

How I “discovered” the Afro-Hispanic varieties of the Chota Valley (Ecuador)

It began in the summer of 1984, while I was teaching at the University of Houston. I had organized a study-abroad program in Quito, Ecuador, having made preliminary arrangements in earlier trips, and we were staying in a very modest residential hotel near the public university where our classes were held. By this time I had become interested in the linguistic remnants of the African diaspora in Latin America, and I was aware of the only Afro-Ecuadoran groups that were widely known at the time, in the coastal province of Esmeraldas. Novelists such as Nelson Estupiñán Bass and Adalberto Ortiz had brought this region to the attention of scholars of Latin American literature and culture, and I had decided to visit Esmeraldas during the little free time that my academic caregiver responsibilities allowed (e.g. on weekends). In fact I did manage to travel to Esmeraldas and carry out some interesting interviews, including speakers from the then remote village of Uimbí and the anthropologist and author Julio Estupiñán Tello, but the best was yet to come. During a casual conversation with a colleague from the Universidad Central, I mentioned my interest in Afro-Hispanic communities and in particular the Afro-Ecuadorans in Esmeraldas. Much to my surprise, the colleague told me that there were also Afro-descendent communities in the highland provinces of Imbabura and Carchi, to the north of Quito. At that time the (= my) received wisdom was that Afro-Hispanic communities were found nearly exclusively in coastal areas, originally the product of the Atlantic slaving trade; at least these were the only communities for which linguistic descriptions were widely available. Intrigued, I asked the colleagues what the speech of these highland Afro-Ecuadorans sounded like; the answer: “como los negros de Esmeraldas” [like the Black people in Esmeraldas]. This facile stereotype turned out to be totally inaccurate, a reflection of latent racism and general indifference. When I asked how I could learn more, he told me that a former Golden Gloves boxer, Ramiro “Clay” Bolaños (from Cassius Clay, the heavyweight champion later known as Muhammad Ali) had a boxing gym in Quito. Thus began a decades-long exploration that taught me much about the fate of enslaved Africans in interior regions. When I met Bolaños in his gym, my initial misgivings were quickly dispelled; he welcomed the intrepid Gringo warmly, and told me that by mentioning his name alone, I would be welcome in Chota (the first time I heard this name). He was very pleased that someone was interested in his (then almost unknown) community and culture, and during our interview I already noticed that his speech had some unique characteristics that were nothing like the coastal Esmeraldas dialect.



Club Academia de Box J. W. K.

Ramiro Clay Bolaños
THE BOXING MANAGER

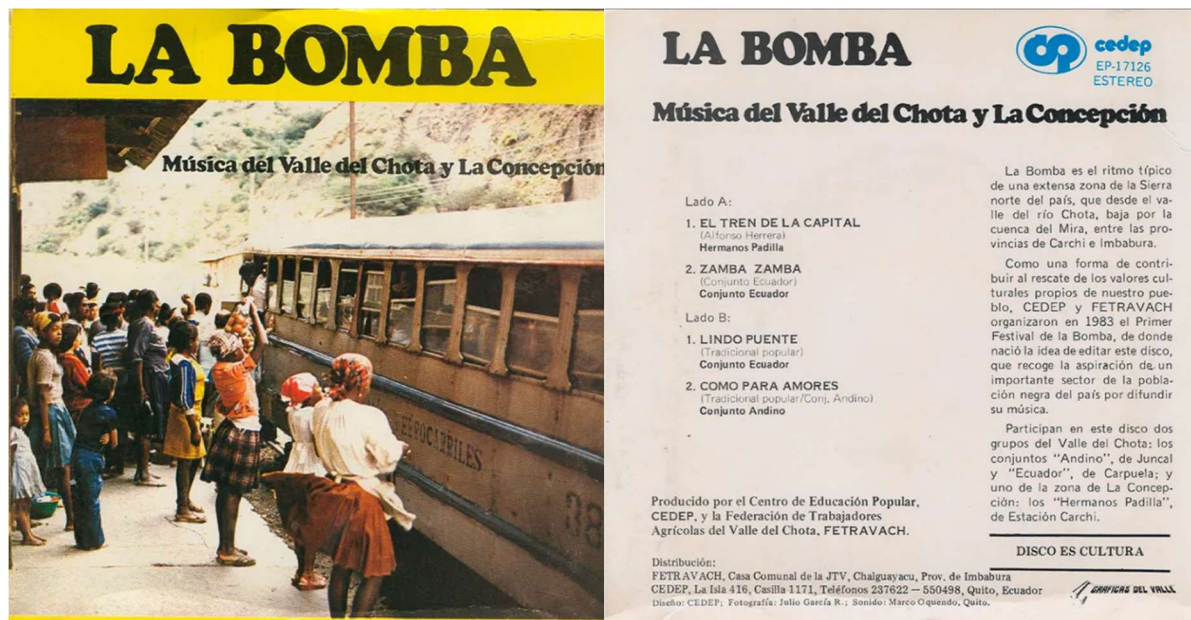
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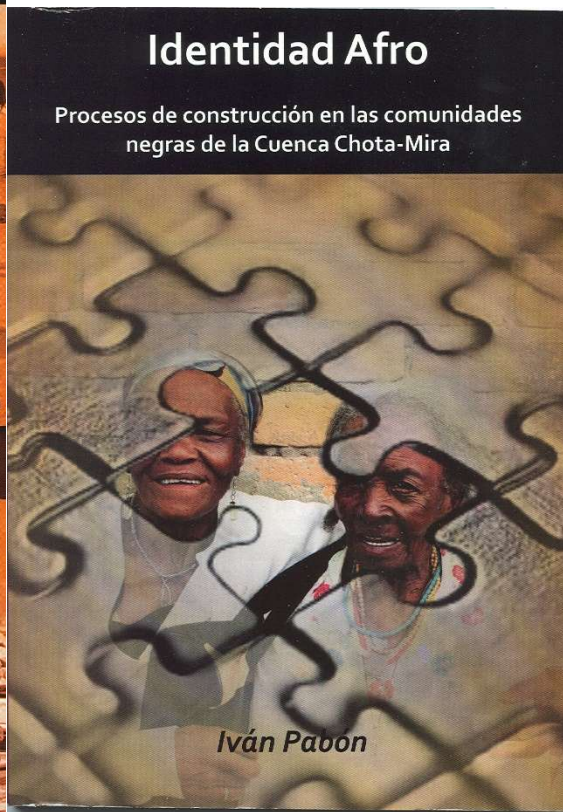
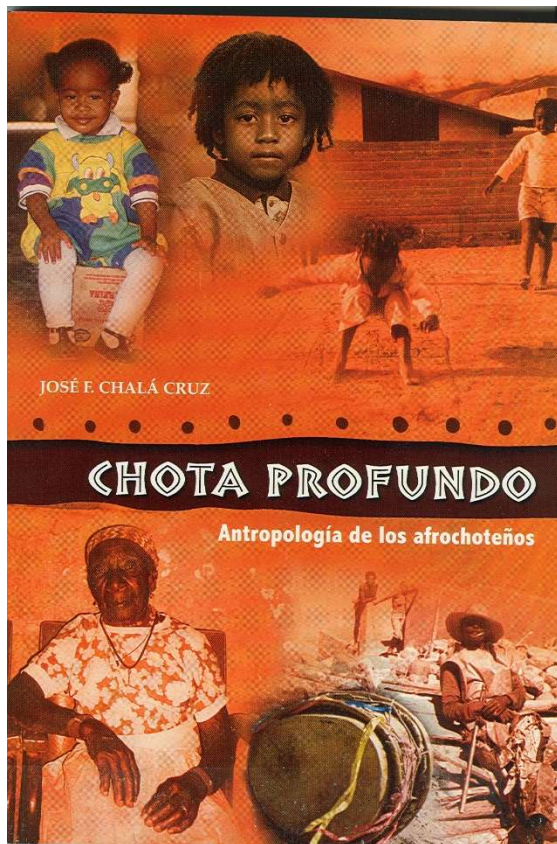
Modesto.
Amigo mío Recibe un abrazo
de tu amigo con te quiere mu-
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Señores Postulantes de esta tarjeta
Gracias Amigo mío Hermano
al SA Modesto: Congo

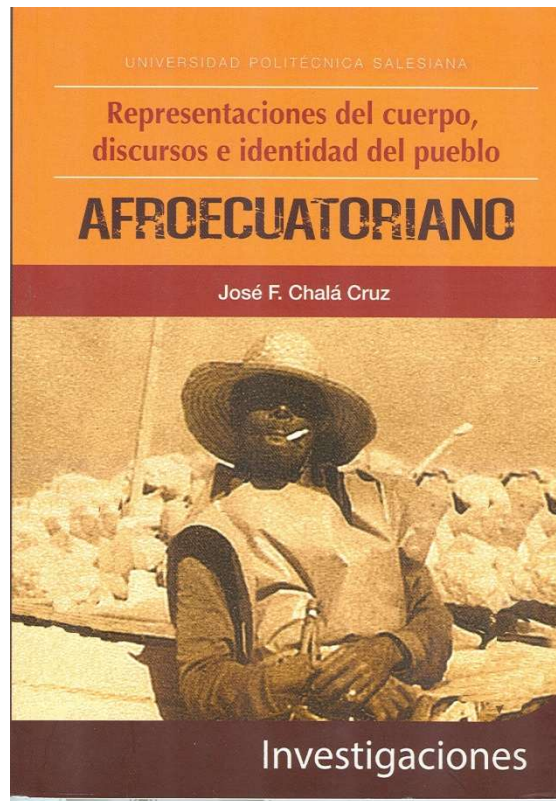
Bolaños told me to take a bus to Ibarra, the capital of Imbabura province, then take another bus headed for Tulcán, on the Colombian border, asking the fare-collector to let me off the bus when we passed Chota. I followed these instructions, but when the *cobrador* told me to get off the bus in what seemed like the middle of nowhere, I felt that a prank was being played on a hapless (and helpless) outsider, who stood out glaringly among the other passengers. Today the Pan American highway runs right through the village of El Chota, with cars, buses, and trucks passing every few seconds, but at the time there had been some sort of landslide and the buses were routed along a much higher mountain road. The bus driver confirmed that if I just walked

downhill, Chota was really there (nothing but bare hillside could be seen from the bus). Having no other option, I started walking down the mountainside, and only a few minutes later I was intercepted by the community's radar system: small children. When I told them that Bolaños had sent me, they pantomimed boxing maneuvers and led me to the village, where I first met with the president of the *cabildo*, then a tailor/teacher and his mother (an expert on medicinal plants). I was also able to interview two elderly men born at the end of the 19th century as well as some other residents. I learned that the Afro-descendents in Chota were the result of colonial sugar plantations run by Jesuits until their expulsion in the 18th century. The Jesuits used enslaved Africans as their labor force, and according to oral tradition, also engaged in forced breeding programs to ensure a continual labor supply. During the same trip I also reached Juncal, the next community to the north, where in addition to carrying out some interviews, I visited a small farmers' co-op where I purchased the first phonograph recording of Afro-Choteño music (the *bomba*), now a collectors' item. I then discovered some fundamental but obscure publications that provided more historical information about Afro-Choteños (a term I more or less invented to describe my findings).

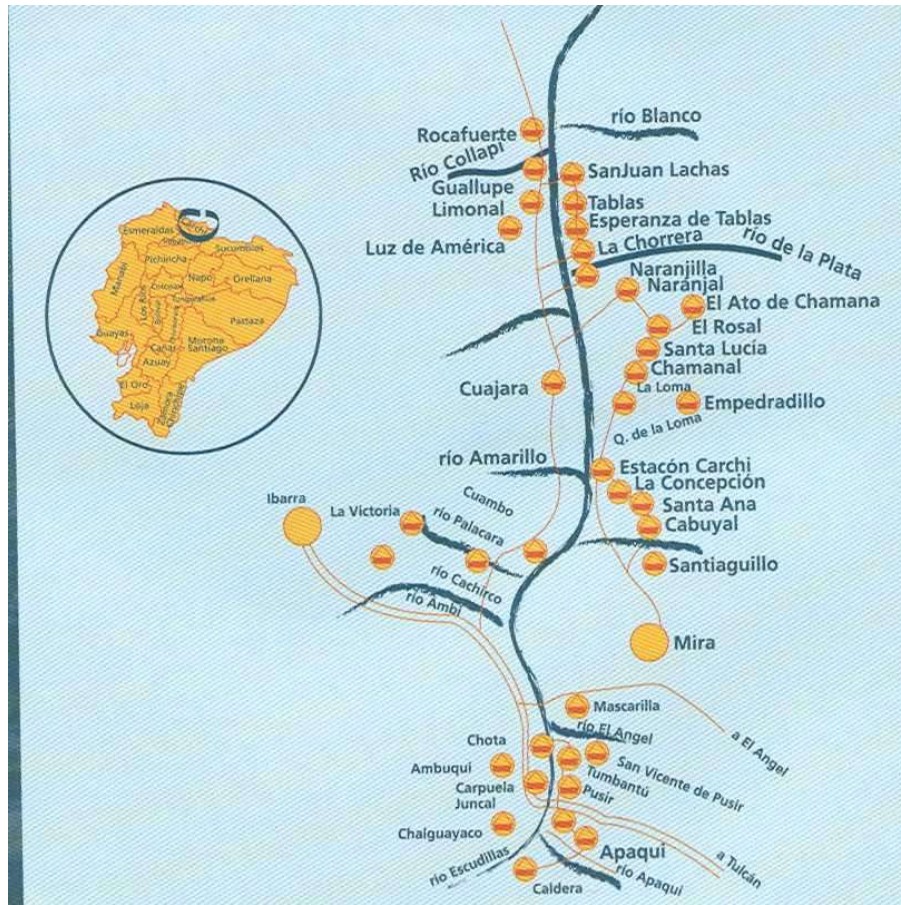


After some more inquiries and several ensuing publications, I moved on to other projects, and I also assumed administrative duties, first as department chair at the University of New Mexico, and then as department head at Penn State, all of which put field research on hold. Around 2005 I was contacted by a student at the University of Pittsburgh, who had read my earlier studies on Chota Spanish and who asked me to remotely supervise a class project on the language and culture of this region. By this time, the Chota communities were better known, and several activist authors had emerged, including José Chalá, author of an important monograph on Afro-Choteño culture, and Iván Pabón, another author and a teacher at the high school in Carpuela.

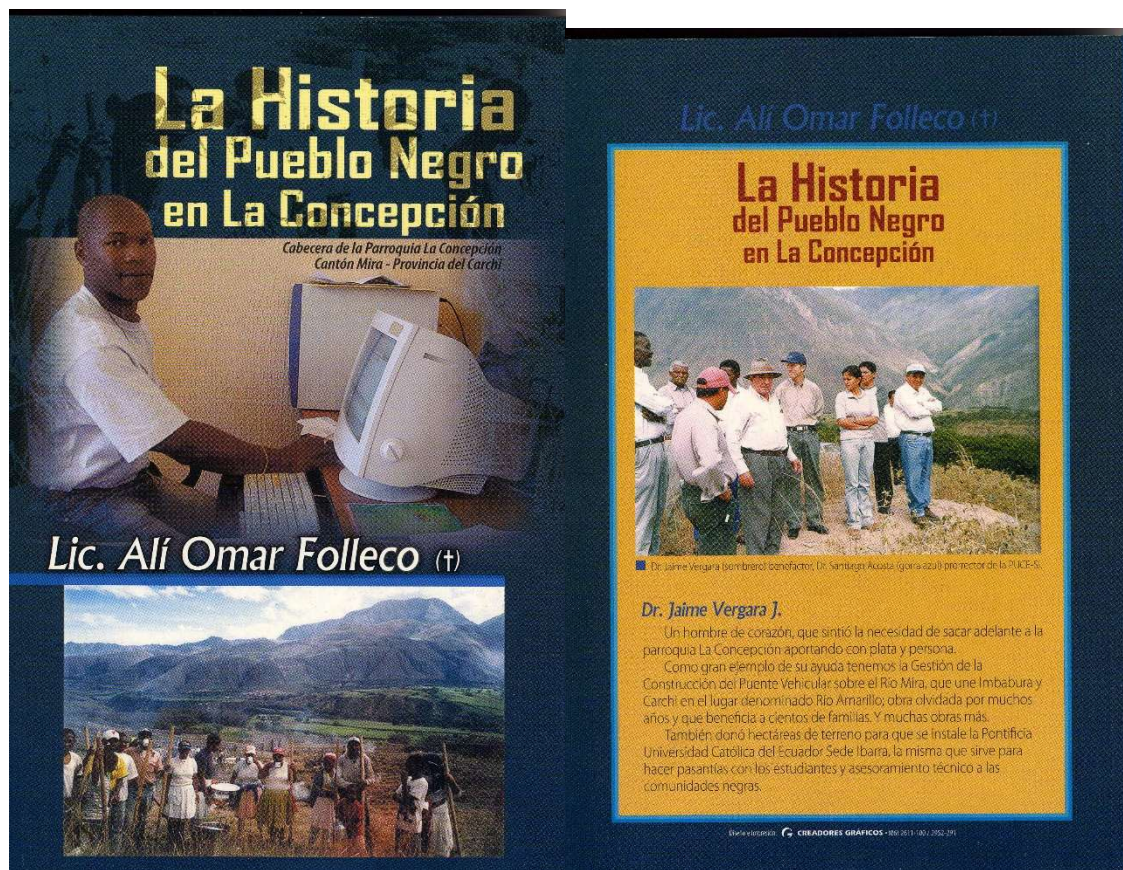




As a result I decided to return to the Chota region, where I met with Chalá, Pabón, and many other community members, and I learned that the Afro-Choteño culture was found in more than 30 communities in the provinces of Imbabura and Carchi.



During a series of field trips, I was able to visit and collect data from every one of the communities, some of which were quite remote. I hired a driver from La Concepción, owner of a sturdy four-wheel-drive vehicle to take me to some of the more isolated communities, some of which required considerable hiking past the point where even the 4-wheeler could not go.



In the course of these wanderings, I had the opportunity to meet some extraordinary people, who graciously shared their homes and personal histories with me. Perhaps the most wonderful experience occurred in the village of Caldera (home of the most distinctively Afro-Choteño speech), when I was introduced to a very humble 90-some year old self-taught woman. Responding to a single question (“how did things used to be?”), she delivered the most organized, meticulous, and detailed account I have ever elicited, topic by topic without further prompting: courtship and marriage, funerals, childbirth, medicinal plants, ghostly apparitions, and much more. I was awestruck listening to a woman who had never been interviewed before, who as far as I know had never been to school, and who rarely left her village. A few years later I briefly returned with a graduate student who wanted to visit some of the communities, and the same woman gave us a repeat performance, this time augmented by cheerful 3-person conversation.

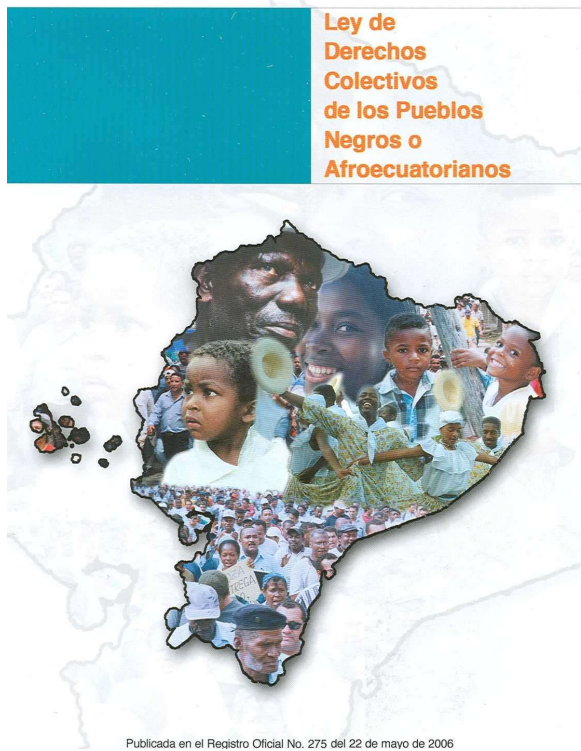


While this was a most memorable experience, all of the Choteños I met received me warmly and without reservation, whether I was accompanied or recommended by a community member or I spontaneously showed up at their doorstep (not the ideal fieldworker tactic, but sometimes my only option). I am grateful for the fateful events that allowed me to visit the communities when aspects of traditional culture and language were still very much alive. Today, most of the communities enjoy better infrastructure, communication, education, and economic opportunities, all of which has blurred or obliterated the remnants of traditional highland Afro-Ecuadoran culture and language.

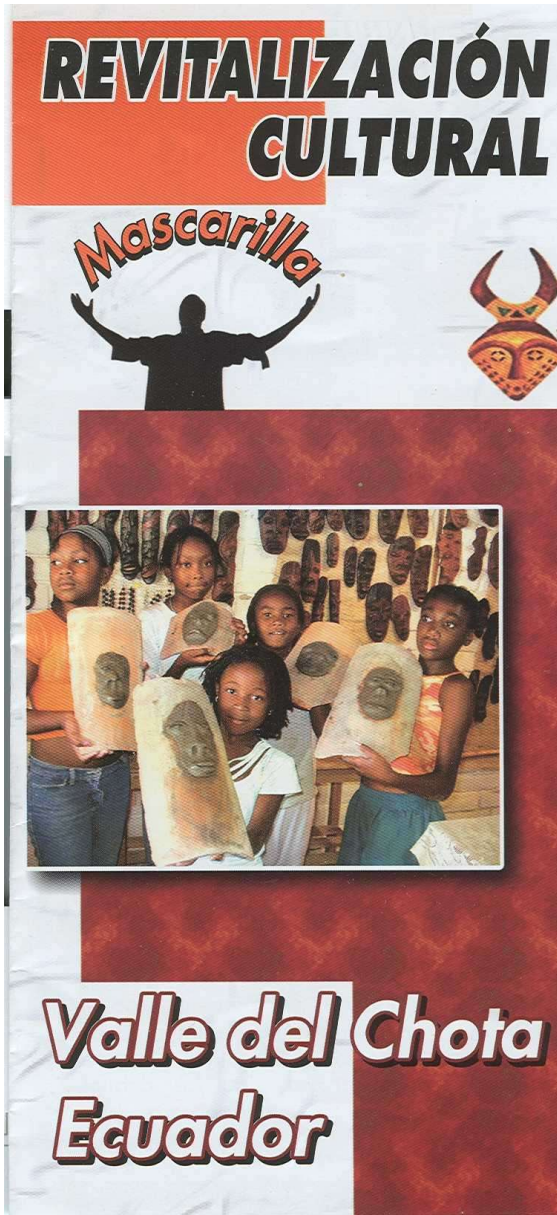
To the best of my knowledge, my articles from the 1980's were the first linguistic descriptions of the Chota valley varieties.







I interviewed her



QUIEN ES **Oshun?**

OSHUN ES UNA DE LAS PRINCIPALES ORISHA DEL PANTÓN YORUBA. REINA LAS AGUAS DULCES, LOS ARROYOS, MANANTIALES Y RÍOS DEL MUNDO. REPRESENTA EL AMOR, LA FERTILIDAD Y LOS ASUNTOS MONETARIOS. CURA CON SUS AGUAS Y CON LA MIEL DE LA CUAL ES TAMBIÉN POSEEDORA. SE DEBE REALIZAR UN RITUAL CONTRA OSHUN. SUS COLORES SON: AMARILLO Y ORO. ES LA MÁS ALEGRE Y SERVICIAL.

El Refugio de Oshun

LA CONCEPCIÓN - CARCHI - ECUADOR

Oshun

Diosa del amor, símbolo de la sexualidad y la feminidad. Hermana de Yemayá, quien le concede el dominio de las aguas dulces, siempre está vestida y lista para la fiesta. Compasiva, asiste a las mujeres preñadas.

directo: Paola Vivero-098717082

