

***Peinillas and Popular Participation:
Machete fighting en Haiti, Cuba y Colombia***¹

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Recibido: Agosto 27 de 2009

Aceptado: Noviembre 8 de 2009

RESUMEN: Este artículo explora la historia de esgrima con machetes entre los afrodescendientes en Haití, Cuba y Colombia. El machete, como un ícono sagrado de éxito individual y de guerra en África, se convierte para los esclavizados Africanos en una herramienta usada en la explotación de su trabajo. Ellos retuvieron la maestría en esta arma a través de la extensión del arte de pelea con palos. Esta maestría en las *armas blancas* ayudó a transformar el machete en un importante instrumento en las batallas nacionales de esas tres naciones. Aún en el comienzo del siglo veinte, el arte de esgrima con machetes fue una práctica social muy expandida entre los Afro-Caucanos, que les permitía demostrar su honor individual, como también hacer importantes contribuciones a las batallas nacionales, como la Colombo-Peruana. Aunque la historia publicada de las batallas nacionales realza la importancia de los líderes políticos y militares, los practicantes de estas formas de esgrima perpetuaron importantes contra- memorias que enfatizan el papel de soldados Afros quienes con su maestría con el machete pavimentaron el camino para la victoria nacional.

¹ This article is based ethnographic research and training in machete fencing in Haiti and Cuba from 2002 to 2004, and Colombia from 2007 to the present. It was presented at the Caribbean Studies Association Conference in San Andrés, Colombia in May 2008, and represents one aspect of a larger research project that seeks to publish the first history of *grima* and explore its relationships with the various other fencing styles of the Atlantic world.

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PALABRAS CLAVES: ESGRIMA, AFRO-DESCENDIENTES, MACHETE

ABSTRACT: This article explores the history of fencing with machetes among people of African descent in Haiti, Cuba, and Colombia. The machete, a sacred icon of individual success and warfare in Africa, became for enslaved Africans a tool used in exploiting their labor. Yet they retained a mastery over this weapon through the widespread art of stick fighting. This mastery of *arma blanca* helped transform the machete into an important weapon in the national struggles of all three countries. Even in the early twentieth century the Colombian art of fencing with sticks and machetes was a widespread social practice among Afro-Caucanos that allowed them to demonstrate their individual honor as well as make important contributions to national struggles from independence to the conflict with Peru in Leticia. Although published accounts highlight the role of political and military elite, these counter-memories emphasize the common soldiers whose mastery of *arma blanca* made possible numerous national victories.

KEY WORDS: fencing, afro- descendants, machete.

In the early twentieth century, the Afro-Colombian communities of the Gran Cauca and Tolima were epicenters for *esgrima* or *grima*, a martial art utilizing sticks, knives, lances, and particularly the machete.² Also known as *juego de machete*, this dynamic art taught its adepts to defend themselves with extreme corporal dexterity and *malicia* (cunning). *Grima* experts passed on this art through formal master and disciple relationships, and often helped to spread important counter-memories of popular participation in the nation's conflicts. This martial art and its twentieth century counter-memories will be explored here in the context of similar developments in eighteenth and nineteenth century Haiti and Cuba.

As with the martial arts of China, Colombians practiced *grima* in many styles or *juegos*. These styles included *Sombra Caucana*, *Palo Negro*, *Cubano*, *Español*, *Frances*, *Relancino*, *Venezolano*, *el Costeño*, *Sombra Japonés*, and many others. Each had slightly

² For simplicity, I will utilize the common vernacular term *grima* rather than the longer descriptive term “*esgrima con machete*” in reference to the Colombian art form.

different stances, ranges, footwork, tactics, and choreographed sequences. For example, *Español Reformado* was played at long ranges with long erect stances and linear footwork, *Palo Negro* was practiced at close range and trained in circular walking patterns, while *Relancino* was similar to *Palo Negro* but emphasized deceptive attacking combinations and the defensive utilization of low-crouching positions and double handed blocks. However, these styles were all related and shared a common core of eight strikes and fundamental defenses. This same technical core was also found in the Caribbean islands of Haiti and Cuba, where enslaved Africans and their descendants had practiced the art of stick and machete fighting for centuries. People of African descent utilized this mastery of *arma blanca* as an important contribution to the national struggles of all three countries. While published histories of wars emphasize the importance of political and military leaders, the practitioners of these fencing forms perpetuate important counter-memories that emphasize the role of common soldiers, often of African descent, whose mastery of *arma blanca* helped pave the way for national victories.

Machete and stick fighting in Haiti and Cuba

The machete, which for centuries had been a primary instrument of agriculture and war in West and Central Africa, continued to be a potential weapon under slavery in the Caribbean. Prior to their enslavement, Africans in Biafra (now southeastern Nigeria) utilized the machete as their primary weapon of war, and in times of relative peace demonstrated their mastery of this weapon in sportive contests utilizing fighting sticks or wooden machetes called *abariba*.³ For Catholic Kongolese, the machete was the symbol of Saint James the conqueror, and for many in the Bight of Benin it remained the icon of the war deity, Ogun. Enslaved Africans carried such spiritual connotations with them into American bondage, and perpetuated them in various religious traditions of the Circum-Caribbean. However, in the larger profane social context of racial slavery, the machete may have become ambiguous for many Caribbean bondsmen, perhaps being viewed by some as an instrument of oppression that symbolized their domination and servile status.

³ Jeffreys, M.D. "Ibo Warfare". *Man*. Vol. 56, 1956. Pp.77-79

Stick fighting, however, remained an important instrument for attaining honor and was a widespread social practice by Africans and their descendants throughout the Americas, but perhaps most pronounced in the Circum-Caribbean where it was a constant concern of plantation owners since the seventeenth century. Already by 1677 the practice was outlawed on the French islands of the Caribbean, repeated in article 15 of code noir in 1685, and numerous subsequent laws forbade sticks, particularly fighting sticks called *bangalas*. Bondsmen often cited their need to defend themselves from snakes as their excuse for possessing these *bangalas*. Pierre-François Dessalles noted that bondsmen “rarely leave on Sundays without being armed with a *bangala*; it is their primary offensive and defensive weapon.”⁴ In eighteenth century Saint Domingue, these combat sticks were made “of extremely hard which have many knots on them, and whose upper end is well ornamented and then set with little gilded nails.”⁵ Despite the prohibitive laws, *bangalas* were frequently utilized as symbols of authority and status.

Enslaved peoples utilized stick fighting in dances as well as violent duels over impugned honor throughout the Circum-Caribbean. In Cuba, cabildos performed dances with machetes carved out of wood. In the rural areas around El Tocuyo in Venezuela, brotherhoods of enslaved Africans established a set of sacred dances in honor of Saint Antonio, which at least by the nineteenth century opened with the *batalla*, a danced duel using sticks. Behind this seemingly innocuous public dance, however, was the *juego de garrote*, a more clandestine martial art called that utilized the stick, knife, and machete.⁶ Médéric Moreau de Saint-Méry, a member of the Superior Council of Saint Domingue in the 1780s, described the use of fighting sticks by the enslaved in duels that were preceded by a ritual challenge and oath.

“[Among the blacks] differences are settled, [with] a fight with sticks.... The blacks handle this club with great skill and since they always aim for the head,

⁴ Dessalles, Pierre-François-Régis. *Annales du conseil souverain de la Martinique, ou tableau historique du gouvernement de cette colonie, depuis son premier établissement jusqu'à nos jours*. A Bergerac, Paris, 1786. 1:258.

⁵ Saint-Méry, Maurel L. E. *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l'isle Saint Domingue*. Société de l'histoire des colonies françaises, Paris, 1958. Pp. 52-53.

⁶ Sanoja, Eduardo. *Juego de Garrote Larense: El método venezolano de defensa personal*. Federación Nacional de la Cultura Popular, Caracas, 1984. Pp 25.

the blows which they receive are always serious. And so, the combatants are soon all blood.”

Distraught over the potential of such duels, he lamented that the “police have indeed forbidden these clubs and keep confiscating them, but they are so easily replaced that it does no good.” Although he was clearly wary of the art’s harmful potential, Moreau de Saint-Méry later described the art as a sport and admired the ability of its adepts:

“This fatal club serves also to make the negro’s skill dazzling in one sort of combat. One can not help admiring with what speed the blows are launched – and avoided – by two practiced men. They maneuver around each other to gain the advantage, while holding the club and swinging it with both hands. Then, suddenly, a blow is directed, the other parries, and attack and riposte alternate, until one of the fighters is hit by the other. This normally ends the fight. The sport has its own rules, just as fencing does. A new athlete takes the place of the beaten one and the palm goes to the most adroit...”⁷

These stick fighting skills helped train bondsmen in the mastery of the machete as well.

Even after the end of slavery, the masters of Haitian machete fighting continued to teach in a progression from training with sticks to mastery of the machete. An aspirant in this system first learned *tiré bwa*, the art of fencing with sticks as a safe way to learn the strikes and defenses of the system in relative safety. Only after achieving some proficiency in *tiré bwa*, did masters then teach the student *tiré coutou* (knife) or, more importantly, at least one of many styles of *tiré machet*, the art of machete fighting. Although basic proficiency could be attained in less than half a years training, mastery required much higher levels. The test of graduation to mastery often involved defending oneself blindfolded or in a completely dark room. In order to pass this test the student had to master a system called “the secret of Dessaline,” which developed the skill allowing a master to fight without the use of his eyesight.⁸

⁷ Saint-Méry, M. L. E. *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l’isle Saint Domingue*. Société de l’histoire des colonies françaises, Paris, 1958. Pp.53-4.

⁸ Interviews and training under Maestros Petit Jolibois, Ti-Jean, Ti-Po and others in 2002, 2003, and 2004.

In Cuba, the feared Abakuá societies perpetuated elements of the Biafran paramilitary tradition. Based upon the leopard societies of Biafra, enslaved Africans in Cuba established Abakuá as a mutual aid society promoting proper behavior and community defense. Abakuá members, known as ñáñigos, enforced strict standards of communal protection and individual “manliness.” A ñáñigo could never let himself be struck by anyone without dire consequences for the offender. Ritual conflicts also occurred between different Abakuá groups. To show themselves as brave, ñáñigos would demonstrate their abilities with machetes and knives in these conflicts. According to Lois Martínez-Fernández, one of the requirements of initiation was to “test iron”, or kill a white person with a machete or large knife.⁹ Esteban Montejo, a former bondsman and veteran of the war of Cuban independence, recollected both the former military experience of Africans prior to their enslavement and the continued paramilitary experience of Cuban ñáñigos he served with:

“Thing is that they had factions fighting over there [in Africa]. Men and women fought. They killed each other in those disputes. It was like what happened here in the barrios of Havana, in Jesus Maria, in Belen, in Manglar....The ñáñigos fought amongst themselves in that African way.”¹⁰

It is clear then that despite legal prohibitions against the carrying of sticks, fencing skills, trained with the stick or wooden machetes but applicable to the machete, were thriving among enslaved people and their descendents in the Caribbean. These skills should be recognized as an important resource that aided former bondsmen in their struggles for abolition and independence.

This rich legacy of fighting with *arma blanca* was a resource for former bondsmen and their fellow soldiers in their battles against European soldiers and tactics. In the Haitian Revolution, for example, European soldiers fought in closed formations that made rapid maneuver and retreat extremely difficult. To make up for the inadequacy of their

⁹ Although they certainly fought with their ritual weapons, this assertion of Fernández reflects more the fears of upperclass whites who constantly sought to criminalize Abakuá than actual ñáñigo practices. Fernández, Lois Martínez. *Fighting Slavery in the Caribbean: The Life and Times of a British Family in Nineteenth-Century Havana*. M.E. Sharpe, Armonk, N.Y., 1998.

¹⁰ Barnet, Miguel. *Biography of a Runaway Slave*. Nick Hill trans. Curbstone Press, New York, 1994. Pp. 154.

individual muskets that were “barely accurate at 100 yards,” European troops packed together in tight ranks and fired together in volleys.¹¹ The massed effect of these massed volleys and artilleries between ranks standing directly in front of each other at relatively close ranges led to concentrated carnage. This European combat tradition proved less than ideally effective when faced with mobile bands that spread out in open formations. In contrast, in the combat strategies of former bondsmen, the real carnage was often the result of *arma blanca*. They organized themselves into small bands that harassed European armies with short but constant skirmishes. If they did not see the opportunity to dominate in close quarters combat, they would quickly disperse. But they would mass for shocks when they felt they could enter into a decisive hand-to-hand engagement.

There are countless examples of the use of *arma blanca* in the early years of the revolution. For example, a native white soldier described in detail how Jean Francois’ Congo band took the capital city, Le Cap armed only with sticks and machetes. One of these Congos knocked him unconscious with a fighting stick, but he later managed to crawl into a hiding place. From there he witnessed many people falling to the stick and machete, overheard boasting between two of Jean Francois’ men over how they had taken down their foes with *arma blanca*.¹²

Even years into the war, *arma blanca* played a decisive roll, as in the battle at the small fort, La Crete à Pierrot. This was a critical moment in the defense of the country after a large French force landed on the island in January of 1802 under Leclerk’s command. 1,200 men under the command of Jean Jaques Dessaliness and Lamartinière were pinned down in the small fort while the French attacking army amounted to twelve thousand men according to General Pamphile La Croix. Even with all their ammunition wasted they were able to repel bayonet charges with their mastery of *arma blanca*. Dessalines and later Lamartinière led their men into the superior French forces. Although they lost nearly half their men, the

¹¹ Uffindell, Andrew. “The closed ranks and close ranges of Napoleonic warfare.” *Military History*. October, 1997. pp 75.

¹² Althéa de Puech Parham ed. *My Odyssey: Experiences of a young Refugee from Two Revolutions*. Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 1959. Pp.129-134.

rest literally cut their way through with machetes. Although Leclerc took the fort it proved an indecisive and costly victory that helped turn the tides of the struggle.¹³

Machetes also played a prominent role in the Cuban Wars of Independence nearly a century later. In these liberation struggles, Afro-Cubans soldiers often dominated the ranks.¹⁴ The main Cuban tactic, like that of the Haitian revolutionaries, was stealthy rifle attacks against the Spanish from concealed positions. According to one Spanish source, “their main tactic was to fire from positions behind trees or broken terrain” and quickly disperse in skirmishes.¹⁵ Yet it was the Cuban use of the machete by black troops that terrified Spanish soldiers.¹⁶ The Spanish were armed with Mausers, deemed the best rifles in the world at the time. They were repeating rifles with greater accuracy and four times the range of the Remington rifle used by the Cubans.¹⁷ As a result, even with their guerilla tactics, Cuba’s concealed marksmen were at a disadvantage in terms of accuracy. Antonio Maceo opened up the most important battles after Maltiempo, including Peralejo and Iguará, with machete charges. These shock tactics forced Spanish soldiers to close their ranks into tight squares. This defensive positioning into massed squares made the Spanish troops much easier targets for the Cubans firing from concealed positions with the less accurate Remingtons.¹⁸

However, the machete came into play most prominently in the battle of Maltiempo, the greatest Cuban victory over the Spanish and certainly the bloodiest. The Cubans at Maltiempo were, like the Haitians at La Crete à Pierrot, running out of ammunition. However, by making a decisive machete attack they were able to soundly defeat the

¹³ Ott, Thomas. *The Haitian revolution, 1789-1804*. Knoxville University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville, 1973. Pp. 155-158; Bird, Mark. *The Black Man*. American News Co., New York, 1869. Pp. 42-44.

¹⁴ Because Cuba brought in the largest number of enslaved Africans in the nineteenth century, many of these soldiers were born in Africa or in Cuba of African parents. Ferrer, Ada. *Insurgent Cuba: Race, Nation, and Revolution, 1868-1898*. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1999.

¹⁵ Castellanos, Adolfo Jiménez. *Sistema para combatir las insurrecciones en Cuba, segun lo que aconseja la experiencia*. Establecimiento tipográfico, Madrid, 1883.

¹⁶ Martel, Manuel Piedra. *Campañas de Maceo en la última Guerra de Independencia.*: Editorial Lex, Havana 1946. Pp. 68-72.

¹⁷ Tone, John Lawrence. *War and Genocide in Cuba, 1895-1898: Envisioning Cuba*. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 2006. Pp. 130.

¹⁸ Ibid; Monfort, Manuel Planelles. *Historia de la guerra de Cuba*. Tip del "Boletín mercantil", Puerto-Rico: 1896. Pp. 141-146; Souza, Benigno. *Ensayo histórico sobre la invasion*. Impr. de Ejército, Habana, 1948. Pp. 51-65.

Spanish forces, many of whom were newly arrived recruits easily unnerved by machete assaults. The Spanish troops were armed with sabers, giving them a theoretic advantage since they had guarded handles, thrusting points as well as a much longer blade than a machete. Yet the Cubans inflicted a bloody defeat on them. According to Montejo:

“They went crazy when they saw us, and they threw themselves into the thick of it, but the fight didn’t last long because at almost the same instant we started to chop off their heads. But really chopping them off. The Spaniards were scared shitless of the machetes. They weren’t afraid of rifles, but machetes, yes. I raised mine, and from a distance said: “you bastard, now I’m going to cut your head off.”

After the battle, the field was strewn with severed heads.¹⁹

While the importance of the machete fighting has been lost to most published histories of such Caribbean wars of independence, the oral traditions of machete fighting lineages have maintained important memories of these weapons. Haitian master Ti-Jean explains that he was drawn to *tire machet* because it was with the machete that Haitians liberated themselves and their country.²⁰ Master Ti-Po explains further:

“When we evacuated the French from the country we used machetes and sticks... Ever since then they became the traditional weaponry used in battle. No matter what nation attacks us, these are the arms we use first.”²¹

In PonsSonde, every first of November *tiré machet* masters paid homage to Boukman and the Bois Caimon ceremony that opened the revolution with machete fighting duels that at times went until first blood was drawn. During the bicentennial commemoration of the battle of Crete à Pierrot *tiré machet* masters from L’Artibonite converged on the remains of the fort to memorialize the event with displays of machete fighting. These commemorative displays help to keep alive community narratives of popular participation in the

¹⁹ Barnet. *Biography of a Runaway Slave*. Pp. 160.

²⁰ Jean, Maestro Ti. Personal communication. June 25, 2003.

²¹ Po, Maestro Ti. Personal communication. April 8, 2002.

independence struggles. In Cuba, Montejo, like many other former fighters who conveyed this sentiment to later generations, closed his biography on this note:

*“Although I may die tomorrow, I wouldn’t give up my sense of honor for anything. ... Because back then, when you were dirty and naked in the hills, you could see those crisp, clean Spanish soldiers with the best weapons. ...I won’t get into the trenches or use any of these modern weapons. A machete will do for me.”*²²

For both Haitian and Cuban fighters, the machete was remembered as the weapon that epitomized the valor of blacks during the Wars of Independence.

Grima in Colombia

Twentieth century Colombian *grima* was practiced in numerous styles, some of which have been named after places in the Circum-Caribbean and Europe. The widespread “Cubano” style was putatively brought “from Cuba by a friend of Maceo’s Cuban revolution, Abelino Rosas who they called the Lion of the Cauca.”²³ The Haitian art of *tiré machet* was undoubtedly related to Colombian *grima* since they share the same technical core. The nomenclature and overlapping techniques certainly raise questions about the origins of Colombian *grima*. Was *tiré machet*, brought by the Haitian soldiers who helped Simon Bolivar’s independence struggle, the source for the Colombian *grima* style called Frances?²⁴ Was there a historical link between the *grima* style Español and the colonial Spanish sword fighting system? The answers to such questions are not yet clear.²⁵

²² Barnet. *Biography of a Runaway Slave*. Pp. 200.

²³ Lourido, Miguel Vicente. Personal communication. February 19, 2009

²⁴ Planters and their bondsmen who fled from the Haitian Revolution to other parts of the Circum-Caribbean often intentionally referred to themselves and their cultural legacies as French. In the case of Cuba, see Brown, David Hilary. “Garden in the machine: Afro-Cuban sacred art and performance in urban New Jersey and New York.” Ph.D dissertation, Yale University (1989).

²⁵ With some Colombian styles even named after Japan, it would be presumptuous to try to establish technical legacies based solely off the names of these Colombian styles. There are very few traceable similarities between Colombian *grima* and the orthodox schools of French or Spanish sword fighting. However, the Colombian *grima* style Venezolano Moderno, which was created in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, appears to have been developed by a Colombian *grima* exponent who integrated elements of Venezuelan juego de garrote into his *grima* style. The technical vestiges of this garrote influence are readily

Among contemporary masters of the art, there are a number of competing ideas as to the origins of *grima*. Although there are numerous variants on these, they fall into four groups. The first group views *grima* as having come from Africa along with enslaved Africans brought to work in the mines of Colombia and the second group traces *grima* directly to European sword-fighting experts who visited Colombia in colonial times. The third sees *grima's desgonses* as evidence that Colombian *grima* was formed by blacks developing their own styles inspired by the European sword-fighting they witnessed, while the fourth group traces *grima* to the Wars of Independence when it was taught by foreign soldiers to Colombian troops. In the near future comparative research on the fencing histories of the Atlantic world may provide clearer details on the historical relationship between Colombian *grima* styles and other fencing traditions in the wider Atlantic world.²⁶

In the meantime, it is clear that contemporary *grima* styles named after Venezuela, Spain, France, and even Japan have been overshadowed by the plethora of Colombian re-adaptations of these styles, which have been labeled *Moderno*, *Remontado*, or *Reformado*. These latter terms refer to a reformulation of styles based on exchanges between *grima* masters or by individuals who mastered multiple styles and taught a synthesis utilizing the best stances, techniques and training sequences of each style. The result has been the most widespread arts in Colombia, including *Cubano Moderno*, *Remonte Español Relancino*, *Venezolano Moderno*, and *Español Reformado*. Among many things shared by all these styles are the emphasis on opening stances called *paradas*, *falsos* (defensive footwork), *desgonses* (low ducking movements), and choreographed sequences built upon eight fundamental strikes. Although not limited exclusively to blacks, these styles have been a resource for Afro-Colombians in their struggles for honor, both in their communities and in the wider nation.

apparent in the perpendicular fighting stance, emphasis on stick sparring, use of *mano teo* (defensive hand movements), and defense based on erect *falsos* and striking the attacking arm.

²⁶ These origin stories should not be seen as necessarily mutually exclusive as elements of each of these potential sources may have played a role in the historical evolution of the art.

Grima and honor in the Gran Cauca

Since the founding of Gran Colombia, the institution of slavery has strongly affected the lives of African descendents. Two epicenters of *grima* began as communities of blacks seeking refuge from bondage; El Patía (formerly El Palenque de El Castigo) and Puerto Tejada (formerly El Palenque de Monte Oscuro). Although slavery was abolished in 1851, the legacies of that system continued to plague the lives of African descendents throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. After abolition, many who were not able to set themselves up on *fincas* (small private farms) were forced to continue working on the lands of their former masters. Peasants of the Cauca region struggled to retain their land, while sugar cane industry owners have developed numerous methods to expel them.²⁷ From such overt economic actions to general preconceptions, black Caucanos have in many ways been hindered from social advancement in the larger society.

Grima has been a resource, albeit a limited one, in the day-to-day struggle of black Caucanos through the mid twentieth century. A successful *grimista* (grima fighter) or *maestro* (master of *grima*) could use his skills to bring honor to himself and his community on various levels. *Grima* functioned simultaneously as a form of cultural capital, an art of personal display, a form of dueling, and a method of personal and collective defense that in the past aided active participation in larger social struggles.

Some *grima* masters were able to transform their social capital into economic gain. Like most men in the region, many *grimistas* worked on *ingenios* (large sugar plantations) of the area or on their own *fincas*. *Grima falsos* and flexibility helped keep workers alert and safe.

*“If you are working and anything falls at you, [with grima] you can defend yourself. The stick will fall here, and [using a falso] you will move out of the way, no problem. But if you are rigid the stick will kill you. The juego de esgrima is sacred and rich.”*²⁸

²⁷ Taussig, Michael T. *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980. Pp. 69-92.

²⁸ Dias, Isabelino. Personal communication. February 10, 2009.

In Julio Posada's short story, "El Machete" that will be discussed below, a clandestine *grima* master was identified as a *grimista* because "that black was cutting in such a beautiful way that it was as if the machete was working by itself." Thus many people believed that the abilities of *grimistas* were reflected in their increased safety and efficiency in utilizing the machete in agricultural tasks on a *finca* or *ingenio*.

Maestros could, however, also develop a secondary form of income by opening professional schools that met in open areas or in private houses. These schools would meet after the working day in the early evening or on the weekends. *Maestros* would then train the students through the various levels of the art, often working from empty-handed exercises to sticks, and finally to practice with the *peinilla*, a medium sized machete from 16 to 20 inches.²⁹

Around the mid-twentieth century *Maestro* Hector Sandoval, one of the most skilled living exponents of *grima* in Puerto Tejada, learned the style of Español Reformado from *Maestro* Fidel Castillo through a five level curriculum. The first level was gymnastics in which the student learned exercises that taught them how to move their bodies according to the dictates of the style. Students practiced basic blows with empty hands and trained their bodies to perform the basic *falsos*. In the second level students trained using a stick in a series of eleven choreographed sequences called *cruzas*. Each *cruza* had a special name like "La Culebra" and "El Crucero." The third level taught fourteen named choreographed sequences called *paradas* that began with special opening postures, also called *paradas*. This level of instruction was named *juego sencillo* as it utilized a single weapon, the *peinilla*. The fourth level also covered a series of thirteen *parada* positions and choreographies, but this time in *juego doble*, meaning with a weapon in each hand, usually a stick and machete. The fifth level taught the *juego de ataque y defensa*, which reviewed the previous levels but teaching the student to be prepared to improvise in case of a live opponent. This prepared the adept for *juego abierto*, a free fighting session where practitioners fought friendly or competitive fights to develop their techniques and *malicia*, or strategies for overcoming an opponent in real confrontations. Talented students might be

²⁹ *Peinilla* is a Colombian term for a particular type of machete with the weight more equally distributed, and generally with fewer curves in the blade.

able to pass through each of the four basic levels of the curriculum in about three months with continuous practice.³⁰ In other styles of Colombian *grima*, the curriculum also included sequences for the lance, knife, whip, and straight razor. Students passing through these schools might pay per class, per *cruza* or *parada* that they learned, or a large one-time tuition fee to cover their entire curriculum.³¹ Although prices varied, this tuition at the middle of the twentieth century could be the equivalent of more than six weeks salary for an *ingenio* worker. A well-sought after master with a rotating base of students, then, could boast of a potentially significant additional income.

Maestros also took pride in perpetuating a particular lineage of *grima*, symbolized by their possession of a special book. Most students only progressed as far as they felt they needed to for their own self-protection. However, skilled students who continued in their training could eventually be given the title of *contra-maestro* with the charge of helping to teach novice students. Finally, a gifted disciple that showed promise could ultimately be declared a *maestro* and given a document called a *cartilla* or *cartilla de malicia*. These books recalled European manuals of swordsmanship but were hand made by each *maestro* for his future *maestros*. These *cartillas* contained pictures and descriptions of the *paradas*, teachings, and histories otherwise passed down orally. They acted both as a type of diploma, and as a guide for teaching their own students according the same rigorous standard so that the style would remain strong and respected.

While *maestros* usually guarded their *cartillas* jealously, a more overt element of the honor of *grimistas* was personal display, expressed through games and performances. *Grimistas* demonstrated their skills with students or other adepts in open displays of *juegos abiertos*. These were competitive, but friendly games that provided entertainment.

“[Grima] was so enjoyable even to just to play. [When we met friends and saw] there were sticks, I would enter giving two or three strikes, ra ra

³⁰ Sandoval, Maestro Hector E. Personal communication. July 11, 2007.

³¹ A popular master, then.

[showing three strikes] hey [showing the falsos to escape them] and that was the game. Then we said goodbye. This became a regular passtime."³²

This game was very popular in the black communities of the Cauca, such that even people without much or any formal training became proficient at the fundamentals.

*"The people developed such ability that they didn't have any problem. The people from the fincas learned to play so much because they didn't have television. There was no other entertainment, so they would cut two sticks, prepare the yard, and people would come to drink aguardiente and play sticks."*³³

These popular games made fencing skills commonplace in these communities, and at the same time allowed *maestros* to publicly display their mastery. The victories and tactics of the *maestros* who dominated these games often became the topic of later discussions, spreading the reputations of particular *grimistas*, which might in turn help bring further income if they were professional instructors.

Grimistas also demonstrated their skills in the numerous local dances of the early twentieth century that incorporated the movements of *grima*. Among others, these included a form of the "Pasadoble" in the area of Buenos Aires Cauca that danced out *grima* sequences or even open games. In a more widespread partner dance, the "Torbellino Caucano," the men would hold their female partners behind them and spar each other with their machetes for part of the dance. These dances also allowed *grimistas* to display their grace in artistic representations of real machete duels that took place in black communities.

In the early twentieth century, the internal disputes in numerous communities were played out through duels and brawls with machetes. While most Europeans moved away from sword duels by the late nineteenth century, in the black communities of the Cauca a machete wielding variant of this social practice remained common in the first half of the 20th century. In order to be considered valient, men maintained a reflexive honor code in

³² Sandoval, Maestro Hector E. Personal communication. Feb 10, 2009.

³³ Lourido, Miguel Vicente. Personal communication. February 19 2009

which insults and infractions among peers had to be responded to, often with violence, in order for honor to be retained. The cartilla of Español Reformado, “*Arte de Esgrima: O sea el juego español de ordon y sable,*” ends with an appendix restating the articles of a “codigo de duelo” found in various forms in seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe. *Grimismo*, or fighting with machetes by trained or untrained individuals, had its own codes and social practices that were distinct from the codified sword duels of France. But what the code duello of Europe and *grimismo* shared was sensitivity to insults and challenges that had to be met openly in order to prove oneself valient in the community.

The principal motives [for duels] were personal offenses, and one of the primordial offenses for a fight was to offend someone’s mother. Among trained individuals, these challenges could be met with a machete duel.

*“I once saw two masters fighting each other... the one was sleeping with the other’s woman... and to be able to separate them, people had to place a stick between them because nobody would dare to get between them because machetes were flying everywhere. The most surprising thing to me was that neither of them got wounded.”*³⁴

This dueling among exponents was marked by a code of honor. “One walked armed, and if not, he would say [to the offended person] ‘wait for me, I am going to get armed,’ the other would respond ‘bring your shit’ and had to wait.”³⁵ Not all *grimismo*, however, followed this one on one dueling structure, or a code of honor.

Many individuals were attacked in situations that arose from domestic disputes, infidelity, or gambling. *Maestra* Saturia Caicedo recalled her father, a *maestro* of Frances style, being drawn into a domestic dispute:

“My father was drinking when he received the news [and rushed off]. His sister was being attacked with a machete by her abusive husband in their bedroom. She had been taught grima by her brother, and was using her

³⁴ Sandoval, Maestro Hector E. Personal communication. July 11, 2007.

³⁵ Diaz, Isabelino. Personal communication. February 10, 2009.

knowledge to defend herself. [Her husband] kept striking at her and she kept moving out of the way [with falsos] until my father arrived and beat her husband with a stick.”³⁶

Conflicts also arose from infidelity, as Eliezer Mina, a *contra-maestro* of Palo Negro style, experienced in one of his early fights before formally learning *grima*.

*“When I was young, well you know I was crazy about women, so I got a crush on someone else’s woman. So once we were entwined and she saw him coming. [but] it was too late for us to run. When the guy got close, he said, that’s the way I wanted to catch you, and took out his machete and started attacking us. She was hiding behind me and he was striking at me.”*³⁷

According to Master Sandoval, “whenever there was any type of gambling going on, there was a chance for a fight.”³⁸ Even though these situations led to brawls rather than duels between masters, there was still often an element of honor in these battles in that it was commonly considered unmanly to involve the police in an open fight.

*“If you wounded me with a machete in a fight, I would leave peacefully and cure myself, but I wouldn’t report it to the police. It was a thing of honor, courage. Cure yourself and later take revenge. If you didn’t know grima, then go and learn.”*³⁹

These situations leading to *grimismo* were common and inspired many Caucanos, male and female, to formally learn the art.

Another common context for various forms of *grimismo* was social dances that took place on weekends. While these were enjoyable community events, most people went to dances armed. “Whoever didn’t walk with a *peinilla* walked with a knife; almost everyone walked

³⁶ Caicedo, Satoria. Personal communication. July 15, 2007.

³⁷ Mina, Eliezer Lasso. Personal communication. February 19, 2009

³⁸ Sandoval, Maestro Hector E. Personal communication. February 10, 2009.

³⁹ Díaz, Isabelino. Personal communication. February 10, 2009.

armed.”⁴⁰ This situation required people to follow certain etiquette or face the possibility of a fight. “In the dances if you had your woman there and I went to take her to dance without asking your permission, then there was a fight.”⁴¹ Those who walked unarmed might have to defend themselves with *falsos* and improvised weaponry.

*“When I was there in a dance hall a mature man was looking to start a fight with a young man. The older guy took out his machete and charged at him. The young man was drinking a beer and when the older guy swung his machete, the youth would avoid the strike [with a falso] shaking the beer and spraying it into the aggressor’s face. That happened repeatedly until people broke it up and removed the totally soaking wet man.”*⁴²

An offended person who wanted to avoid such community intervention might denigrate the entire party into general chaos.

The troublemaker would cut the lights, causing general alarm among all who were not trained to deal with such situations.

*“Since there were no electric lights in those farms, they were illuminated by an araña. An araña was a crossed chandelier with candles on each end that was hung from above. So whoever wanted to start a fight - because there were a lot of people that loved to fight and would start one with no reason - would just cut the araña and when it fell, it would go out leaving the place in complete darkness. When the lights went out, everyone would take out their machetes.”*⁴³

In order to deal with such situations, some *grimistas* learned the art of *elastico de sombra*. *Elastico de sombra* was an advanced sequence of training, associated with the fighting style *Elastico de Sombra*, which was like the Haitian secret Dessaline in that prepared its adepts

⁴⁰ Mina, Eliezer Lasso. Personal communication. February 10, 2009.

⁴¹ Díaz, Isabelino. Personal communication. February 10, 2009.

⁴² Sandoval, Maestro Hector E. Personal communication. February 10, 2009.

⁴³ Sandoval, Maestro Hector E. Personal communication. July 11, 2007.

to fight in complete darkness.⁴⁴ However, basic elements of these skills could also be found in other styles as well.

“That’s why in the style Español Reformado...masters teach how to control your breathing, hold their breath, and a method of walking silently; because when that happens and the araña was cut, everyone was against everyone. And since I knew you were sitting there, as soon as the araña was cut, I could strike you. So in the moment the lights go out, you should move right away, but if you go breathing heavy, they will know where you are and cut you. If you go stepping heavy, they will also find you and rataca- you are cut!”⁴⁵

Even more dangerous than these free fights in the darkness, were when fights degenerated into gang attacks against a single individual.

Maestro Don Angel of Puerto Tejada recalled a dangerous gang attack he survived in El Patía:

“I went at there [El Patía] when I was 16 or 17 years old, and when I was dancing with this girl - in that time I was a good dancer. This girl was kissing me here and there when there was a young guy sitting there said: “in the plains of Patia a man is offending me” (En los llanos del Patia, un hombre me desafía) ...but I didn’t understand. When another song played, we danced again suddenly the guy came and attacked me. I dropped to the floor [under the strike] and made the sign of the cross on him. Then another attacked and I crossed him also... There were like ten of them, but I got to cut at least five of them.”⁴⁶

In some cases *grimistas* observing such unfair tactics might be called by valor to aid the overwhelmed fighter

⁴⁴ Martinez, Rosalva y Orlando. Personal communication. April 9, 2009; Carabali, Luis Abelardo Mirando. Personal communication. July 1, 2007.

⁴⁵ Sandoval, Maestro Hector E. Personal communication. July 11, 2007.

⁴⁶ Samigan, Maestro Angel Maria Vivero. Personal communication. February 17, 2007.

“I was on one occasion visiting someone on a farm.... When I was talking to the woman who invited me some guys were thinking that I was flirting with her. And it seems to be that one of them was her boyfriend and he came to start a fight with me, but I was unarmed. So when he took out his peinilla, I took a stick from the floor and when he gave the first strike, I hit him with my stick. Then the other three of them fell on me too. I defended myself as best as I could. Suddenly someone came out of nowhere next to me. I moved against him, but he said, “don’t worry I came to help you so they don’t gang up on you.” Then we stood back to back and when they saw that, they ran away.”⁴⁷

Grimistas skilled enough to survive such gang attacks unscathed gained widespread reputations as tested *valientes* and *macheteros*. Some of these *macheteros* found courage in spiritual preparation with special prayers and ritual practices. *Grimistas* who would enter without fear into battle with numerous opponents often became community heroes that were seen to reflect the strength of the community.

Grima and honor outside of black communities

Outside of their communities, blacks could also utilize their mastery of *grima* to claim respect for themselves both as teachers and soldiers in other parts of the country. In the early twentieth century, black *grima* experts from Tolima and the Gran Cauca spread their styles into new areas such as Antioquia and Quindío.⁴⁸ Julio Posada’s “El Machete,” published in 1912, provides a possible model of the nature of this spread, and at the same time illustrates that *grima* could be a resource for respect from those who might otherwise look down on Afro-Colombians. This short story is told from the perspective of an Antioqueño campesino youth, Charlarca, who finds employment on a coffee farm in Antioquia. Charlarca was despotic when his boss assigned him to work in a remote area with a black work partner. Charlarca recognized his new partner as an efficient worker, but initially reacted negatively towards him because of his African features, which in

⁴⁷ Sandoval, Maestro Hector E. Personal communication. July 11, 2007.

⁴⁸ There may have been an earlier spread of machete fighting during the nineteenth century wars, particularly the War of a Thousand Days. However, none of the *grima* lineages I have encountered thus far have claimed descent from these military experiences.

Charlarca's words "made me afraid when he looked at me with those colored lips that resembled a devil." However, Charlarca eventually realized that since his new work mate was a black from Cauca, he should certainly know how to "play" *machete* (*jugar el machete*), an art Charlarca wanted to learn. Upon broaching the subject, his partner initially denied knowing the art, but later agreed to teach Charlarca. They armed themselves with "two thin sticks of guayacán" [a wood hard enough to resist machete strikes], and his new teacher invited Charlarca to attack. In this initial sparring match, Charlarca was baptized into the dynamic movement of the art, particularly *falsos* and *desgoneses* - dynamic movements of stepping, crouching, or angling the body to avoid a blow without having to block it:

"He was around my height, but it was hard to tell because I saw him some times very tiny, like really low to the ground and sometimes I couldn't even see him or he...looked like he was going to jump over me. Yet I knew that he didn't jump because he had told me that [grima has] nothing of jumps; those who know how to play machete do not need that nonsense. But I wasn't worried and I attacked freely... but as much as I tried to hit him with my stick I couldn't because that black was so agile at moving his body out of the way."

Their training continued and eventually concluded with a public demonstration, using machetes instead of sticks, which left both teacher and student satisfied with Charlarca's education as a *grimista*, or adept of this art.

"It seemed to me really beautiful and I was so satisfied that when we stopped, I let myself lean on my partner and call him my "brother" and we hugged and he also called me "dear brother." We smiled happily and full of satisfaction."

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His apprenticeship clearly filled Charlarca with profound respect for the dark skinned master. Similar encounters took place between black masters and local workers of white,

⁴⁹ Posada, Julio. *El Machete*. Litografía Colombia, Bogotá, 1929.

native, and mestizo communities in Antioquia and Quindio, establishing ongoing lineages in these areas in the early twentieth century.

While the spread of *grima* through such intimate encounters was the norm, there were exceptional teachers who taught on a large scale. A good example of this was Felipe “El Tuerto” Cardona, a black *grima* master who moved to Quindio, where he became the central figure of *grima*. He lived primarily from *grima*, performing in theaters and public squares, and teaching in both formalized ongoing academies and rotating temporary schools throughout the region. He was greatly respected over a wide area, drawing students from afar as Antioquia and the Cauca. The overwhelming majority of *grimistas* in Quindio were taught by Cardona, or by his mostly white and mestizo students who continue to spread his style of *Cubano Moderno* throughout Colombia.

While *grima* allowed a few blacks to gain respect as teachers, a more common way that black *grimistas* have claimed honor for themselves was through active participation in national struggles. As one recent study has argued, “Afro-Colombians had little to offer the Liberal Party in terms of wealth and social influence- all they had was their willingness to support the party with their votes or with their blood.” Therefore, as James Sanders suggests, the armed citizen became the political actor of popular liberalism. Afro-Colombians played an important role in the battles for independence, (zurriago) and the 1851 civil war to ensure the end of slavery.⁵⁰ Blacks continued to play important roles in the numerous wars during the rest of the nineteenth and even into the twentieth century.

While certainly not all blacks were *grimistas*, the widespread mastery of *arma blanca* in black communities often allowed Afro-Colombians to make unique contributions to national struggles. According to Arias Trujillo, in the civil war of 1861, “[General] Mosquera took Bogotá in a thunder of machetes ...with two battalions of blacks from El Patía that managed the national weapon with the agility of a surgeon, he planted the liberal flag in the Capital.”⁵¹ A North American doctor working in Colombia, Herbert Spencer

⁵⁰ Sanders, James. "Citizens of a Free People: Popular Liberalism and Race in Nineteenth-Century Southwestern Colombia." *Hispanic American Historical Review*. 2004. Pp.308.

⁵¹ Arias Trujillo, “Elogio del Machete” in *Notas sobre el folklor colombiano*. (Unpublished manuscript in University of Antioquia collections), 159.

Dickey, described similar groups of black machete-wielding troops in the War of a Thousand Days. Dickey emphasized that the use of rifles in this conflict was largely “ineffective” due to poor training. Rather the real carnage was the result of special companies

“...of particularly bad hombres called “macheteros” or machete men. These men fought with the machete exclusively...Most of them were huge, brawny Negroes, and this body was often thrown into the front line during the fighting...The sight of such men armed with such weapons was quite enough to inspire fear.”

This preference for bladed weapons was not limited to the rank and file; there were numerous officers who were also renown for their use of *arma blanca*. The son of a slave, Juan José Rondón and his 14 lance fighters saved the battle of Pantáno de Vargas for Bolivar during the independence struggles. One of the most important macheteros of the War of a Thousand Days was General Ramón “El Negro” Marin, who was the leader of the liberal armies of Tolima. Despite his rank and the European sword he donned, in combat he was famed for his reliance on the machete, and was popularly remembered as being “invincible when he raised his *peinilla* in shining in the sun.”⁵²

Grima was a resource for many black soldiers, and its oral traditions remain a form of memorialization to counter the erasure of popular Afro-Colombian participation. Numerous experts in this art articulated the importance of Afro-Colombian mastery of machetes and lances in conflicts from independence to “La Violencia.”⁵³ Despite their significant size and contributions to the society in these historical watersheds, Afro-Colombians have largely been erased from the national narrative as independent military and political actors. As a group of *grimistas* complained “the [written] history of Colombia is false!”⁵⁴ Abelardo Carabali also lamented the disparity between popular and written history.

⁵² Arias Trujillo, “Elogio del Machete,” 159.

⁵³ The end of La Violencia ushered in a time of transition when revolvers and air strikes would slowly began to make the machete obsolete on the battlefield.

⁵⁴ Reunión of the Escuela de *Esgrima* con Bordon y Machete of Puerto Tejada. Personal communication. July 1, 2007.

“The 14 lanzeros of Rondon were Afros... But they were not good for being Afros but because of their techniques and their practices. So we want that to be shown historically. This is not shown in the [history] books.”⁵⁵

For many Afro-Colombians, this is one among numerous erasures from the national history.

This dissonance between popular memories and published history books can be seen clearly in the case of the Colombo-Peruano conflict at Leticia in the Putumayo region. On September 1, 1932 over 300 armed Peruvian citizens seized the Amazonian harbor town of Leticia, violating the Salomón-Lozano Treaty of 1922 which ceded the territory to Colombia. Most accounts of the conflict emphasize the roles of the international community and the diplomatic struggles of the conflict, and leave no room for the heroism of poorly armed Afro-Colombians who formed the rank and file of the Colombian forces. *Grimistas*, however, recall how Afro-Colombian soldiers played a key role in overcoming their better-armed Peruvian opponents:

“The historian Lemaitre talked about a boat...and a professor when I was in school said that a bomb was thrown to the campament of Peru. But the reality that we know is that of the macheteros or batallon of the north of Cauca.”⁵⁶

Maestro Sandoval explained further.

“I didn’t see any of that, but someone who was close to that conflict, told me. This was Don Sabas, who they call Captain Sabas.”

Because the Colombians were given inferior rifles, the Caucano macheteros drew instead of firepower on the Caucana propensity for machete fighting.

“The first thing [the Caucano officer] asked for was to be able to pick out the soldiers that he would have to take there. Then he chose from those who were from the North of the Cauca, of which there were plenty in the army in that

⁵⁵ Carabali, Luis Abelardo Mirando. Personal communication. July 1, 2007.

⁵⁶ Carabali, Luis Abelardo Mirando. Personal communication. July 13 2007.

time, He went with them and their rifles, but always gave each one a peinilla”.

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These local *grimistas* are remembered to have fought fiercely in a key battle by relying on well established tactics of *grima*: *malicia* and *elastico de sombra*. They had to revert to such tactics because their weapons were outdated while the Peruvians had modern rifles.⁵⁸

*“And when the Peruvians shot there with repeating rifles, he was here shooting a single shot and having to hide himself to prepare the rifle to fire again, and then he felt himself too lost in that way of fighting and said there is no other way than to leave these rifles and use the machetes.”*⁵⁹

Using *malicia*, these macheteros snuck undetected onto the Peruvian side to fight unclothed in darkness.

*“It’s like my uncle told of when he left here for the Amazons. He was yet another who fought in the War of Colombia and Peru. He said that the Colombians took off their shirts and whoever they touched with clothes, they knew that it was the enemy and “plum” they killed them by the dint of the machete.”*⁶⁰

In the Cauca, these fighters are popularly remembered as “los macheteros de la muerte” or “los macheteros de la Cauca.”

Conclusions

Colombian *grima* is one important part in a long history of machete wielding expertise in the Circum-Caribbean. In Haiti and Cuba, enslaved Africans drew upon their knowledge of *arma blanca* to turn their sticks into deadly weapons. Although they were not able to train openly with the machetes with which they labored, their skills with the stick were applied

⁵⁷ Sandoval, Maestro Hector E. Personal communication. July 11, 2007.

⁵⁸ Díaz, Tito Livio Mina. Personal communication. February 17, 2007.

⁵⁹ Sandoval, Maestro Hector E. Personal communication. July 11, 2007.

⁶⁰ Díaz, Tito Livio Mina. Personal communication. February 17, 2007.

to the machete in time of need. In the eighteenth century the former bondsmen of Saint Domingue utilized the stick and machete to help end slavery and gain independence for Haiti. Roughly a century later, an army largely composed of ex-slaves armed only with machetes mowed down Spanish forces in the battle of Maltiempo, the most important conflict of the Cuban War of Independence. While the Colombian *grima* style of Cubano, may have tangible ties to this Cuban legacy, in Colombia this style like many others underwent a process of reformation into Cubano Moderno. In the early twentieth century Afro-Colombians utilized the various styles of *grima* to aid them in their personal and community struggles. During the same decades black masters carried this and other *grima* styles into new regions of Colombia. When called upon, *grimistas* often brought their machetes of to bear on behalf of their communities and country. *Grimistas* recount histories in which mastery of *arma blanca* played an important part in Colombian struggles from independence to the conflict in Leticia. Although published history books glorify the activities of elite leaders in these struggles, popular histories passed down in communities where machete-fighting martial arts have been practiced recollect a view from below. These Haitian, Cuban, and Colombian counter-memories are important for revealing the perspective of common people, the importance of their skills, and the contributions they made to their country.





