

ENJOY THE FESTIVAL OF SAN JUAN BAUTISTA (JOHN THE BAPTIST)

One of the most storied cultural celebrations in South America will take place this June in Barlovento. Barlovento, in the state of Miranda, is the region of Venezuela that is most thickly populated by descendants of African slaves. The majority of the cultural expressions of Barlovento are based on religious and recreational activities that found their origins in colonial times.

According to Jesus Chucho Garcia, the preeminent authority on AfroVenezuelan culture, the traditional AfroVenezuelan fiesta is a state of collective spiritualism motivated by a celebration that revolves around a saint, a death, a harvest, the start of a fishing expedition or some other recurring activity that the community plays an important role in. The celebration of San Juan Bautista evolved as a result of the religious imposition placed on AfroVenezuelans by the Spanish crown during colonial times. As a way of reinforcing the system of slavery, the white slave owners forced African slaves and their descendants to honor San Juan Bautista as the patron saint by praying and paying homage to him. The Blacks interpreted the celebration as an attempt by the slave holders to convince them that, even in heaven, they would encounter a spiritual equivalent to the master who ruled them on earth.

However, as Chucho Garcia makes perfectly clear, the Africans had their own religious beliefs, mythologies and symbols. They therefore used their drums, songs, rhythms and dances to reinforce their own religious beliefs, and transformed the celebration that was meant to strengthen the hold of slavery into a festival of liberation. The result is that the celebration of San Juan Bautista simultaneously sought contrary objectives; as a tool of the church and masters of the plantation to resign the slaves to their status, and as a celebration by the slaves and their descendants that reaffirmed the call for liberty that burned in their hearts as strong as ever. In fact, on June 24, 1749, the Blacks in this region had planned a huge rebellion to coincide with the celebration of San Juan Bautista. The whites got wind of the rebellion and nipped it in the bud.

Each year the Society of San Juan Bautista organizes the celebration of the saint whose namesake it carries. The celebration, which begins on the 23rd of June, consists of acknowledgments of grace, carrying the saint to the river in order to bathe him, and making pious offerings. On June 24, a church mass is conducted, the saint is removed from the church, and a procession is made to a home or cultural center. There San Juan will be placed on an altar adorned with flowers, cacao, and a variety of fruit. During all of this time, the drums will be beating out relevant African rhythms. Finally, on June 25, the saint is returned to the church to be confined until the following year. Throughout the day, as always during the festival, the drums beat amidst a continuing give and take between a soloist and a chorus. The message of the soloist is that if San Juan Bautista knew when he would be honored, he would gladly come down from heaven with a crown on his head and dressed in black. The response of the chorus is to repeatedly invoke the name of Malembe, the traditional protector of the community who came with them from Africa (Congo).

Luis Perdomo, Assistant Director of the Andres Bello Multicultural Center in San Jose de Barlovento, explained that the celebration of San Juan Bautista takes place throughout Barlovento, but is centered around the small town of Curiepe. Curiepe is where the first town of freed Afrovenezuelans was founded.

This year's festival promises to be as spiritually uplifting and energetic as ever. The syncopated rhythms of the drums, the wind filled with songs of joy, deliverance and energy, and spirits engulfed with hope as each person remembers that the world can be a better place. One can not fully appreciate its magic unless it is witnessed first hand. Join me there. You will not regret it.