Healing the afro community of Bogotá from Collective Trauma

Adjoa Mante, Princeton Class of 2017

Dobin Prize Submission

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Armed conflict has shifted the social and cultural practices, beliefs and identities of displaced people of African descent. One facet of displacement’s impact is collective trauma: the disruption of afro communities’ well established spiritual and physical reliance on the ancestral territories of the Pacific coast. I conducted interviews and site visits at the kilombos, an Afrocentric network of community health centers in Bogotá, to understand and evaluate strategies for healing collective trauma. Based upon my research at one center in particular, Kilombo Niara Sharay, I conclude that the kilombos address collective trauma by affirming a communal afro identity and providing the community with a space to remember the homeland left behind. To mitigate the likelihood of future displacement or trauma, Kilombo Niara Sharay collaborates with local institutions. These methods represent critical steps in the reparation of collective trauma, an oft-neglected consequence of the conflict. The leadership of the kilombos can further promote healing from collective trauma by creating a community garden, public works in remembrance of the conflict and expanding their network of sponsors. This research presents a new framework for understanding the work of the kilombos and suggestions to strengthen their practice.

INTRODUCTION

The Colombian armed conflict has disproportionately affected people of African descent and caused the forced internal displacement of hundreds of thousands of afro
citizens.\textsuperscript{1} The displaced population faces a daunting set of challenges: adapting to a new social and economic environment; leaving behind loved ones; and separating from an ancestral territory inherited for generations in the Pacific coast.\textsuperscript{2} In the face of such upheaval, displaced people of African descent report intense grief and trauma. The weight of material and cultural burdens – homesickness, poverty, exile, as well as nutritional and occupational insecurity – has caused emotional distress within the displaced afro community of Bogotá.\textsuperscript{3} In line with contemporary social theory, I argue that this phenomenon is in fact collective trauma; the forced separation of people of African descent from the land that served as an economic and spiritual anchor has destabilized and distressed the community. This collective trauma parallels the individual psychological trauma experienced by displaced people as a result of witnessing violence in the conflict. Addressing these consequences of the armed conflict is particularly important in light of the historic 2016 peace agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC, a major guerrilla group. In order to construct a truly peaceful and equitable “post-conflict” society, solutions must be posed to the collective trauma of displacement in the afro community.

My thesis analyzes the ways in which the \textit{kilombos} heal collective trauma in the afro community of Bogotá. The \textit{kilombos} are a network of community health centers that

\begin{flushright}

\textsuperscript{2} “Trenza la Paz: Recetario para Curarse del Conflict, Reparar y Resistir en el Post Conflicto.” AFRODES, n.d, 2.


\textsuperscript{3} Renteria, Martha Lucia. Personal Interview with Martha Lucia Renteria, Ancestral Coordinator of the Kilombos, February 2, 2017.

Personal Interview with staff of Kilombo Niara Sharay, February 1, 2017.
\end{flushright}
practice ancestral Afro-Colombian healing in the Colombian capital, Bogotá. At the
kilombo sites, ancestral healers use plants, oils and other traditional remedies to heal
everything from gastritis, cancer and diabetes to stress and grieving. As of 2015, the
majority of the 3,114 visitors to the kilombos were people of African descent (76%)
and/or adults aged 27-59 (49%). Furthermore, the kilombos are intimately linked to
collective trauma; displaced afro people created the network following involvement in a
community task force about the needs of members of the afro community affected by the
conflict. The kilombos are affiliated with local public institutions such as the District
Secretariat of Health and community Centers for Attention to Victims of the conflict. My
research focuses on the practices of Kilombo Niara Sharay, the oldest and most-visited
kilombo in the network. I worked closely with key kilombo coordinators Sr. José Francis
Collazos Chara and Doña Martha Lucia Renteria Barreiro throughout this research
project. The findings, recommendations and implications of my research are intended to
support the leadership of the kilombos as they provide critical services to the afro
community of Bogotá.

METHODOLOGY

My research draws heavily from in-depth semi-structured interviews I conducted
with four key kilombo staff members and participant observation at clinic sites, client
visits and local meetings. In order to understand the role of Kilombo Niara Sharay in
healing collective trauma, I asked the leadership about their clientele, motivations in
constructing the clinics and principal healing practices. This programmatic information
was supplemented by a site visit to Kilombo Niara Sharay; through participant

4 Collazos Chara, José Francis. “Proyecto Ancestral de Medicina Intercultural Afro.” Bogotá, n.d.
5 Ibid., 14, 16.
6 Personal Interview with Martha Lucia Renteria.
observation during client visits and in the waiting room, I was able to assess the nature and impact of the kilombo as a healing and cultural space. Participant observation in team meetings and conferences with district and kilombo representatives highlighted the complications of collaboration with local institutions. This first hand qualitative research was supplemented by an extensive literature review about displacement and afro culture in Colombia. The key aim of my research was to identify how the therapies, structure and physical configuration of Kilombo Niara Sharay addressed the impacts of collective trauma in the afro community of Bogotá. To my knowledge, this is the first such investigation of collective trauma and the practices of the kilombos. Therefore, my findings may also be useful for clinics and community organizations across Colombia aiming to serve displaced people of African descent.

MAJOR FINDINGS

Literature review and preliminary interviews suggest that the key issues associated with forced displacement in the afro community include culture shock and mourning the loved ones, beliefs and community left behind. Kilombo Niara Sharay affirms and celebrates African ancestry through the use of a name (“kilombo”) inspired by African traditions and history. By focusing on African heritage and encouraging visitors to embrace an “afro” identity, Kilombo Niara Sharay counters the individualistic metropolitan culture of Bogotá. Through community-oriented programming (e.g. community potlucks and house calls) and the creation of a collective afro identity,

---

7 Personal Interview with Martha Lucia Renteria.
Kilombo Niara Sharay consolidates and redefines the community in terms of its African descent; this mitigates the effects of cultural shock.⁸

Additionally, the kilombo provides displaced afro community members with spaces to mourn collective trauma through individual and communal therapy. One such remedy is aromatherapy, in which displaced people are encouraged to remember and describe their forced migration; ultimately they release the stressors and emotions of displacement into mother earth.⁹ Kilombo Niara Sharay also facilitates the process of mourning through creation; in the “sewing room for memory” displaced people are encouraged to reflect on and commemorate their former homes. More generally, the kilombo itself – decorated with the plants and artifacts of the Pacific – is a reminder of the culture, land and people the displaced have left behind. The therapies of the kilombo facilitate a mourning process tailored to the afro community.

Lastly, through collaboration with local institutions, Kilombo Niara Sharay attempts to legitimize and publicize the ancestral knowledge and needs of the displaced afro community in Bogotá. By partnering with the municipal Secretariat of Health and a nearby Center for Attention to Victims of the conflict, Kilombo Niara Sharay and its staff act as consistent community advocates. While this institutional work does not directly address the cultural shock and grief of collective trauma, it establishes a framework of mutual respect intended to counter discriminatory trends of violence and institutional neglect.

---

⁸ Personal Interview with Staff of Kilombo Niara Sharay.
⁹ Ibid.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Incorporate Accessible Community Garden Spaces

A repeated theme in interviews and the literature was the importance of land in the afro cultures of the Pacific; “land” here refers to ancestral territory – the mines and plots that have been passed down for generations – and to physical livelihood – many afro communities are primarily agrarian. In Bogotá, a densely populated city, “land” can no longer fulfill either of these collective and material functions. Although internally displaced people are legally entitled to housing once the government verifies their needs, such accommodations rarely incorporate green spaces. Kilombo Niara Sharay includes a garden where curative plants are cultivated, however community members appear to have limited access. In collaboration with municipal authorities, the kilombo leaders should increase community access to available land. A community garden, with limited hours and supervision, would allow community members to preserve plants and cultural traditions from the Pacific. It would simultaneously strengthen bonds within the community. A community garden could integrate recently displaced afro people into their new community, through attention to cultural symbols.

Establish Public Sites of Remembrance

In both mission and practice, Kilombo Niara Sharay recognizes the significance of memory in healing collective trauma. As an extension of the mourning process facilitated in the sewing room for memory, the kilombo staff can commission public works, which commemorate the displacement experienced by members of the afro

---


Renteria, Martha Lucia. Personal Interview with Martha Lucia Renteria, Ancestral Coordinator of the Kilombos, February 2, 2017.
community. A public work of art, such as a mural, statue or sculpture, would represent a communal acknowledgment that displaced people and their stories are integral to the community. The process of deciding upon and creating the work could be collaborative, thereby bringing together the community and facilitating collective therapy through memory.

*Expand Funding Collaborations*

Funding has been a key constraint on the services of the *kilombo* network. While the system is currently supported by the District Secretariat of Health, under this setup six *kilombos* have been closed; similarly the sewing for memory program temporarily halted for financial reasons. In order to increase their autonomy and expand programming, the *kilombos* must partner with additional foundations. Although a patchwork funding system would be more complicated, the focus of Colombian NGOs and philanthropists on targeted aspects of social welfare would encourage the *kilombos* to integrate critical educational, technical and nutritional services into their care.

**CONCLUSION**

The Colombian armed conflict has greatly disrupted the social fabric of afro communities across the country. The *kilombos* of Bogotá provide a model of addressing the trauma caused by forced internal displacement through the community building and health care. My thesis highlights the importance of community-based organizations in contributing to the construction of peace in Colombia. I hope that my findings and recommendations about *Kilombo Niara Sharay* aid the clinic in its efforts to improve collective health in the context of the conflict.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Collazos Chara, José Francis. “Proyecto Ancestral de Medicina Intercultural Afro.” Bogotá, n.d.


Personal Interview with staff of Kilombo Niara Sharay, February 1, 2017.


Renteria, Martha Lucia. Personal Interview with Martha Lucia Renteria, Ancestral Coordinator of the Kilombos, February 2, 2017.

