nicomedes Blanco Gil. At about that time—the precise date is difficult to ascertain—San Juan Congo suddenly stopped appearing. Some say he vanished because an indiscretion was directed toward the doctor's wife as she was walking through the streets. Enraged by such disrespect, Blanco Gil decided to punish the entire community, and he refused to lend them the saint from that moment on. Others, however, claim that the church, upset by the saint's phallus, pressured the doctor to retire it.

Faced with the dilemma of having no saint with which to celebrate their festival, members of the community approached the family of Enrique Moscoso, who had just arrived from neighboring Birongo and was the owner of a much-admired image of San Juan. This image now became the official one of Curiepe, and while San Juan Congo was still celebrated on the fourth of August for several years, it was soon almost entirely forgotten. Passing into the hands of Blanco Gil's illegitimate daughter, María Poncho, the saint remained an almost hidden figure. Then, in the late 1970s, nearly a century after it had been replaced, a group decided to ask Poncho if they could borrow her San Juan and hold a *velorio*.

Although the *velorio* coincided with the other innovations surrounding the celebration of San Juan, it was held not during the festival itself

but four days later, on the Day of San Pedro. This way, the organizers avoided the intrusion of any tourists and succeeded, as they had hoped, in re-creating the celebration as it had existed before the arrival of Liscano and others. It was to become, as people said, “our festival,” “the one of the village,” “the real one,” and it has been held in relative secrecy since 1979 without any publicity or national attention. For while substantial changes could be made in the organization and performance of the festival as it occurred from the 23rd to the 25th of June, the tourists and national celebrity they represented were now a permanent (and not entirely unwelcome) part of it.<sup>25</sup> The *velorio* to San Juan Congo, on the other hand, permitted the village to complete the cycle of historical recuperation already under way. The symbols surrounding this event, therefore, were a powerfully orchestrated return to origins.

Instead of celebrating the *velorio* in the plaza, the participants held it in the ruins of Curiepe’s former church, called the *Capilla* (chapel). Sitting atop a hill overlooking the main square, the *Capilla* was Curiepe’s sole church from the earthquake of 1811 until the construction of a new one in the village center in 1959. At one time, members of the community planned to construct a new school in its place, but after tearing down most of the old structure and rebuilding some walls, they simply left it as a shell. Today it sits as a symbol of the surrounding neighborhood of the same name, a neighborhood associated with Curiepe’s poorest citizens and best musicians. “The people above” (*el pueblo arriba*), as they are known, have developed a certain resentment for those they call “the people below” (*el pueblo abajo*), the town’s more well-to-do and powerful citizens, who live in the larger homes around the square. For many years the people of La *Capilla* had complained that the celebration of San Juan was too restricted, that it should not be limited to the main square but should also be performed in the upper part of the village. Now, with the new *velorio* of the 29th of June, “the people above” feel that they finally have their own San Juan. María Poncho herself lives in a small house within two blocks of the *Capilla*, so this neighborhood takes sole responsibility for organizing the night-long event.

At 2:00 in the afternoon, a mixture of people, old and young, men and women, begin to arrive to decorate the remains of the *Capilla*. They place palm fronds against the walls, both inside and out, and create a thatched

ceiling, from which a selection of local fruits is hung. Above the altar where the saint will be installed is placed the most important crop, cacao, and then, spiraling out in an improvised hierarchy, are all the other locally cultivated plants: a bunch of bananas, a long, curved pod of guamo, shoots of sugarcane, pineapple, passion fruit, guanabana, almonds, cashews, coconut, and a score of other rich tropical fruits that reach back to the entranceway, covering the entire ceiling. A few lights are run from a lamppost, and the altar is modestly decorated with flowers and a painted velvet hanging. At dusk a young boy arrives, nearly unnoticed, with the saint. A group close to the altar begins to play *culo e' puya* and sing. And outside, 20 yards from the church entrance, others start on the *mina* and *curbata*. Both ensembles will continue playing throughout the night, with people coming from the entire village to dance, drum, sing, and drink. And, of course, to see San Juan Congo, to touch him, to ask him for a favor, to simply stand and silently pray.

It is significant that this *velorio*, held annually since 1979, has escaped the attention given the preceding three days of celebration. For if the consistent arrival of outsiders converted the original Festival of San Juan into a public event to be held in the village plaza, the new *velorio* has restored it to a private (and, for the participants, "authentic") one. It has also returned the celebration to its original location, the *Capilla*, where for generations *Curieperos* worshiped and met. This "return" is especially meaningful when one recalls that the move from the *Capilla* to the new church coincided with the construction of the *Casa de Folklore* and, hence, the move of San Juan from individual home to public square. Both of these restorations, to private space and primary location, must be seen as contributing to what is perhaps the fundamental restoration: that of the original community.

But the most important element in this obvious primordialization of the festival remains its return to the original saint, San Juan Congo. As with the events surrounding the new Culture Week, the symbolism underlying this restitution was also powered by its relation to *cimarronaje*, although not simply because San Juan Congo was said to be black and hence African. The story of his origins also linked him to a past of liberation and struggle, just as that of the festival linked it to the *cimarrón*

hero José Larito. In the version recounted by Juan Pablo Sojo (1986: 168–172), two African princes, who are also brothers, arrive in the port of La Sabana to be sold into slavery. They are brought to a plantation in Curiepe owned by a hacendado named Blanco. Once there, they show a remarkable if not uncanny skill in the growing of cacao. Although treated with particular deference because of this, the younger of the two brothers grows increasingly melancholy and finally takes his own life. The surviving brother continues to bring prosperity to his master and then one day is suddenly given his freedom, along with a small piece of land. Soon after, Blanco dies and the former slave takes his name. The fortune and prestige of the new Señor Blanco continue to increase, with slaves and free blacks coming to him for support and advice. Then, just before the celebration of San Juan, he proposes that they form a society to purchase the freedom of two or three slaves a year. He begins by contributing enough to buy the freedom of at least three of the most expensive. Moreover, he commissions a carver to make a saint for the new order, a San Juan, said to cost 2,000 pesos and to include gold dust.<sup>26</sup>

While this tale may exemplify what John Watanabe refers to as “myths of saintly origins [that] complete the localization of . . . once-Catholic figures” (1990: 138), it nevertheless contains many verifiable historical elements. In the record of his visit in 1784, Bishop Martí writes of a slave freed by Don Alejandro Blanco Villegas in order to clear and settle the area around Curiepe (García 1985: 5). And documents brought to light in 1981 by the historian Lucas Guillermo Castillo Lara verify that the village was indeed founded by a group of free blacks. The leader of this group, which arrived in Curiepe a full ten years before Father Joseph Hilario founded his church, was named Juan del Rosario Blanco (Castillo Lara 1981a, 1981b).<sup>27</sup>

Even more significant, perhaps, was the existence, not only in Venezuela but throughout the Caribbean and Brazil, of what were known as “liberation banks.” These “emancipation credit unions,” as Sheila Walker refers to them, were set up by both slaves and free blacks in order to make funds available for the purchase of “free papers” (1986: 29–30).<sup>28</sup> It is precisely this form of sanctioned subversion that Blanco and his collaborators set up in Curiepe and for which San Juan Congo

was to serve as a symbol. By fusing the history of this liberation movement with the origin of the saint, San Juan is not simply Africanized; he becomes the ultimate expression of cimarronaje, a precursor not simply of Jesus but of freedom.

Because of my awareness of the special regard in which San Juan Congo was held and the role that his "blackness" played in creating this esteem, I was somewhat stunned when I finally had the opportunity to see him. For in reality he was not black at all, a bit darker, perhaps, than the porcelain-skinned San Juan of the Moscosos but certainly not black, at least not like Venezuela's other black saints, such as San Benito de Palermo and San Martín de Porres. In fact, in addition to being light skinned and having Caucasian features, the two-foot-high San Juan Congo also had curly blond hair. When I discussed this issue with friends of mine in the community, they appeared quite shocked. How could I not see that he was black? Yes, perhaps a restorer had been a bit overzealous in cleaning him, they confided. Nevertheless, it was still clear that he was black. After several of these discussions, I began to realize that the issues of blackness signified by San Juan Congo were much more profound than simple pigmentation. In fact, I eventually came to understand that it was actually the absence of color that made San Juan such a powerful symbol of it. For the blackness represented here was that of poverty and oppression. It was the economic and social marginalization that had defined the African condition since the arrival of the first slaves in the early 1500s. And indeed, although San Juan Congo might not have appeared black, he was certainly poor. His broken fingers, the lack of any toes, the irregularity of his skin, all were in sharp contrast to the elegance of his wealthy namesake celebrated by "the people below" (Fig. 7).

But like all "dominant symbols," the color of San Juan is loaded with contradiction and ambiguity (Turner 1975). Hence, it also speaks directly to Venezuela's resolute denial of any color at all. In what might be called the myth of *mestizaje*, historians, philosophers, writers, and even anthropologists have consistently claimed that in Venezuela the issue of race does not exist, that all ethnic groups have blended together in a harmonious and indistinguishable new entity called the *mestizo*. Juan



*Figure 7.* San Juan Congo. (Photograph by David M. Guss)

Liscano, one of the first to write about African cultures in Venezuela, stated that "Racial differences were absorbed in the cruel process of our national formation, and today there is no 'black problem' as there is in the United States, with its unforgivable discrimination. What exists is a class problem, just as there is everywhere" (1950: 86).

This commonly held view, that discrimination is the result not of race but rather of class, is the focus of Winthrop Wright's study, *Café con leche: Race, Class, and National Image in Venezuela* (1990). In it, Wright makes a distinction between what he calls the "creed of racial democracy," which maintains that no discrimination based upon color exists, and the "idea of racial equality" itself, a belief somewhat less realized (1990: 111). It is this "seeming paradox" that Wright addresses, showing that if blacks were able to emerge from both racial and economic oppression, they were able to do so not through acceptance but through miscegenation, for "the myth of racial democracy's basic premise [was] that blacks achieved great things in Venezuela only as they whitened themselves and their offspring" (1990: 115).<sup>29</sup> Racial democracy, then, was not the absence of prejudice; it was simply the license to transform one's ethnic identity. The awareness of any prejudice based on color was therefore effectively masked by a belief system that did not recognize racial diversity. Instead, it insisted that anyone discriminated against was selected because he or she was poor. But, as Wright points out, such reasoning was hopelessly circuitous, for "the majority of blacks were poor because they were black" (1990: 5).<sup>30</sup>

So widespread was this color-blind view of Venezuelan society that even social scientists subscribed to it, insisting that even those identified as black did not necessarily consider themselves to be. As one of Venezuela's leading students of Afro-American traditions, Angelina Pollak-Eltz, wrote:

In Venezuela there is little racial consciousness or discrimination due to skin color. The fact remains, however, that the majority of Afro-venezuelans belong to the lower strata of society. This is due to class differences, lack of educational opportunities for the rural sector, and little spatial mobility until recently. Africa has no meaning for Barloventeños, who consider themselves "criollos" just like Venezuelans elsewhere. (1979: 31)<sup>31</sup>

For the people of Barlovento, such statements, along with the pattern of denial they represent, are but another step in the systematic erasure of the Afro-Venezuelan's cultural and racial history. The fact that San Juan Congo is such a powerful symbol of blackness without actually being black, therefore, reveals much about the issue of race itself in Venezuela. To those celebrating at the Capilla, San Juan Congo is clearly black. Yet it is a blackness that only they appear able (or willing) to perceive. Like the cimarrones who continue to inspire it, it is dissembled and hidden. But the power of San Juan Congo, like that of all religious experience, is the power to make the unseen visible.