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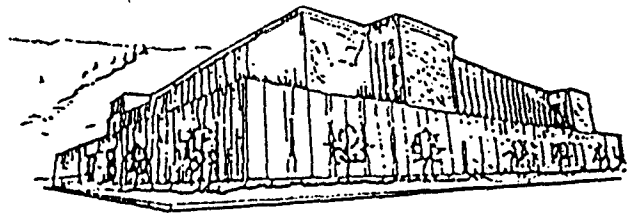
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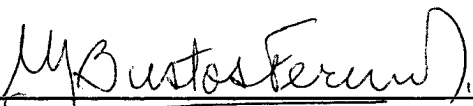
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African Traits and Conflict of Identity
in Cumboto

by
Alicia Gignoux
B.A. University of Montana, 1991

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Arts in Spanish
University of Montana
1994

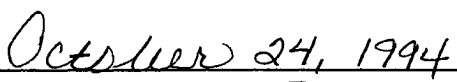
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African Traits and Conflict of Identity in Cumboto

Director: María Bustos MJB.F.

Cumboto (1950), a Venezuelan novel by Ramón Díaz Sánchez (1903-1968), is an excellent example of a work that explores the issue of cultural identity and transculturation as exhibited through the interlacing of African and European world views. The purpose of this thesis is to describe African traits throughout the text and the conflict of identity, which is portrayed through the protagonist and which points to a changing culture.

Structural as well as thematic elements in the text are emphasized in the literary analysis. The critical concepts of Josaphat Bekunuru Kubayanda are applied to explain African referentiality within the text. For example, themes associated with the symbolism represented by trees and rivers are explored as they relate to an African world view. In addition, the occurrence of spirits, folklore, folktales, and magic realism are briefly discussed.

The notion of transculturation, or the process of two or more cultures in contact and combining to form a new culture is briefly described. This involves an analysis of language, dualism, and opposites, such as oral versus written tradition, contrasting world views, and domination and subordination in the novel. Natividad, the protagonist of African descent, is caught between two cultures. As a house slave, his ideology has been influenced heavily by whites. He manages to recover elements of his African heritage, but at times rejects his African cultural heritage as he struggles to discover his identity. The protagonist, as he struggles between two world views, demonstrates the internal process of transculturation, which in essence explains the ambivalence in the novel.

The appearance of nature and African traits, which can not be ignored, create a strong sense of African cultural influence throughout the novel. The process of transculturation is evident and the influence of African heritage on the culture is strong despite the ambivalent nature of the first person narrator.

PREFACE

While taking a class in African Literature with Professor Maureen Curnow in the Spring of 1993, my interest in and awareness of Afro-Hispanic literature grew. Following Professor Curnow's suggestion, I made a search to learn more about Afro-Hispanic authors. As a result of my search I discovered many Afro-Hispanic authors and a literature that made me aware of a new cultural perspective: that of the Latin American writer of African descendancy.

Cumboto (1950), a novel by Ramón Díaz Sánchez (1903-1968), is a work that intrigues me for a variety of reasons. In particular, the author's descriptions of the countryside, nature, and people are vivid and the portrayal of the Afro-Hispanic's life and customs in the literature broadens my view of ethnic diversity in Latin America. In the literature of the Afro-Hispanic writer, the acknowledgement of issues such as identity, racism, religion, African heritage, deculturation, and transculturation or the process of cultural transformation, which has occurred in the Latin American culture and which is due in part to colonization, modernization, and to the coexistence of the Europeans, blacks, and the indigenous people, surfaces. The mixing of races and the interlacing of cultures has been strong in Venezuela, which is the birth place of Ramón Díaz Sánchez.

As I read about Afro-Hispanic literature I discovered that the approaches for analyzing Afro-Hispanic literature were varied. Bonnie Barthold, who merges the message within black literature with the structure by analyzing the concept of time in her book Black Time: Fiction of Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States, believes that critics of black literature "have tended to

polarize into two ideological camps” (Barthold Black Time 197). She states that “one camp” focuses on the “message” of black literature while the other focuses on structure (Barthold Black Time 196-7). Some critics, such as Richard Jackson, believe that the message is more important than structure, while others, who are listed later, believe that the message and structure unify to provide a vehicle for criticism of the text.

Richard Jackson believes that black literature should be analyzed for humanistic elements, and he is mainly concerned with the theme within the literature. “To the humanist critic, literature “is relevant to matters outside of it or it is nothing, however internally unified” (Jeffrey Sammons qtd in Jackson Humanism 123). Humanism, in the study, is defined by Jackson to mean “an attitude of concern for the welfare and dignity of human beings, especially the “marginal”ones, and for the problems that beset them in this life (Jackson Humanism xiii).” To continue, from Jackson’s perspective, “Humanistic Criticism is the interaction between text and context, or between literature and the cultural, racial, and historical circumstances” (Jackson Humanism 122-123). In regards to humanistic criticism of a text, Jackson says, “it seeks out the human in it and endeavors to see how it is expressed thematically through language” (126). For example, the repeated incidents of problematic interracial relationships point to the unfairness of the intolerance of racial mixing in Cumboto.

A main theme that Jackson sees in Afro-Hispanic literature is the theme of liberation (Jackson Black Novel in Latin America Today 34). This theme can be related to a symbolic trip the house slave of African descent in Cumboto takes to the river. Henry Louis Gates, the leader of the avant-garde school of black

criticism states that “the race component in literature should be addressed and that criticism itself is not color blind, apolitical or neutral” (qtd in Jackson The Afro-Hispanic Author II xv). Cornel West believes that cultural identity and political conflicts, to name a few issues, found within the text should be explored as well as the way they relate across societies and cultures while taking into account the historical background of the work (West Minority Discourse).

Terry Eagleton in his book Literary Theory makes the following claim about criticism, “The idea that there are ‘non-political’ forms of criticism is simply a myth... ” (209). Eagleton, a Marxist critic, values the message within a text that speaks to the audience and the power of literature to elicit change. One message within Díaz Sánchez’ novels is the importance of human rights. Other messages include: the importance of heritage and freedom. Another theme throughout the novel is the transformation of cultures and the conflict of identity involved in the forming of a new national identity. Similar to Angel Rama’s view of transculturation, Eagleton believes that the process of transculturation is not only one of changing cultures, but of the partial loss of culture as well.

Imperialism, as described by Eagleton, “is not only the exploitation of cheap labour-power,... but the uprooting of languages and customs.. ” (215). This “uprooting” is evident in Cumboto and is seen in Natividad’s conflicting world views, but at the same time a strong message within the text gives importance to African roots and the positive consequences of inevitable miscegenation. For instance, the evidence of African customs, and elements in the novels of Díaz Sánchez acknowledge the history of blacks in Venezuela. The patterns of

imagery that revolve around nature nurture a deeper meaning that expresses a cultural African world view that can not be ignored. Despite the ambivalence of the black first person narrator in regards to his cultural identity, African traits found throughout the text confirm the importance of African heritage and its impact on Venezuelan society. Díaz Sánchez is among those who reaffirm African heritage. Díaz Sánchez' style, and narrative, which include elements of magic realism, are as engaging as the messages within his works and should be noted when reading his novel.

Thus, Afro-Hispanic literature is analyzed in many ways. Stylistics and symbolism, as well as extraliterary elements, such as ancestry, should be considered in the analysis of Díaz Sánchez' novels. Joseph Kubayanda focuses on structure and ancestry, which he understands as the references to an African based cultural system within the text. He uses an analysis of structure and the concept of ancestry as his source for expressing the themes within black literature and the importance of African history and its effect in black literature. He also proposes criticism that takes into account aspects such as the African versification, which has been applied to Guillén's poetry, while another critic, Ian Smart, looks at the trickster figure in Afro-Hispanic literature (Jackson Trends 33-34).

African elements, the messages and the form or structure of the literary work are all interrelated and of relevance to a literary analysis of the novels of Díaz Sánchez. According to Barthold, the message or content of a text is 'inseparable' from the structure or form in black literature (Black Time 196-8). The messages in the work of Díaz Sánchez are strong and the ties between the content and the structure and symbolism are significant. One

message within Cumboto, for example, is that miscegenation is an unavoidable outcome that does not ignore African heritage because it is embedded within it and is part of the new culture. This message is not only realized through the commentary by the narrator, but also by African referentiality found throughout the text. For example, much of the reference to African elements exists throughout symbols in the natural world within the novel. Therefore, the message within the novel as well as the symbolism, and structure of the text will be emphasized in my analysis.

Chapters I, II, and IV of this thesis provide the reader with background information on the author and people of African descendancy in Venezuela. Characteristics that define Afro-Hispanic literature are found in Chapter III. Chapter V points out the African elements that surface in Cumboto, and the underlying messages implied by them according to the studies of Kubayanda. In chapter VI, the African and European world views as they are expressed through the protagonist are explored, while the notion of transculturation or the transformation of culture as it relates to the internal conflict of identity of the black protagonist is discussed followed by a conclusion.

Finally, I can not claim to view Afro-Hispanic literature from a Latin American perspective or the perspective of a person of African descent. My mother was raised in Guadalajara, Mexico and my father was born in the United States. I was born in the Philippines, but have spent most of my life in the United States. I analyze Ramón Díaz Sánchez's literature in order to increase my awareness of themes within Afro-Hispanic literature and knowledge of ethnic diversity in Latin America. Through the works by writers like Díaz Sánchez our understanding of the complex history of Latin America, ethnic diversity, and cultural

identity is broadened and therefore, Afro-Hispanic Literature holds a special place in the study of literature from Latin America. My knowledge of Latin American literature has been broadened and I hope to inspire others to read Afro-Hispanic works.

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CHAPTER I

Ramon Díaz Sánchez: A Brief Biography of a Novelist and Historian

A celebrated novelist and historian of his time, Ramón Díaz Sánchez (1903-1968) produced works that reflect his strong feelings for Venezuela and the people of his country. Some of these include Mene 1936, La Virgen no tiene cara y otros cuentos (1951)., Casandra (1957)., and Borburata (1960). Puerto Cabello, which is said to have gotten its name from the calm and motionless water where a boat could be anchored to shore for days with a single strand of hair, is birthplace of Díaz Sánchez.¹ He was born the 14 of August in 1903 and lived in Puerto Cabello where he worked as a mechanic, in a tobacco factory, and as a sign painter (Bonet de Sotillo 28).

In his early twenty's he was a journalist for *La Información* and *Excelsior*, and a political activist in Maracaibo, Venezuela who protested against the dictatorship in Venezuela. Díaz Sánchez also helped found a literary group that was known as the "Grupo Seremos." The group's primary intention was to promote culture, although the members eventually became politically active (Arcila Farias Protagonistas 158). The group was composed of intellectuals and writers such as Bracho Montiel, Héctor Cuenca (the president of the group)., Valmore Rodríguez and others (Arcila Farias Protagonistas 155). In 1928, a year which is famous for protests against the dictatorship in Venezuela, Díaz Sánchez was working at *El Excelsior* as a journalist (Arcila Farias 158).

¹This information is from Cumboto (14).

Governing Venezuela at the time, was a man who later died the wealthiest man in his country, Juan Vicente Gómez. Gómez was the dictator of Venezuela from 1908 until his death in 1935. He abolished all organized political activity and by imprisoning those who opposed him and by controlling the press, he insured his control over the masses (Encyclopedia Britannica).

Díaz Sánchez was put in the Castillo de San Carlos jail from 1928-1930 because of his involvement in a student uprising in 1928 (Johnson 149). Eduardo Arcila Farias interviewed and tape recorded some of the people who were imprisoned at the same time Díaz Sánchez was. Some of them were from the “Grupo Seremos”, and Isidro Valles lists Díaz Sánchez, a colleague of his, as an active member of this group in Maracaibo (Arcila Farias 158). On July 24th, 1928, Isidro Valles and others had planned to speak out against the government. The night before, Valles attended a meeting, where Díaz Sánchez was present, to discuss the demonstration.

The next day Valles was arrested and sent to el Castillo de San Carlos, an old fort near the entrance to Maracaibo lake (Arcila Farias Protagonistas 157). Valles was treated well by the military men, unlike others who were arrested during the Gómez regime (158). For those who were arrested due to their open protest of the dictatorship, prison life varied. One jail that housed the protesters was ‘El Castillo de Puerto Cabello’ (Arcila Farias Protagonistas152). Isaac J. Pardo tells of his experience as a prisoner in 1928. He states that the tendency was for the students to be separated from each other by small groups once arrested and sent to different locations.

Of his initial group, some were taken to Palenque, while he

was taken to work in the country and then to “El Castillo.” Arcilo Farias describes Palenque as a prison which was an Inferno and describes it as, “A hell because of the suffocating heat and because of the horrors” (Arcila Farias Protagonistas 19). In El Castillo, as Pardo relates during his interview, the food consisted of rotten beans, from which a mouse appeared one day. Pardo says the mouse was grabbed by the tail and tossed aside, after which the bean soup continued to be served to the prisoners (Arcila Farias Protagonistas 85-86). Another day a big lizard appeared and was discarded, but again the bean soup was served (85-86). Due to the condition of the prison food, the prisoners were eventually brought groceries by their families (85-86).

As stated previously, the students were imprisoned for openly opposing the overpowering dictatorship in Venezuela. The “Grupo Seremos” believed in democracy and Isidro Valles, a member of the group, states that “Seremos” was the first institution to voice its complaints about the government, while the rest of the country was silenced in terror (Arcila Farias 159). Díaz Sánchez began his fight against oppression early and is known for his concern for humanity, which is seen through his literary works. Following his term of imprisonment, in Cabimas, one of the petroleum producing areas of Venezuela, Díaz Sánchez began his career as a novelist.

Díaz Sánchez wrote his first novel, Mene, over a two year period once he was liberated from prison. The novel was written in Cabimas from 1933 to 1935 (Johnson 28). He lived in Cabimas from 1931 to 1935 and held the position as the municipal judge of Cabimas. From then on he led a life that included many prestigious positions in government and public

offices.

In 1936, the author moved to Caracas where he lived for the rest of his life (Johnson 28).² His involvement as a public figure continued. In the capital, he was a journalist for *Ahora* and held the position as head of Publications for the Ministry of Agriculture (1937-1939), he was the director for the cabinet of the Ministry of Education (1940-1941), and director of the National Printing Office (1942-1943) (Bonet de Sotillo 9-10; The Oxford Companion to Spanish Literature). In addition, the author was a deputy of the National Congress (1943-1945), the director of Culture and Fine Arts for the Ministry of education (1951-1952), and a cultural consultant for the embassy of Venezuela in Madrid, Paris, and Rome (1949-1950) (Bonet de Sotillo 10). In 1952 he returned to the cities mentioned previously and to West Germany as a cultural consultant for the Embassy of Venezuela (Bonet de Sotillo 10).

Ramón Díaz Sánchez was president of the Venezuelan Writers Association for three years, an associate of the National Academy of History, and the Venezuelan Academy of Language (Bonet de Sotillo 10-11). He also belonged to the Historical and Geografic institute of Uruguay, and history institutes and academies in Colombia, Spain, and Argentina (Bonet de Sotillo 11). The list of Díaz Sánchez's involvement in various delegations, international conventions, and seminars is long and impressive³.

Equally impressive are the awards he has received as a writer. The Premio de Cuentos del Diario "El Nacional" was awarded to

³ Bonet de Sotillo states that he moved to Caracas in 1935.

² For a full list of Díaz Sánchez' achievements see Bonet de Sotillo's Serie Bibliográfica (1967).

him in 1946. In 1948, for Cumboto, he won the Premio de Novela “Arístides Rojas” and the William Faulkner Foundation Award in 1964. In 1951 he won the Premio Nacional de Literatura for his work Gúzmán, elipse de una ambición de poder, and for Borburata, he was given the “José Rafael Pocaterra” award (Bonet de Sotillo 12).

In Bonet de Sotillo’s bibliography of Díaz Sánchez’s work one finds a variety of works in different areas. History was one of his main interests. For example, El Caraqueño, which is about Bolivar, was recently republished. He has also written political articles, articles for magazines on various subjects including the following: literary figures, history, travel, art criticism, theater, social and educational issues, and literary criticism. Díaz Sánchez demonstrates a knowledge of and concern for issues of social identity, sociology, culture, history, folklore, and anthropology. In his book Paisaje histórico de la cultura venezolana (1965) he devotes a section to the African influence in Venezuela.

African ancestry is an important part of the culture in Venezuela. Influences can be seen in dance, food, religion, and other areas. Through the literature of Díaz Sánchez, the issues of self-acceptance, *mestizaje*, and African heritage are examined. A new created self and the perspective of the person of African descent and the mulato, is mirrored in the novel Cumboto. Specifically, Díaz Sánchez acknowledges his complex cultural background. As a Venezuelan of mixed ancestry, he speaks for the African who was brought to Venezuela, for the Europeans, and to a lesser extent, for the Native Americans who came together to form a new culture. With one voice he encompasses

the history of his people, while acknowledging his African heritage. Díaz Sánchez helps break the suppression of the African's historical past in Venezuela and expresses his feelings about racial issues, and his opinions of how the blacks have been treated in his country. His outlook is essentially hopeful for the black race as it is transformed upon contact with other races.

Ramón Díaz Sánchez is an author who clearly seeks to give recognition to his cultural past and at the same time reach for a future where he is comfortable with his mixed heritage and his identity as a Latin American. Finally, the literature of Díaz Sánchez is a valuable contribution to the study of Afro-Hispanic and marginalized literature.

CHAPTER II

A Concern for the Venezuelan

This chapter discusses Díaz Sánchez' literary tendency and some background information of how Díaz Sánchez' work fits into the literary scheme from the turn of the century. In general, the work of Díaz Sánchez has not received considerable attention, in comparison to the literature of the 'boom'. Nevertheless, his work needs to be explored, along with that of other Afro-Hispanic writers' works, for its role in reflecting 'authenticity'. His literature cultivates cultural, and social images that are close to the Venezuelan people, and he demonstrates his interest in the sociological issues of his people. This concern gives his work a degree of 'authenticity'.

In the field of Latin American literature, Jackson states that, "The term 'authenticity' is applied to the work of authors who write about subjects close to the true concerns of their Latin American readers without falling prey to the cult of foreign models (Jackson Humanism, 16). Although not experimental, like the literature from the boom, Díaz Sánchez's literature comes from a perspective that cultivates a third world perspective.

Jackson states that, in general, black writers in Latin America write from the perspective of the Third World, not from the First World looking in at Latin America (Jackson Humanism 18-19). Even though his view is that of the 'educated elite', it is one that is very much from within and for his own country. Arcilo Farias writes that in 1928 few Venezuelans read and that there were few who had access to scientific books or modern literary works (Arcila Farias 15). For example, the literature that was dominant

in the universities came, for the most part, from Spain (Arcila Farias 15). The authenticity of Díaz Sánchez' work results from the fact that his writing represents those who are marginalized or those who were not commonly represented in literature. His novels show a concern for social and historical issues that were relevant to the Latin Americans of his period. He sympathizes with the plight of the black and mulatos, and in many ways could be categorized as a mundonovista novelist.

Díaz Sánchez did not fit into the first stage of modernism, which Jackson, as many do, describe as the 'art for art's sake' realm of modernism, but to the second stage or "mundonovista" stage of modernism that evolved over time and reflected humanism, New Worldism, and literary Americanism (Jackson Humanism 6 & 4). Jackson aptly describes literary Americanism as "art for people's sake" (4). In Black Literature and Humanism in Latin America, R. Jackson follows the literary trends that led to the concept of literary Americanism in Latin America and its relationship to black humanism. "The beginnings of Literary Americanism can be traced to the second stage of modernism and to the Afrocriollista movement of the 1920's and 1930's (Jackson Humanism, 6)." Literary Americanism according to Jackson, is a concept that was built by Vallejo, Neruda, Guillén, and Rubén Darío who become interested "in the concern for collective and oppressed humanity (Jackson Humanism 6)." As R. Jackson states, to the mundonovista novelist, whether indigenista, socio-negrista, black, or novelist of the Mexican Revolution, humanism and literary Americanism ostensibly were one and the same thing (Jackson Humanism 4). "Literary Americanism was opposed to human misery and adapted to the needs of the specific human

realities they took as their points of departure, namely, the black, the Indian, and all the victimized of America to whom, about whom, and for whom Neruda sang his “Universal Song” (Jackson Humanism 6). Prior to this the Afro-Criollo movement helped lead the way to the search for authenticity of voice. Jackson calls the Afrocriollo movement one of the “first genuinely “American” literary movements in this century in Latin America (Jackson Humanism 31). Negritude, one product of the Afrocriollo movement, sought to “deconstruct myths and stereotypes” (René Dépestre qtd in Jackson Humanism 26). The Afrocriollo movement, even though it was also associated with negrism, affirmed the human value of blackness, and helped expand the search for identity in Latin American and Caribbean literature (Jackson Humanism 30).

According to Lombardi, who wrote various books on Venezuela, the work of Ramón Díaz Sánchez is influenced by the positivists. Although the positivists adapted many variations of Comte’s original philosophy, a simplified explanation of the positivist view in Venezuela, as it relates to Díaz Sánchez, follows. Of relevance to the author in question is the surfacing of society and history in the work of the Positivists in Venezuela during the early 1900’s and the concern they had for Venezuelan issues. More specifically and in regards to the Positivist’s interest in history and sociology, the positivist of the early 1900’s in Venezuela is also concerned with the relationship between civilization and barbarism or primitivism; a theme which is prevalent in their work. Lombardi states that “the positivists saw Venezuela as a clash between the two worlds of civilization and barbarism” (Lombardi Venezuela 260).

One of the most famous positivists of his time was Laureano Vallenilla Lanz (1870-1936) (Lombardi Venezuela 260). In his work, the resolution between the civilization of the cities and the barbarism of the countryside was of importance (260 Lombardi). As Lombardi states, the theme of civilization and barbarism appeared in many forms including “the portrayal of the division between the elegant civilized city and the untamed, barbaric countryside”, and the conflict between the aristocracy and the environment (259). The aristocracy, in the sense mentioned by Lombardi above, which lived in the city, saw itself as superior to the wildness of the unbridled countryside. Lombardi states that the impact of petroleum on values and society inspired Uslar Pietri and Ramón Díaz Sánchez to create a “new manifestation of the theme of civilization and barbarism” (263 Lombardi). In Díaz Sánchez’s Mene, civilization brings problems to the rural areas.

Modernization is at the root of evil in Mene, but nevertheless, the town survives the transition brought on by the petroleum boom. In Mene the conflict created by the modernization of a rural town due to the petroleum boom is an important focus within the novel. Civilization is not looked at as a positive element in this novel as it is in other novels, such as Facundo by Domingo Faustino Sarmiento. “The civilization and barbarism theme became famous due to the Argentine Domingo F. Sarmiento and was seen throughout Venezuelan literature in the early 1900’s and continued to be seen in literature after the death of Gómez in 1935” (Lombardi Venezuela 259). In Cumboto, the controversy that existed in respect to the issue of miscegenation in Venezuela in the 1900’s becomes apparent through the novel’s main theme of conflict of identity and the occurrence of racism in

the novel. Miscegenation was seen by some Venezuelans as a negative force. Others, such as Díaz Sánchez, saw it as a positive tendency, while Sarmiento saw miscegenation as a “barbarie.”

Sarmiento, in Facundo (1841), reveals the belief that the racial mixing of the population contributed to a “barbarie” that impeded Latin America’s progress (Beane 200). This notion was reversed by the time Díaz Sánchez employed the theme. At this time Díaz Sánchez was writing the controversy existed in Venezuela in regards to race and this question is treated in the novel. While miscegenation is looked down on in Facundo, it is exalted in Cumboto. Beane gives a good overview of the history and use of the terms “barbarism” and “civilization” in her article that discusses the stereotyping in Cumboto and two other Afro-Hispanic novels.

Beane writes that race was a common theme in discussions that concerned the development of the national character (Beane 200). The pessimism of racial mixing paralleled a more positive view of miscegenation in Latin America and in 1925 José Vasconcelos in La raza cósmica looks at miscegenation as the forming of a new race, a race of the future (Beane 200-1). Díaz Sánchez fits into this train of ideological thought. Miscegenation is the ultimate outcome in Cumboto. Despite his view, the controversy persisted in the 1930’s as to whether or not *mestizaje* was beneficial or harmful to society (Beane 202). In Jackson’s opinion, miscegenation is not the preferred outcome because the process leads to the loss of African heritage. Realistically, miscegenation is inevitable. Again, in cases where *mestizaje* was considered a destructive force to society it was identified with the notion of “barbarie.” On the other hand, some

believed that *mestizaje* was a constructive force in society and the notion of miscegenation was identified with “civilización” (Beane 202). This demonstrates the expression of the terms as contrary to how Sarmiento first conceived them. In addition, Beane states that the novelists who believed in racial mixing at the time considered accepting *mestizaje* as a symbol of Latin America’s commitment to “civilization” (Beane 202). Beane writes that a number of authors felt a social and artistic responsibility to the Indians and Afro-Hispanics (Beane 203). Díaz Sánchez is such an author. To accept miscegenation as a positive outcome was Ramón Díaz Sánchez’s message in Cumboto. Another concern of his was to express elements from his African heritage.

The study of works that express authenticity or a concern for expressing issues close to the lives of the people of Latin America is a move towards cultural awareness and a step that adds an important dimension to the study of Latin American literature. Díaz Sánchez is concerned with issues that reflect the society around him. Social issues and issues of identity within the text bring the reader closer to comprehending Latin America’s diversity.

Chapter III

Afro-Hispanic Literature: Some Characteristics

Who is the Afro-Hispanic writer? Stanley Cyrus and June Legge define the Afro-Hispanic writer as one who “reaffirms that his blackness is worthy, and one who claims that his accomplishments and contributions to the culture are significant.”

In addition they write:

“The Afro-Hispanic writer rejects racism, and instead of trying to blend into the white aesthetic, is intent upon forging a black aesthetic, one which, while universal in its themes, retains the concerns of black Latin Americans and reflects the unique linguistic and cultural aspects of their society” (Cyrus and Legge 93).⁴

Ramón Díaz Sánchez, a Venezuelan mulato who is listed by Cyrus and Legge as an Afro-Hispanic author, conveys the message of the Afro-Hispanic writer in his work. In Cumboto (1950) he seeks peace between the races, he values the African cultural influence, and acknowledges a new transformed culture. Many of the traits mentioned by Cyrus and Legge are found in Cumboto, even though the protagonist demonstrates a dual nature and adopts a white as well as a black world view.⁵ The novel, Cumboto, includes African religious rituals and mentions folktales of African origin.

This information comes from the article Afro-Hispanic Literature: Cultural and Literary Enrichment for the Foreign Language Classroom and can be found in Acting on Priorities: A Commitment to Excellence 1991 (ERIC accession number: ED348856).

The protagonist's dualism will be discussed in chapter VI.

The emergence of African oral-traditional rhetoric in Afro-Hispanic literature is a tendency that is manifested in Cumboto. Josaphat Bekunuru Kubayanda lists many traits that tie Latin American Black literature to its origins in Africa.

Cyrus and Legge list some of the traits common to Afro-Hispanic literature in their article "Afro-Hispanic Literature: Cultural and Literary Enrichment for the Foreign Language Classroom." From the list of eight traits, seven were applicable to the novels of Díaz Sánchez.

The first characteristic simply states that even though Afro-Hispanic literature contains aspects that are unique to Black literature, the literature contains elements similar to other types of literature (Cyrus and Legge 94). For instance, one similarity is the fact that Afro-Hispanic literature fits into the realm of romanticism and modernism (Cyrus and Legge 94). Díaz Sánchez is described as a modernist as well as an Afro-Hispanic writer in their article. A second trait common to Afro-Hispanic literature is the search within the work to re-affirm the African spirit, and its reflection of "the dynamism, accomplishments and glorious traditions of an ethnic group which, though having been subjected and exploited, resolved to reassure its sociocultural identity" (Cyrus and Legge 94). Anita is a strong character in Cumboto who is proud of her African heritage, as are other characters in the novel. Although she has a son who has moved to the city and wants to better his race by having children with a white woman, she exemplifies her black heritage through the way she chooses to live her life. She also fills the role of the griot in a sense. In Africa, the griot is a story-teller, chronicler, and transmitter of myth and legend, as well as a repository of oral tradition in history and literature (Diop Amadou Koumba vii).

She helps carry on African tradition by telling folktales and by sharing her beliefs about the world. Natividad, the protagonist, can also be seen as a type of griot who tells the story of Africans in Venezuela beginning with the arrival of the blacks to the Cumboto plantation, and of life on the plantation. He continues through the narrative to tell a history of Cumboto that includes African tradition, identity conflicts, as well as the different stages of *mestizaje* that are experienced on the plantation.

Cyrus and Legge also list a concern with the oppressed and the poor as a theme commonly seen in Afro-Hispanic works (Cyrus and Legge 94). Thus, as Richard Jackson has stated, a concern for humanity is a common theme in this literature. In addition, Cyrus and Legge acknowledge that the protagonists represent many ethnic groups and racial mixtures (Cyrus and Legge 94-95). In Cumboto, the protagonist is of African descent, but *mestizos*, *zambos*, and Europeans appear as well. Europeans and blacks play a significant role in the novel. Another tendency seen by Cyrus and Legge is the expression of nature's beauty which is emphasized in a vital, animistic, and telluric sense in Afro-Hispanic literature (Cyrus and Legge 95). The many descriptions of nature in Cumboto are expressive and the idea of animism is evident in the description of the natural world.

Another trait is the incorporation of romantic sentimentalism. This, for Cyrus and Legge, is the tendency to bare emotions and frustration in the face of harsh conditions. Natividad, the protagonist of Cumboto, often is silent when faced with racial discrimination (Cyrus and Legge 96). Finally, Afro-Hispanic literature according to Cyrus and Legge includes rhythms and sonorous African linguistic elements, as in the poetry of Guillén

(Cyrus and Legge 96). Songs the Africans sing as they break coconuts occur in the novel Cumboto. African traits, such as sacrificial ceremonies, oral traditions, to list a few, appear in Cumboto and are relevant to the analysis of the work.

J. Kubayanda lists certain oral traditions of Africa that appear in Latin American and Caribbean writing in his article titled "Notes on the Impact of African Oral-Traditional rhetoric on Latin American and Caribbean Writing." He is concerned with the features that occur in the texts that parallel the traditional systems to which they relate and with how and why the structures evolved (Kubayanda Notes 5).

The "African principle of ancestrality" as defined by Kubayanda, "is the recognition of the whole network of values pertaining to one's past" (Kubayanda Notes 5). This "ancestral reference system", writes Kubayanda, surfaces in New World literature in the form of acknowledging and celebrating an African heritage and thus, paying verbal tribute to an ancestor (Kubayanda Notes 6). Also, ancestral symbols of status such as age, wisdom, and integrity appear in Black novels (Kubayanda Notes 6). One example given by Kubayanda is that of an old man who tells his son to not follow the vices of the white man and to be true to his people and ancient rites.⁶

Similarly, Kubayanda sees the animistic elements " (i.e., earth, water, winds, mountains and other phenomena) as significant that represent a deep vision or "meaning" in the culture of the African and American tropics" (Kubayanda Notes 7). Further, purification and vitality are symbolized in narrative that incites the idea of unity between matter and spirit (Kubayanda Notes 7).

the author quoted by Kubayanda is Ngugi. The quote comes from his novel The River Between.

He gives the example of kinship between human and animal natures as an expression of this. He also lists the words ‘singing’, ‘the hills’, ‘the winds’ and physical being as signs of tradition in an example he gives of an African girl who, while singing, is listened to by the grass, while the hills sing a chorus to her. This communion between the sacred and profane is, as Kubayanda writes, a search she makes for “rhythmic reintegration into the signs of her traditions and her substance” (Kubayanda Notes 7). Thus, she becomes rejuvenated and purified. At times, Afro-Hispanic novels praise certain qualities in black women, such as those of the dancer (Cyrus and Legge 95), Pascua, a character in Cumboto who dances beautifully to drums at a festival as well as to a Beethoven piece. Music and rhythm, which Kubayanda has mentioned as an element of African referentiality, are present in the novels of Díaz Sánchez.

Plant symbolism is also paralleled with the idea of revitalization of ancestry. Kubayanda states that this is especially true for the palm tree, the baobab tree, the ebony tree, the guayacán wood in Ecuador and Colombia, and the Mugumo tree in Kenya all of which in this rhetoric symbolize strength and sustenance against the possibility of extinction of the self and Africanity (8). Dead leaves indicate loneliness or weariness in a story of a man who is identified with a palm tree (Kubayanda 8). The palm tree is as significant a symbol as the Baobab is in Africa. In the African tale “The Humps” from the book Tales of Amadou Koumba, a tamarind tree is said to be the haunt of good and bad spirits who can have special powers (Diop 4).

African oral traditions in the form of jokes and riddles, trickster tales, animal stories, legendary and ritual narratives, mortuary or lament rites, and musical expression or other

performances influence New World texts and often have a specific message to impart (Kubayanda Notes 8). Often the tales will contain a moral or will teach a lesson (Kubayanda Notes 8-9).

To continue, heroic figures commonly appear in black literature. Jackson writes that they may be represented as being physically strong and courageous, as is Ascensión Lastre, from Adalberto Ortiz's novel, Juyungo , or, a heroic figure may speak his mind and reflect a strength based on verbal abilities (Jackson 42-44). Jackson adds that the heroic figures are "sensitive to prejudice and to the misfortunes of others" (Jackson 44).

The Mandingo (mainly of ancient Mali and Songhai) and the Bantu (of central and Southern Africa) are listed by Kubayanda as the main groups represented in black Latin American and Caribbean epic narrative (Kubayanda 9). Heroic lore is common in African folktales as well (Kubayanda 9). In Africa the Mandinga figure is that of the warrior tradition, and is, as Kubayanda continues, "a symbol of epic anchorage, of strength, beauty, and intelligence" (Kubayanda 9). Cumboto , a novel which contains many of the traits listed above is thus, distinguished as an Afro-Hispanic novel.

CHAPTER IV

Africa and Venezuela

At least 150 million persons of African descent live in Latin America, and Brazil has the largest concentration of people of African descent in the world outside of Africa. The following is a partial list of Spanish speaking countries where those of African decendency contribute the population. There are blacks in Colombia, Peru, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Ecuador, México, and Venezuela. They arrived as slaves, for the most part, and have influenced the culture substantially. Literature that contains African elements gives insight into the life and history of blacks in Latin America. In addition, any knowledge of one's history has been and is an important issue in the black community, for which a recuperation of the past is essential.

In a recent debate regarding the race of the Egyptians on Internet in the list CANALC, The Canadian Association for Latin American and Caribbean Studies, Marvin A. Titus expressed his opinion concerning the importance of history to his people. Literature, like history, he states, should be used as a "rehabilitative tool" and as a way to "gain control of our past".⁷ Tony Gleason, who currently has a photography exhibit called *Africa's Legacy in Mexico* traveling throughout the United States, said "I would like to provide a voice for the Afro-Mexicans because I found that many didn't know their own

⁷ This appeared in CANALC on March 8, 1994, but originated from the newsgroup soc.culture.african.american(Feb. 24,1994). "Our" refers to, in this circumstance, to those African decendency.

history” (qtd in Simon 47). Furnishing a voice for the marginalized has been a concern of Afro-Hispanic writers in Venezuela. The voice for Afro-Venezuelans has been provided by writers such as Juan Pablo Sojo, and Ramón Díaz Sánchez, who includes some historical facts and African traditions in his novels. This chapter will briefly discuss the Venezuelan’s African heritage.

In the beginning of the colonial period the indigenous population was enslaved before the Africans arrived in Venezuela. The Native Americans, who were exploited by the Spanish, were required to obtain pearls, gold, and food for the Europeans (Jimenez and Morella 303, 296). Like many indigenous populations, upon contact with the Europeans, the native population was decreased due to illness, heavy work loads, and malnutrition (Jimenez 303).

Prized for their strength, the Africans were considered to be physically superior to the indigenous people and became the labor force of Venezuela beginning in the 1500’s. Salcedo-Bastardo writes in Historia fundamental de Venezuela , that an African was worth four Native Americans because he could cultivate one hundred and forty bunches of yucca a day, while an indian could only cultivate twelve” (Salcedo-Bastardo 90-91). Africans were considered as objects, and were bought by the ton, or by the foot to provide a labor force. The act of enslavement of the Africans during the colonial period was a disgrace to humanity, and the Africans’ endurance and will to survive and rebel against slavery has been admired by many. Many of the Africans brought to America were from 15 to 20 years old, and this led to deculturation or a phenomenon that stripped the Africans of their native culture (Moreno Fragonal Culture 8-10).

The oral tradition was retained and passed on by the elders not the youth (Moreno Fragonal "Culture" 10). There has been some speculation that Africans arrived to the Americas before Columbus.

Ivan Van Sertima suggests that there was pre-Columbian contact between Africa and America. He lists evidence such as sightings of Africans by Spanish explorers before the arrival of slaves and discusses the pre-Columbian Olmec sculptures in Mexico with negro features (Sertima 25). There is much controversy regarding the pre-Columbian history of Africans in Latin America and in this study the background of African heritage will be limited mainly to its relationship with the literature and with ties to Venezuela.

Some of the first people of African descendency to land in America with Europeans arrived with Christopher Columbus when he stumbled across Venezuela in 1498 during his third voyage to America. They were navigators for the Niña (Brookshaw 8). Later, in the 1500's, the Africans were brought to Venezuela as slaves to search for gold and dive for pearls (Morón A History of Venezuela 33, 42). Oyster beds existed off the island of Cubagua (Morón A History 33), Margarita Island, and other coastal regions. In addition, the Africans were skilled metallurgists. The African's knowledge of metallurgy was beneficial in the field of mining (Salcedo-Bastardo 91).

The Africans were skilled in many areas. Africa's civilization was diverse and Africans coming to America came from many different tribes, kingdoms, and empires. The majority of the Africans to come to Venezuela were of Bantu origin. They were superior farmers, artists, and musicians. (Salcedo-Bastardo 90).

Many slaves worked with tobacco in Barinas, cacao in Caracas and near Lake Maracaibo, and with cotton in El Tocuyo and Carora (Morón A History 52). In addition, they worked on coconut plantations and in sugar cane production. Women as well as men were brought to America as slaves, although the importation of males was much higher (Moreno Fragonal Cultural 11). As noted by Francesca Miller, women of African descent were not mentioned as much in written work as the Indian or Iberian woman during the first part of colonization (Miller 23). She also states that the black women's history has been poorly recorded, even though the major exportation points are known.

Portuguese sailors working for Spain transported thousands of Africans to Venezuela in the 1500's and the 1600's (Acosta Saignes 4-5). The principal slave exportation points were the Senegal river and the Sierra Leon, and the Niger River (Acosta Saignes 5-6). Of importance is the fact that the Africans brought valuable skills to America as well as many traditions.

According to Daniel Boamah-Waife, spirit possession, singing, drumming, dancing, exorcism, animal sacrifice, and elaborate occult rituals are characteristics of traditional African religious practices (Boamah-Wiafe). Some examples of African religious forms in the Americas include Voodoo in Haiti, Macumba in Brazil, Shango in Trinidad, and Orish which is found in many Latin American countries. He also states that "African religions survived better in Latin America than in the U.S.." Moreno Fragonal explains that in Cuba, the cabildos, lodge-type mutual-aid associations of a strictly regional or tribal basis, with religious, social, and cultural overtones where slaves could get together, allowed certain aspects of African culture to

continue, while British colonialism in the Caribbean persecuted all African cultural manifestations (Moreno Fraginal Cultural 8). In Venezuela, the Africans were allowed to celebrate together and continue some of their traditions.

The Africans continued to celebrate with drumming and dancing in Venezuela. Festejos or holidays were allowed for the Africans from the beginning in the 16th century, but due to the increased fight for liberty the dances in Caracas and elsewhere were limited for a short time in the 18th century (Acosta Saignes 201). The festivals, although limited in cities, still continued in the countryside during this time (Acosta-Saignes 202). The festivals of San Juan, San Benito, and other saints were celebrated with drumming and dancing. The festivals enabled the Afro-Venezuelans to maintain remnants of their African past throughout the decades (Acosta-Saignes 201) and are a combination of African tradition and Catholicism. The use of amulets, which are mentioned in Cumboto, is a tradition brought from Africa (Salcedo-Bastardo 94). Language was also influenced by the African presence.

Words of African origin that still exist include: guineo, congo, loango, mandinga, angola, mina, and cafre.⁸ Furthermore, some products were imported with the Africans. These include ñane, patilla, quimbombó, and quinchoncho (Salcedo-Bastardo 95).⁹ In addition, Venezuelan music and instruments are influenced by Africa. Marimbas, merengues, rumbas, mambos, congas, cumbias, calipsos, bambucos and sambas all reflect the African

Guineo is a type of banana. *Mandinga* means devil and in Barlovento it stands for 'brujo' and devil. A *mina* is a type of drum made from a hollow trunk.

Ñane is an edible tuber used in soups. *Patilla* is a watermelon. *Quimbombo* or *quingombo* okra. *Quinchoncho* is a type of bean that grows on vines.

rhythms and tradition. In Cumboto the African influence in music is described in a positive light. It is interesting to note that song was commonly used as a form of expressing protest and the condition of life on the plantations. The mestizo-black has been described through the following saying, “he sings when he wants to cry” (Salcedo-Bastardo 94-95). The songs of the black had various purposes, one of which was to protest their enslavement as they faced many hardships.

During the early colonial period interracial marriage was prohibited, and people of African descent were not allowed to go out at night, or wear certain colors (Brookshaw 5-6). mulatos were restricted from attending schools and universities (Brookshaw 6). In 1527, 1538, and 1541 the monarch of Spain insisted that blacks only marry blacks (Salcedo-Bastardo 101). The Spanish regime slowly retracted such laws and accepted the miscegenation that is characteristic of Venezuela today (Salcedo-Bastardo 101).

Beginning in the 16th century, protests, rebellions, and uprisings which lasted through the 19th century occurred (Salcedo-Bastardo 97). Brookshaw writes that rebel run away slaves were common and that they formed new communities (Brookshaw 4). One of the first African rebellions was commanded by “Miguel el Rey” in 1555 in Barquisimeto. Miguel, who was a miner at the time, ran away with his wife and became an important hero figure (Brookshaw 4).

Blacks and mestizos participated in a rebellion led by a free Zambo¹⁰, José Leonardo Chirinos, between 1795-1797 in Coro (Carrera Damas 45). The Africans in Venezuela were strong and their fight for equal rights and liberty were common beginning in

The term zambo describes the offspring of a Native American and a black.

the 1500's. Richard Jackson believes that the Latin American black's passion for liberty and quest for freedom should be emphasized when analyzing literature (Jackson Humanism 121). He adds that following abolition, "blacks rarely accommodated themselves to their status as slaves or as second-class citizens" (121).

Large black revolts were not unusual in Latin America and the theme of liberty has been prevalent throughout the history of Afro-Hispanics (121). The colonial period in Venezuela ended in 1811 (Morón 57), but it wasn't until March 24, 1854, that President José Gregorio Monagas declared absolute freedom for the slaves in Venezuela (Morón A History 53). In conclusion, the people of African descendance have influenced the Venezuelan culture substantially with their many skills, religious beliefs, music, myths.

Chapter V

African Traits in Cumboto

Cumboto contains many references to traditional African beliefs and world view. The predominant theme in the novel revolves around the identity conflict experienced by the protagonist who is caught between two world views; the African and the European. Besides the conflict of identity, which is discussed at length in chapter VI, the text is unified by the constant reference to African tradition in the text and the occurrence of ancestral referentiality which takes into account the African reference system in the novel. The African reference system recognizes the whole network of values pertaining to a black's past and which demonstrates, as stated by Kubayanda, a new faith in the the community and a concept of self identity in the individual of African descent (Kubayanda Notes 5). Recognizing these elements is a way of recovering black history which has been suppressed. First, African traits within the novel will be explored. These will include the symbolism associated with natural elements, such as trees and the river as well as the occurrence of spirits, magic realism, folklore, and religion within the novel. The symbolic representation and sub-themes which tie the text to African tradition are described. This analysis is mainly based on the critical concepts set forth by J. Kubayanda.

Trees

One of the elements of symbolism that has a connection to the African heritage is the occurrence of trees in the text and how

they are represented in the novel. According to Kubayanda “African rhetoric, whether oral-traditional or written-modern, relates as much to natural agencies of revitalization as to the ancestor figure; it (this rhetoric) is often woven around plant symbolism, especially the palm tree, the baobab tree, the ebony tree, the Ecuadorian and Colombian wood called guayacán...” and the Kenyan Mugumo tree (Kubayanda Notes on the Impact 8). He continues to explain that “these trees and others symbolically provide strength and sustenance against the possibilities of extinction of the self and Africanity” (Kubayanda Notes on the Impact 6-8). Natividad’s first vision of the world is through the windows of the large white house on the plantation from which he sees “miles de palmas ondulantes” (9). From inside the house Natividad senses the strength and soothing nature of the palms, “por sus ventanas penetraba la brisa del bosque y la suave música de las palmas ” (22). Trees are mentioned throughout the text and from the beginning of the novel, trees provide strength and are an essential part of life. As in the African tradition, trees represent a tie with nature and the spiritual world. Trees are imbued with spirit and are an important part of Natividad’s world. Trees contain spirits, take on human traits, and at times, their traits are used to describe humans. Furthermore, trees provide food and shelter.

The palm tree is to the Africans in Latin America, what the baobab tree is to the cultures of West Africa. “First, the palm tree has structural, aesthetic, and spiritual importance for the people in the areas of agriculture, architecture, religion, and music” (Kubayanda Notes on the Impact 8). Kubayanda points out that the palm tree produces oil for cooking and for rubbing into the

traditional drums to maintain aesthetic pitch levels, and is used “as an offering to certain gods” (Kubayanda Notes on the Impact 8). In addition the palm leaves have been used for shelter, as well as for making a “salubrious drink” (Kubayanda Notes on the Impact 8). Many of these uses are mentioned in the novel. Palms dominate the center of the plantation. The palms are inviting and are nourished by the river.

Cumboto is a hacienda that is bordered on one side by the harsh coast : “En la costa la vegetación es áspera y retorcida como pelo de negro. Predominan en ella los cactus, el cují y otras plantas agresivas ” (12). Unlike the coast, the center of the hacienda is more inviting. It is dominated by the palms, which provide valuable palm oil, and rivers: “ Pero hacia el interior, penetrada y enternecida por el agua de los ríos, la tierra se vuelve oscura y los árboles crecen robustos, coronados por copas enormes.”... “Cerca de la casa de la familia fue instalada una batería de calderas para la cocción del aceite de coco ” (12). The palm leaves provide many functions. For example, Cervelión, a plantation worker, weaves palm leaves on his terrace. “Por las tardes, al terminar su tarea en el galpón, Cervelión mataba el tiempo tejiendo palmas de cocotero. ” (53). Venancio, an “old fat mulato”, makes cages out of “veradas y varillas de coco ” (53). On his ranch, “Cientos de pájaros inquietos, nerviosos, saltaban chillando dentro de ellas” (54). The palms provide food, oil, material to build cages, mats, and other useful objects, but also represent spiritual strength.

To continue, trees provide solace. During a time of sadness Natividad goes to the foot of a big tree when he learns that Federico, his childhood friend and the plantation owner’s son,

will be going to Europe soon: "Me fui al pie de un frondoso mango que se elevaba más allá del galpón y me senté en un rústico banco de bambúes fabricado bajo su sombro. Medité largo rato " (55). The importance of Natividad's relationship to the mango tree is evident. Furthermore, from an African world view and concept of man's relationship with nature, Natividad is at one with nature as he sleeps on palm leaves. Palms provide a peaceful mattress for Natividad to sleep on as he is comforted by the wind and the moon, "En ésta que era cocina y depósito a un tiempo, sobre las palmas, dormía yo. El viento de la noche acariciaba mi cuerpo, la luz de la luna me cubría a veces como una sábana, y la lluvia, cuando venía del Norte, me lavaba los pies " (92). Throughout the novel, the protagonist is at harmony with nature and the author often personifies natural living objects.

Human traits are given to trees and other natural elements in the novel. For example the wind is described as having a hand, while the trees have hips: "...el roce de la mano del viento en las caderas de los árboles.. " (10). In another instance, Natividad observes Jer Gunter, a relative who has come to take care of the finances after the death of don Guillermo, draw a tree. Natividad attributes human traits to the tree in the drawing: "En rápidos trazos su lápiz copió el árbol con admirable exactitud. Allí estaba sobre el blanco papel como una persona, rechoncho y nudoso, con sus brazos apuntados hacia el cielo..." (116). On another occasion Federico leads Natividad to the window to see the trees dancing in the wind and the fire is described as having tongues, "Galopaba en el campo un viento saltón que hacía danzar las palmas, y a lo lejos, entre los troncos de los cocoteros, alzaban sus lenguas rojas las hogueras encendidas para espantar los lémures y las alimañas del monte " (135). At other times, men

are described as resembling trees.

The following comparison between a man of African descendance and a tree again strengthens the tie between man and nature that is commonly seen in the novel as in the comparison that follows, “¿Quién fue Gaspar de los Reyes?... Debió ser un negro grande, alto, árbol de largos y fuertes brazos,... Por la sola fuerza de sus brazos debió sacar él la pesada guaratara del río...” (137). In another section, humans are given characteristics of trees when they come to listen to the young mulato, the son of Federico play a piece which expresses not only his European heritage, but his African heritage as well. Natividad describes the blacks that surround him: “ Los seres que me rodean, sudorosos y estremecidos, se mecen y gruñen como los árboles en medio de la tormenta: - Cumboto... Cumboto.. ” (184). The trees on the plantation are an integral part of the blacks’ lives. They provide sustenance, solace, and material to make useful articles. To continue, they represent physical strength and are also personified which strengthens the tie between man and nature in the novel. Dorothy S. Blair concludes that, “In the traditional animistic beliefs and mythology of Africa there is no dividing line between life and death, between animate and inanimate objects, between animals and humans. Everything lives and possesses a soul: tree, arrow, antelope, pebble, man” (Diop The Tales ix).

Trees contain spirits in the African tradition, and everything, from an African world view, is imbued with spirit . Examples of this can be seen in The Tales of Amadou Koumba, which is a collection of some of the African folklore of the griots. As story tellers, griots carried tradition by passing on folklore. This folklore included tales, axioms, proverbs, fables, myth, legend,

music, history, and literature (Diop The Tales v-vii). As members of the community, they are valued highly. In “The Humps”, one of the stories from Amadou Koumba, the tamarind tree is described as the one that “. . .provides the deepest shade...” . Its thick foliage “makes this tree the commonest haunt of spirits and ghosts, good spirits as well as bad, the ghosts of unsatisfied desires as well as those which have found fulfilment” (Diop Tales 4).

According to the African folktale, the spirits of the Tamarind tree can grant favors or drive people mad. A parallel exists between the “The Humps” and a tale told in Cumboto. Abuela Anita, a friend of Natividad’s who is one character who fills the role of carrying on oral tradition, tells of an incident that occurred to her under a tree. Natividad begins by telling about her incident with the tree: “ También había visto la Abuela un espeluznante espectáculo que ella llamaba de ‘caigo o no caigo’ ” (45). The narrative goes back to dialogue and Anita’s voice narrates the story:

“Estaba yo muchachita y una noche que tuve necesidad de salir de la casa, en un patio muy grande que allí había, lleno de árbol, vi un bulto negro colgando de un samán enorme. Lo samane, como ustedes saben, atraen a las almas en pena. Ver aquel bulto y quedarme paralizada, todo fue uno. De pronto oigo una voz ronca y horrible que me dice: ‘¿Caigo o no caigo?’ Y en seguida otra que le contesta: ‘Caiga’. Entonces vi desprenderse uno de lo brazo del bulto envuelto en candela. ‘¿Caigo o no caigo?’, repitió la vo...’Caiga’. Y otro brazo

llameante se vino al suelo. ‘¿Caigo o no caigo?...
‘Caiga’. Y vi caé la cabeza como una bola de fuego.”
(45-46).

As proven, trees in Cumboto are the haunts of spirits as they are in certain traditional African tales. In “The Humps”, the tamarind tree is blamed for turning people mad. Man is said to go crazy because he “has seen there what he should not have seen: the inhabitants of another world, spirits which he had offended by his words or actions”(Diop Tales 4). The parallel with African tradition is evident. The tree is a haunt for spirits in both the African and Venezuelan cultures. Finally, the representation of the tree in Díaz Sánchez’ novel provides a tie to African tradition.

More Spirits, Magic Realism, and Folktales

Natividad’s visits to Anita’s to listen to her tell stories are frequent and the tales, some of which are based on her life experiences, tell of spirits, contain elements of magic realism and include African folktales. She becomes a maternal figure for the protagonist and is much like a griot. She not only tells tales, but gives advice about how to live. Filling the role of an elder in African tradition, she passes on stories and culture to the younger members of her community. Edna Sims notes that in Cumboto , “women are portrayed as serving mankind in their roles as guardians of traditional African beliefs, as builders of moral character, as sources of religious doctrine, as believers in mystic powers and as specialists with access to the supernatural forces of the universe” (Sims 16).

Listening to Anita’s stories was a common occurrence according to Natividad,

“Cuando la anciana amanecía canturreando, con el labio inferior distendido, nosotros nos preparábamos a pasar una mañana feliz a su alrededor. Aquélla era la señal inequívoca de que tendríamos ventas o cuentos espeluznantes, o ambas cosas a la vez ” (43).

Natividad explains that Anita tells her stories and not those of princes or European based fairy tales, but tales of telluric based superstition:

“Estas supersticiones, precisamente, eran las que asomaban a la flor de sus labios cuando sentíase comunicativa. Eran sus cuentos, o para decirlo con sus propias palabras, ‘sus historias de diablos y de visiones.’”(44).

Natividad describes Anita as one who ignores the civilized world of fairy tales that include witches and tales such as Little Red Riding Hood and Snow White. Her tales are based on truth: “Las suyas eran verdaderas historias, hechas de los cuales podía dar fe jurada, manifestaciones de un universo que no por estar más allá de lo perceptible era menos real que el universo donde nos movemos todos los días. ” (44).

The line between the fantastic and reality is difficult to distinguish in her tales. Her stories, which include fantastical events add an element of magic realism to the narrative. For example, in one story she tells of a man that would carries his head in his hands: “Una vez, viviendo en Borburata con mi agüelo Mamerto, se me apareció la visión del hombre que se paseaba con la cabeza en la mano”(45). This man was a Spanish gentleman who was taken prisoner and decapitated with an axe in front of his servants. After the burial the dead man occasionally

wanders through the area.

“Enterraron su cadáver en el patio de la propia hacienda, con la cabeza entre las manos, y desde entonces su pobre alma se pasea por aquel lugar sin descanso. Sale unas veces de un bosquecillo y se mete en la casa; otras parece venir de los cafetales, se queda un momento parado en el centro del patio y hace ademán de querer decir algo ” (45).

This scene is similar to one in One Hundred Years of Solitude where Prudencio Aguilar, after being killed, reappears to Ursula with a sad expression on his face, lonely and unable to speak (García Márquez 22-23). In an other instance of magic realism within the text , Natividad explains that there are roads in Cumboto that no one walks on after 6 in the evening because that are inhabited by spirits taking walks who appear to people in human as well as animal forms. Venancio, who is another griot-like character that shares his stories and visions, explains about the spirits who wander through the woods: “Esos son los espíritus de los españoles que vivieron aquí hace muchos años, ¿comprenden? Yo los he visto muchas veces. Los espantos se conocen en que no posan el suelo, sino que resbalan en el aire.. ” (73). Although fantastic, these events are related in a reliable and realistic manner (Baldick 128). Ghost stories are a common theme in the novel. Ghost stories, theorizes Leonard Barrett, “abound in Caribbean culture” because of the “many premature deaths of so many victims” during slavery (qtd in Jackson Five Afro-Hispanic 40).

Many of Anita’s visions include her many family members such as her grandfather and her mother. Natividad explains that

the world of the blacks is overrun by fantastic characters:

“Familiares le eran todos los fantasmagóricos personajes que infestan el mundo de los negros y que se meten en las alcobas, se apoderan de los hogares, pululan en los suburbios de las ciudades y hacen de las iglesias y los cementerios lugares de pavor.” (46). In the African tradition it is believed that one travels from life to death and back to life again in a circular existence. This view is shared by Anita in the following quote. Anita, “Porque a pesar de lo que digan los incrédulos, los espíritus de lo que se fueron están siempre junto a nosotros y vuelven a recorrer sus pasos y a cumplir la penitencia de sus pecados ” (46). In Cumboto, the mention of Christian and African religious practices together demonstrates the syncretism of the two. Together the religious beliefs are united and exist together to create a new religion. African traits within the religion are strong. Anita is the character who possesses most of the information regarding spirits in the novel.

From Natividad’s point of view, Anita possesses a substantial amount of knowledge of the spiritual world: “La Abuela poseía toda una teoría de lo sobrenatural, teoría primitiva, simplista, pero no por ello menos definida. ... Para ella existían dos zonas perfectamente delimitadas en el orden de los fenómenos del ‘otro mundo’, la de las almas en pena y la de los demonios ” (46). Anita’s vision of the devils is much like the notion of bad spirits in the African world her ancestors came from. Anita believes they frighten people, cause men to commit crimes, make women and children sin and are the cause of natural disasters such as floods, earthquakes, and crop losses. Anita says that there are many devils with different powers: “Uno dominan pueblos entero, ciudades y campo; otro no pueden pasar de una casa; otros, en

fin, apenas alcanzan a la persona " (47).

Natividad continues on the theme of the evil spirits that inhabit the world and tells of the small teasing goblins that are minor demons whos mission it is to, "... hacer travesuras y sobresaltar a las gentes (47). They inhabit houses and are engaged in mischeivious tricks such as the following; "tiran piedras a los tejados, arrastran los muebles en los salones, rompen los platos en las cocinas (47). Anita tells of one unfortunate woman whos house was inhabited by the goblins: "A una pobre mujer, que vivía de hacer arepas, le derramaban todas las noches el maíz salcochado, le abrían el grifo del agua y le sacudían la cama donde dormía. A otra llegaban hasta darle de bofetadas " (47). Among the mean spirits listed by Anita is the Mandinga. Mandinga is, according to Anita, the head of the devils. Anita's describes the Mandinga with fear and reverence: "Mandinga, llamado también Belcebú, el Maligno y el Enemigo, sólo se hacía sentir en las grandes commociones del mundo, en las catástrofes nacionales e internacionales. Sobre todo en las guerras" (47).

The medieval Mandingo was a heroic warrior. "The medieval Mandingo empires of Mali and Songhai, with their centers of operation at Timbuctu and Gao, were renowned throughout Europe and the Middle East for their administrative, military, commercial, and intellectual distinction" (Kubayanda Notes on the Impact 9). Kubayanda points out that in several other Afro-Hispanic novels "the Mandingo persona is a symbol of epic anchorage, of strength, beauty, and intelligence" and is related to "the memories of a heroic African past." Eventhough this is not so in Cumboto , the Mandinga is related to destruction which is an element of war and dominance. In addition to the the ghost and devil stories, folklore, such as, animal tales transformed from

original African ones are mentioned in the novel. Animals are commonly found in African folktales and fables as well, of course. Two of the best known animal characters is the hare and the lion. In Venezuelan tales the rabbit and the tiger are common characters in folklore. Venancio, the storyteller, refers to Brer Rabbit tales, which are originally from Africa. Natividad describes the nature of oral tradition on the plantation as varied:

“Algunos eran simplísimos, elementales; otros complicados y llenos de humor. Habían narradores especializados en relatos espeluznantes, lúgubres y sobrenaturales, de aparecidos y brujerías; otros en fábulas alegres e ingeniosas, en las que bullía el sentimiento humano del valor y de la astucia encarnados en los animales del bosque. Las hazañas de Tío Conejo y Tío Tigre resultaban interminables y Venancio el Pajarero las conocían todas ” (73).

Listening to and telling stories is mentioned throughout the novel. The oral tradition that is an important part of African tradition is common on the Cumboto plantation as well. The incorporation of oral tradition and the mention of African folklore in the narrative is strong and points to a strong reference to African tradition in the novel.

The River

The river in Cumboto plays an important role. Considering the role trees play in the African society, the river's contribution to the well being of the trees is significant. The river provides the life blood for the palms. The symbolic representation of the river, as suggested by Brookshaw, parallels that of the river in

Díaz Sánchez' novel. In her dissertation she proposes that the Tuy river in Nochebuena negra, by Juan Pablo Sojo, is associated with the notion of fertility, and the river in Cumboto is also associated with providing the palms with the strength to grow and flourish (Brookshaw 104). In addition, the river symbolizes liberation. According to R. Jackson, the theme of liberation is common in Afro-American texts and in Cumboto the river represents freedom. In this section the symbolic representations associated with the river will be examined.

In the African society, rain has been linked to God and has been a sacred word (Cirlot 274). Rain represents an important event and according to African tradition, as seen in the following example of the text, rain is revered during a period of convalescence for Natividad:

“Llovía. El hondo cielo se llenaba de bilis y sobre las heridas de la tierra corría la turbia sangre del invierno. Cuando llueve, el silencio tiene una grandeza religiosa que nos transforma. Creo que nadie osaría tocar una música alegre en estos momentos en que los campos desaparecen envueltos en la mortaja del agua” (168).

Water in the African tradition possesses a spiritual connection as demonstrated in the above excerpt. Water, in the form of the river is associated with liberation within the novel, and references are made to the role the river plays in guarding against extinction. In addition, a reference to the river and escaped slaves occurs in the beginning of the novel.

The river on the plantation is the heart of the palms and a refuge that provided freedom from the bonds of slavery for the first blacks to arrive to Cumboto. The hacienda's coastal region

is described as harsh, while the interior is lush and softened by rivers and the trees are described as strong. This is symbolic of the fertility and strength found within the river fed plantation.

“En la costa la vegetación es aspera y retorcida como pelo de negro. Predominan en ella los cactus, el cují y otras plantas agresivas. Pero hacia el interior, penetrada y enternecida por el agua de los ríos, la tierra se vuelve oscura y los árboles crecen robustos, coronados por copas enormes”(12).

The interior provided a hiding place and a home to the first blacks to arrive to Cumboto by boat. They were slaves that escaped from the Antilles to find refuge in Venezuela's jungle. When the Africans first arrived to the Cumboto region, the river fed jungle provided escape from the harsh reality of slavery.

Natividad's desire to recover his past and his need for freedom surfaces in the temptation he feels to enter the forests and follow the rivers in search of the blacks who hid from slavery in the jungle:

“En mi niñez y luego, hombre ya, muchas veces sentí la tentación de echarme a andar por los bosques, seguir el hilo de los ríos y perderme en lo más oscuro de la selva, para descubrir los antiguos refugios de aquellos primeros negros, guaridas oscuras donde la naturaleza palpita con el corazón de los grandes tambores; caminos donde todavía se siente el áspero olor de los cimarrones " (14).

The connection between man and nature is obvious as is the river as a metaphor for freedom or liberty. The river has protected blacks and is associated with African tradition as well.

Rivers are again related to the notion of freedom during

Natividad's childhood as he observes Federico, the son of don Guillermo draw during his daily lesson. On one occasion Federico is drawing a river that makes Natividad think of adventures and trips that in themselves demonstrate an element of freedom and escape. "Mientras hubo señales de vida en la casa pude contemplar a mis anchas los dibujos de Federico, unos maravillosos mares, ríos, árboles que poseían la virtud de hacerme soñar con viajes y aventuras " (26). The two children of the house, Federico and Gertrudis, are taught by Frau Berza who controls the children at first, but later loses her control when she is blackmailed by the boys who discover her secret sexual relationship with a black man. Relationships between whites and blacks on the plantation were not allowed and in this novel two black men are murdered as a result of getting involved with white women. The two boys break away from Frau Berza's control and eventually make a symbolic journey to the river.

Prior to the blackmailing of the tutor, Frau Berza's dominance over the children is observed in the following scene where he is caught drawing with Federico. One day in the white house Natividad, who often observes Federico drawing, makes the following comments on his work: "¿Por qué no le pones más verde a esta palma?. In addition, Natividad comments that the Medlar tree leaves seem blue to him, not green. At this moment Federico asks him if he would like to draw. It is obvious he has never had the opportunity to draw before by his reaction, "Sudé tinta aquella tarde." Federico laughs at Natividad's blue trees which he likens to blue burros. When Frau Berza notices Natividad drawing, she quickly tells him that this is not his place "Este no es tu lugar. Vete a limpiar el piso " (24). Education was

commonly denied to people of African descent during and after slavery. Accepting the social status put upon him by Frau Berza is difficult and causes Natividad pain. As he thinks back on the moment he describes his thoughts, “Difícil me sería ahora, al cabo de tanto tiempo, explicar la verdadera índole -o si se refiere a la verdadera forma- del sufrimiento que me causaron las palabras de la institutriz”(25). Afterwards, Natividad overcomes the insult as he draws reams of blue donkeys with his friend Federico while Frau Berza sleeps . In her presence, he is denied the education received by the plantation owner’s children.

The door of freedom opens after Natividad and Federico discover Frau Berza’s secret. The tutor has a dual character. During the day she denies Natividad the right to learn because of his race, but during the night she sleeps with a black man. The son of Cervelión, Cruz María, or Matacán which is a name given to him because he is like a small deer, is seeing Frau Berza secretly during the night (27). This information allows them the freedom to do what they want because they now have something to threaten the tutor with if she interferes. When Federico asks Natividad if he wants to learn to read he responds positively, “No vacilé en responderle que sí, porque aquello formaba parte de la misma aventura ” (30). Reading, like the symbolic trip to the river represents freedom. In a book of Federico’s there is a picture of “dos niños blancos que parecían soñar a la orilla del río.” Natividad begins to think of the rivers on Cumboto after seeing the picture described above, “Viviendo tan próximos a los ríos de Cumboto nosotros sólo poseíamos vagos y desvaídos recuerdos de ellos. Yo, por ejemplo, no recordaba haberme acercado a un río en toda mi vida ” (30). He then asks Federico if

he would like to go to the river. Going to the river, where they have never been before, represents an act of liberation. They go without the permission of don Guillermo, the plantation master. Natividad forms a closer bond with the natural environment, and he meets Anita and Cervelión who teach him about the Afro-Venezuelan traditions. The children plan the adventure to the river to coincide with don Guillermo's trip to the port. After don Guillermo's departure, the boys leave and immediately feel the power and excitement of freedom as expressed in the following excerpt.

“Al trasponer el umbral y hundir nuestros pies en el prado que rodeaba la casa, experimentamos una electrizante sensación de libertad. ... Los tres caminábamos de prisa, los rostros levantados, las narices palpitantes aspirando aquel aire joven que venía de los confines azules. Verde y húmedo el parque, en medio del cual se alzaba la blanca mole de la casa, nos parecía un manso mar bañado por el sol adolescente ” (31).

The confinement that has been imposed on them by don Guillermo is lifted. Their perception of the world is broadened and it is on this trip along the road to the river where Natividad and the children meet Abuela Anita. Abuela Anita, a colorful character, is described by Natividad in the following sentence: “La Abuela Anita era negra retinta, absoluta. Un viejo hábito, del que nadie hubiese podido despojarla, la inducía a mantenerse siempre cubierta con un enorme pañuelo de colorines atado a la cabeza y encima de éste un estropeado sombrero de fieltro de anchas alas lustrosas.” (39-40). She is animated and full of information and tales. Ana provides a tie with Natividad's

African heritage and the fact that her house is on the road to the river makes the journey of great importance. Ana intrigues the boys and is idolized by Natividad, "Su sola presencia, en el limpio ambiente que la rodeaba, tenía para nosotros una irresistible atracción " (39). Ana becomes a maternal figure for Natividad. Furthermore, her home stands out from the other homes in the area giving it a special significance. Her house is different from other houses that Natividad was familiar with :

"Casi todos los ranchos que yo conocía eran negros rojos, sucios, agrietados, desollados por el inclemente fuego o sol, ariscos como animales salvajes que se escondieran en la floresta. Este, en cambio, sonreía con el ojo de su ventana bajo los brazos verdes que se inclinaban a acariciarlo. Un viento suave agitaba las hojas y hacía caer sobre el tejado una garúa de flores flamíferas y carnosas " (34).

The adventure to the river becomes an important road to the discovery of the African tradition and heritage on the plantation. Although she is not Natividad's grandmother she treats him like one of her own. Anita has two sons. Ernesto the youngest lives at home with her and his two children, Prudencio and Pascua. Her other deceased son, Fernando, had married a white woman and had lived in the city.

Anita's granddaughter, Pascua, shows them the way to the river. As they continue their journey the relationship between man and nature is mentioned by Natividad as it is conveyed to him through the force of young girl's voice in the following statement, "Ya la naturaleza no penetraba en nuestros espíritus sino a través de la magia de su lengua " (35). Cervelión, the adopted father of Cruz María, catches up with them and they

arrive to the river together. The river is given human qualities as it is described by Natividad. “A dos pasos de allí estaba el río, en el fondo de un suave talud que se resolvía en una franja de playa de doradas arenas. Había una gran cepa de bambúes de largas cañas que se doblaban en una ofrenda de lanzas hasta herir la piel del agua corriente” (37). The river is alive as Natividad alludes to its skin pierced by bamboo leaves.

After the first day at the river the adventures and freedom continue and the boys take every chance they get to go to the river:

“ Lo que siguió a aquella escena fue una verdadera orgía de libertad. Don Guillermo ausentábase con frecuencia, siempre seguido de un negro a caballo, y nosotros salíamos poco después que él a hartarnos de campo, de río, de todo cuanto aquel mundo voluptuoso podía deparar a nuestros sentidos recién abiertos. En estos días no había lecciones ni dibujo ni piano” (38).

The river, a leitmotif in the novel, symbolizes liberation. The boys are free to explore their natural surroundings. These trips also encompass Natividad’s initiation into the African based world of the other blacks on the plantation. Natividad’s universe, which includes nature and Anita and other blacks that transfer African tradition, values, ideas, beliefs, attitudes, and customs to Natividad is discovered through the journeys to the river. These elements are a vehicle for liberation because they serve to awaken his forgotten African heritage. Remembering back on the first trip to the river Natividad explains the importance of the trip and the role the river plays in his life, “Por la tarde, al salir de la vaquera, fui al río y me bañé en el pozo del bambú, en el mismo

lugar donde una mañana maravillosa abrí ante Federico las ventanas de mi universo” (80). Again, nature is very important to the Natividad throughout the novel and its repeated occurrence provides the novel with a strong unifying sense that is an essential component of a cultural African world view. Through the discovery of the natural world that surrounds him Natividad creates his identity; that of a Latin American of African heritage.

Religion and Rebellion

According to Patrick Taylor, African religious rituals are an expression of the fight for liberation. He states that “Religion unified the community and gave the oppressed a sense of control over their destinies and of hope for the future”(Taylor 229). In Cumboto this is present in the form of a ritual that occurs after don Guillermo shoots Cruz María when he discovers him and Frau Berza in the moonlight. Furthermore, the mixing of African and European traditional religions are seen within the novel.

After shooting Cruz María, Don Guillermo gets Natividad out of bed to chase the man he shot in the dark. Natividad’s loyalty is divided. Although he never reveals anything to don Guillermo, he goes along on the chase without protesting. As they begin the search, Natividad wishes he had an amulet, which is a vestige of African tradition, with him. In this instance Natividad demonstrates his faith in a syncretic form of religion that is of African and Christian origins.

“Mientras trotaba sobre la tierra húmeda, me puse a rezar en silencio cuantas oraciones sabía. Invocaba el nombre de Dios y le hablaba de su Divina Madre y de la

Corte celestial de sus Santos. Si hubiese tenido algún amuleto mi angustia habría sido menor, pues en él hallaría un apoyo mi pobre espíritu atribulado. Pero no lo tenía. ¿Por qué había sido tan descuidado que no me procurase una crucecita de palma bendita, una medallita sagrada, siquiera una humilde pepa de Zamuro?” (64).

The *pepa de zamuro* is one type of amulet. As described by the narrator amulets of all kinds are clutched by listeners during a segment where Venancio tells tales. “Existen amuletos de todas clases, de una fantástica variedad; simples unos, tomados de la naturaleza salvaje; complejos otros, producidos por raras combinaciones e industrias”(74). The amulets contain certain powers. Venancio’s amulet is magical and comes from a bull:

“Venancio el Pajarero poseía, por ejemplo, una hermosa bola negra. Bola de toro llaman a esta curiosa formación estomacal de los rumiantes a la que los negro atribuyen virtudes mágicas para ahuyentar la pava. También poseía un pequeño frasco lleno de azogue al que miraba como a un ser vivo y prodigioso. Pesado y argénteo, el frasquito parecía entre sus dedos la pupila de un monstruo o una alimaña diabólica” (74-75).

As Natividad explains, other amulets consist of “una hermosa sortija fabricada con un clavo de casquillo, rabos de conejos, dientes de bestias feroces, trocitos de piel de reptiles, crótalos de cascabel, y pedazos de madera labrados bajo la luna menguante ” (75). Natividad derives his faith from the interlacing of the Christian and African religious traditions, and as Barthold states, “Christianity coexisted with a diversity of traditional beliefs” (Barththold Black Time 26).

Spirits that inhabit the world of the living are a common

element in Cumboto. As Natividad goes out with don Guillermo in an unsuccessful search for the injured black he begins to think of the spirits that Anita has told him about. Natividad believes in the spirit world that inhabits the trails of Cumboto, “Todo el mundo sabía que por aquellos senderos desfilaban en la alta noche las almas en pena y los espíritus malignos de que nos hablara una vez la Abuela Anita. No tardaríamos en ver colgando de las ramas de un árbol el cuerpo en llamas que dejaba caer su cabeza y sus miembros mientras gritaba: “Caigo o no caigo” (65). In the African tradition, as stated by Barthold, “The passage between the spirit world and the material world was at best risky, and if the ritual of birth and death were left unfulfilled, the cycle could be broken, leaving the spirits of the dead or the unborn to wander, angry with the human community whose ritual negligence had excluded them from the spiritual continuum of the living and the dead” (Barthold Black Time 12).

The next day Cervelión, Venancio, and others arrive at the white house to inform don Guillermo of the death and ask for permission to bury Cruz María. The communal responsibility among the slaves was strong (Barthold 26). This sense of community is evident when a burial is planned for Cruz María. Pascua’s father speaks, “Entre todos lo enterraremos, don Guillermo; lo único que venimo a pedile es que nos permita velarlo en el rancho de Cervelión ” (66). The burial ritual is important to them and the wake is attended by many blacks on the plantation.

Natividad attends the wake and the others treat him with hostility during the funeral. They are all aware that he accompanied don Guillermo on the search the night of the

shooting. This conflict of identity in Natividad will be discussed more in depth later on. Natividad reveals his passivity in contrast to their rebellious nature. “Yo era el perdiguero de don Guillermo; ellos eran los gatos, rebeldes y sigilosos. Me parecía verles asomados a las rendijas de sus puertas inmediatamente después que sonara el disparo, y deslizarse de choza en choza, sin ruido, para comunicarse sus impresiones ” (67-8). Cervelión and the others lament the death of Cruz María and the black women sing and share stories about the positive characteristics of Cruz María during the wake. Afterwards, the death is avenged.

The African legacy, which Jackson traces back to the Afro-criollo movement, involves images of oral traditions, song, dance, but also certain humanistic values. These are listed by Jackson as “the protest against human slavery, respect for the rights and dignity of the human being” (Jackson Humanism 128). In Cumboto, the murder of Cruz María is protested. Barthold states that the slaves “were not passive victims” (Barthold 24). They rebelled against slavery and she states they “found various ways to nurture certain central aspects of traditional West African culture ” (Barthold 24). “Throughout the New World, the practice of conducting religious ceremonies in a sacred grove echoed African practice, as did the use of drumming” (Barthold 25). The eventual revenge of Cruz María's death is a rebellious act initiated through religion.

Roso, Cervelión's brother, symbolizes the characteristic rebellious nature of the black: “Cuando muchacho (Roso) abandonó la casa de sus amos en Goaguaza y fue a alzarse en las montañas del Yaracuy. Formó con otros una cimarronera.” (81). Roso, his two sons, Venancio, a woman, Cervelión, and a black

that is unknown to Natividad gather to perform a religious rite that is meant to avenge the death of Cruz María. This act is a form of rebellion and part of the struggle against the oppressor.

Roso initiates the religious ritual with rebellious overtones, "Aquí estamos para invocar lo'salto pedere y el arma de Crú María el Matacán"(93). Natividad describes what he sees from his room, "Tendido en el poso en el centro del círculo, reposaba un monigote de trapos blancos y en torno a éste cuatro velas encendidas." A woman takes out a dead snake as an offering, "Sus manos deshicieron un oscuro envoltorio del cual vi salir, mórbido, relajado, largo y repugnante, el cuerpo sin vida de una serpiente. Era una cascabel. La mujer la tenía asida con ambas manos y la alzaba en el aire en un gesto de ofrenda " (93). In the African tradition, "Sacrifice emphasized the human 'manipulation' of the spirit world and was a means of ensuring harmony between the human community and that (the spirit) world." (Barthold 12). Sacrifice, according to Barthold, is a means by which the cycle of continuity from the both worlds was maintained and could include the sacrifice of various animals such as chickens or rats (Black time 12).

A dead rattlesnake is used in the ritual as Roso recites the lines of revenge against don Guillermo during the ceremony, "Que los deudores paguen sus deudas." (94). Speaking to Cruz María he says, "que muera el hombre que te mató...." .. " Que lo blancoj no maten maj a lo negro.. (94). The liturgy, which is an expression of the desire for human rights follows:

Podere de la vida ocurta,
 arma de Crú María er Matacán:
 sopla tu soplo de muerte

sobre fjte preparado
y trae a Guillermo el Musiú
por su propio pasoj...
Con la licencia del día de hoy
y do lo grande poderes,
que padezca dolor
y que la sangre se le pudra en la venaj
y la vida se le vaya
y la palabra le farte
y el corazón no le lata má...
Podere de la má'sarta valía,
arma de todo lo que murieron
por mano ajena,
soplen aquí su soplo frío,
y que la tripaj de la cajcaber
caminen solaj su camino,
y que su sangre máj fría que la muejte
bañe er corazón
der que te quitó tu preciosa vida,

Crú María er Matacán, hijo de Cervelión (93-94).

All of them then repeat the litany together. Meanwhile, Natividad observes the ceremony from his room unknown to the group. The ceremony makes Natividad feel ill. He then expresses his negative feeling towards blacks in this instance, "...respiré el acre olor de aquel suelo que tantos negros habían pisado " (95). He sees the actions as shocking and as an outsider who is not part of the group in this case : "Las ceremonias que siguieron entonces fueron tan sorprendentes y rápidas que no pude seguir pensando " (93).

Shortly afterwards, Don Guillermo's body is found in the river

and his eyes, which were once blue, are now black. His watery grave is related to the following image: ".cual si la muerte lo hubiese querido bautizarlo " (95). His whole body is swollen and black. The river which is a strong symbol of liberty in the novel becomes an appropriate grave for the master or oppressor. Although no one tells Beatriz, don Guillermo's wife, about the death, she knows it has occurred. "El duelo fue presidido por doña Beatriz que bajó a media noche trajeada de negro y tomó asiento, en silencio, a la cabecera del lecho mortuorio. Nadie la había informado de la tragedia.. " (96). Five days after the ceremony, don Guillermo is buried. Deep ruts are left as the funeral coach takes his body away, ".el coche mortuorio grabó sus huellas, hondas, en la arena del patio" (96). "Las huellas de satanas", which is the title for this section of the text gives the association of evil with don Guillermo.

In addition to being a representation of rebellion in the form of protesting human rights, Barthold, who states that "voodoo had a clear relationship to traditional religions of West Africa.", adds that "By celebrating remembered aspects of the African past, whether in religion, medicine, or in music, he (the slave). again defied the European ownership of time " (Barthold 25-26). According to Barthold, these activities prevented the imposition of temporal dispossession (Barthold 26). Finally, as R. Jackson states, black literature is a reflection of the rebellion against oppression and according to him, black writers in Latin America have done much to raise the social, political, and racial consciousness of their readers (Jackson Humanism 66). Although, Natividad demonstrates a white world view when judging the religious act within the text, the narrative and African

traits in the text contain messages of liberation, rebellion, and racial awareness. The next section, which discusses the conflict of identity and how it points to examples of the transformation of cultures, also explores the voice of the narrator. The point of view of the narrator and his connection with Fernando, the plantation owner's son and long time friend of Natividad are discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter VI

Conflict of Identity in a Changing Culture

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the dual identity of the narrator and how this duality points to the internal process of transculturation or the transformation of culture. A first-person narrator tells the story of Cumboto as he has experienced it, but often incorporates dialogue. Díaz Sánchez includes historical facts that take the reader back to the arrival of the first blacks to Venezuela and thus, the narrative spans approximately 300 years of history. At the end of the novel the future of Venezuela is alluded to. The story begins and ends when Natividad is between 45 and 50 years old, but the major part of the story is told as a flashback brought on when Natividad runs into a young mulato on the plantation. In a sense, the narrator becomes a griot, or the carrier of tradition and the history of the Cumboto plantation, but also is an excellent example of the internal process of cultural dualism. Natividad's interwoven European and African world views create an ambivalence throughout the novel, which is a consequence of being caught between two cultural world views. To begin, a brief definition of transculturation is given as well as its relevance to this analysis. Next, the internal conflict of the narrator due to opposing world views is presented as it occurs within the novel.

The term *transculturación* was adapted by Angel Rama from Fernando Ortiz (1798-1857), who coined the term to describe the culture of Cuba as it changed due to the contact of the black and European cultures. Angel Rama, who is known for his historical and cultural analysis of literary works reintroduced the term

transculturación and applied it to the analysis of literature (Williams 259). This term is used by Rama to describe the process a culture goes through as it transforms to produce a new culture. Rama analyzes this process as it is revealed in literature. The new culture maintains aspects of the former cultures, such as African, Indian, and/or European elements, but forges an individual identity. Much of his work involves explaining the consequences of modernization on rural societies (Williams 260).

In his analysis of literature he uses the notion of transculturación as an interpretive approach which describes elements in the text such as, the influence of other languages, its cosmological view, and the literary structure. Along with the notion of a transforming culture, a loss of culture is also seen by Rama as a consequence of transculturation. According to Rama, transculturation, when it is due to modernization, is basically inevitable, “La modernidad no es renunciabile y negarse a ella es suicida; lo es también renunciar a sí mismo para aceptarla.” (Rama Transculturación narrativa 71). In a similar way the cultural change that occurs when two cultures come together as they do in Cumboto, is also inevitable.

The conflicting dual identity of Natividad's is a common element found in literature that points to a changing of cultures, and according to Marina Catzaras, in the literature of Latin America and the Caribbean, contrasting dualities are involved (Catzaras Negrismo 82). For example, a list of some of the terminology that is useful for describing contrasting dualities in literature follows; the universal self and/or the local self, discovering the universal in the heart of the immediate surroundings, expressing the world and expressing one's world,

the old world versus revelation and recent discoveries, and eurocentrism versus mestizajes plus mythologies (Catzaras 82). Other terms to define contrasts that create a basis for demonstrating *transculturación* within literary works follow; “domination/subordination, written/oral tradition, and cosmological African vision/ cosmological European vision” (Antonio Cornejo Polar qtd in Catzaras *Negrismo* 86). Some of the elements suggested by Catzaras are apparent in *Cumboto*.

Catzaras suggests that the expression of contrasting worlds is an element seen in novels that exemplify the notion of transculturation. For example, *Natividad*, the adult asking through child’s eyes, is uncertain which world he belongs to as he looks out the windows of the white house, which inhabits his first memory, “¿A cuál de los dos mundos pertenecía yo? ¿Al del alegre sol que dora los mangos y ennegrece la pulpa del coco haciéndole brotar el aceite, o al de la blanca penumbra que resbala sobre los pisos brillantes y fríos?” (16). The world outside the house is happy, warm and associated with fruit, while the white world is described as a white shadow with cold floors. In this contrast the world outside is more inviting. The world of the whites affected *Natividad* deeply as a youth. They are the first people he remembers and with whom he holds a close relationship. Federico, the white plantation owner’s son, and *Natividad* are of about the same age, and Federico exists in one of his earliest memories: “Desde donde arrancan mis recuerdos, de entre las nieblas de la primera infancia, veo surgir la imagen blanca y delgada de Federico,... ” (19). *Natividad*’s first mother figure, *Beatriz*, is the white wife of the plantation owner. *Beatriz*, who is described as “sweet and quiet” in her insanity, is the only

person who gave Natividad any affection as a young child: “ Sólo de esta mujer recibí alguna caricia en mi niñez. Su mano azulada, flexible y aérea, solía posarse sobre mi cabeza mientras sus ojos vagaban por los caminos del pensamiento ” (20). Natividad, having spent his first years in the white house, identifies with white values and people. It is not until the symbolic journey to the river that he meets Anita who becomes his black maternal figure.

As he searches for the answer to his question about which world he belongs to Natividad observes the blacks on the plantation that work with the coconuts. He becomes melancholy as he thinks that the blacks know nothing, that their work with the coconut trees is the only world known to them and that they would pass their entire life there. He does not consider himself as part of the black's world at this point. One day, Cervelión, who has the fame of being the best coconut preparer, takes Natividad aside to show him how to break coconuts. During the lesson, Cervelión gives Natividad some advice and makes him think about his place in society: “Me parece que voy a tené que enseñáte mucha cosa a ti. Oyeme bien: lo negro tenemo que conocé mir maña pa defendeno. ... Tú estáj metío entre lo blanco, pero ere negro por lo cuatro costao y ello no van a enseñáte nada de lo que saben; así é que tienej que comé avipa si quierej viví comon un hombre ” (19). Although Natividad's skin is black, his influence from the white culture is significant. Throughout the novel and as Natividad meets more people of African descent, his struggle with finding his identity continues as he is exposed to varying opinions on racial issues. His point of view is that of a house slave influenced by both cultures.

The point of view of the narrator is limited in the usual way

because he tells us what he hears or heard, feels or felt, is thinking or thought, and what he sees or remembers seeing. The reader is never allowed into the internal thoughts of the other characters. The dialogues, which are presented in detail are provided by the memory of the narrator and provide a strong opinion about race or social position that challenge Natividad's ideology and require him to think about his place in society and his identity as demonstrated in the example above in the conversation with Cervelión.

Another scene that challenges Natividad to think about his social position in life occurs when Anita's grandson accuses Natividad of being subordinated by Federico and of not seeking the freedom he deserves during a conversation they have on a short trip they make together to Anita's house. Fernando's father had left the plantation to better his race by marrying a white woman years ago and Fernando's return is to make amends with his grandmother. Fernando, Anita's grandson says the following to Natividad, "Mi padre estaba persuadido de que hay que emanciparse, no sólo de la tutela de los blancos, sino de este horrible pigmento que pesa sobre la vida de los hombres mucho más que un delito" (152). On his deathbed, Anita's son asks Fernando to plead for Anita's forgiveness for his ignorance. The notion of bettering the race by whitening is criticized. Fernando tells of some of the racism he has encountered as a mulato, "He sufrido humillaciones de los tipos más divertidos. He sido llamado negro en todos los tonos. Los más educados me lo dicen discretamente, entre sonrisitas de fina espiritualidad y amable veneno; los más valerosos, en mi propia cara " (154). Fernando is not ashamed of his black heritage like his father and seeks to

spread the word about individual freedom.

In addition, Fernando confronts Natividad about his relationship with his master:

“ —Se dio usted cuenta de la manera como me recibió su... patrón? Su ... patrón -añadió con visible reticencia_ sólo sabe de mí que soy un mulato, que desciendo de esclavos de su familia. Al verme debió preguntarse: “¿Cómo es que éste anda suelto por ahí?.” El ignora que poseo un grado universitario, que hablo varios idiomas y que he publicado un libro sobre enfermedades tropicales. Nada de esto le importa. Para él no paso de ser un ladrón. Le he robado algo que le pertenece: mi vida, mi destino " (152).

As the ride comes to an end, Natividad feels relieved, "...me sentí aliviado, cual si escapara a una pesadilla monstruosa " (154). The visitor's point of view has shaken Natividad's view of the world. As Fernando leaves he tells Natividad that his name, Arguíndegui, means "Hágase la luz" (155). and then he adds: "Yo trato de hacer la luz a mi alrededor. ¿Por que no hace usted lo mismo?" (155). Arguíndegui is aware of what it is to be free and educated. He also has a respect for his black heritage. A strong anti-racist message is proposed through Fernando. Natividad remains subordinated by Federico and basically disturbed by the "nightmare" visit of Anita's grandson. Prior to Fernando's visit, Natividad leaves the white house and the distance he sees between himself and the black world is evident.

After Cruz María's death, Natividad is asked to leave the white house by don Guillermo. Until Federico's return, he lives with Cervelión. During his stay with the black man his strong

feelings put him at a distance from the black world, and the move from the white house to a plantation cabin is a shock for him. It is obvious that his thoughts are dominated by a eurocentric mentality that reflects a dislike for blacks (Cyrus Ethnic Ambivalence 30). Natividad's first emotions are negative: "Jamás me acostumbraría a semejante vida ni me sentiría unido espiritualmente a aquellos seres estúpidos y socarrones que no sabían hablar sino de miserias " (72). He quickly adapts to the situation as his perspective changes: "Poco a poco, sin embargo, fue perfilándose ante mi espíritu una nueva perspectiva, una desconocida dimensión de la vida que sólo pude apreciar viviéndola. Aquella existencia oscura y reptil de los negros tenía ciertos encantos que yo no hubiese podido descubrirle de otra manera, así hubiese vivido siglos " (72). Eventually, Natividad partially incorporates the African world into his consciousness.

The ambivalence exists when Natividad rejects the way of the blacks and almost in the same breath follows Afro-Venezuelan tradition. On the one hand he portrays the European belief that man controls nature, and on the other he is at one with nature; a tendency characteristic of the African culture. He also refers to blacks using the third person pronoun. This further broadens the span between him and blacks. For example, when Natividad speaks of blacks he often uses "los negros" and never the first person plural 'we'. The following comment proves that part of him understands the European tendency to question beliefs that are not scientifically proven: "Los negros suelen dar un significado particular a los distintos matices y manchas de la luna, y hacen o dejan de hacer ciertas cosas según esté en sus fases crecientes o menguantes " (88). At the same time Natividad benefits from a medicine made by Abuela Anita's

granddaughter which is taken during a particular phase of the moon:

“ En realidad mi curación fue obra de un jarabe de cáscaras vegetales (preparado por Pascua según receta de la Abuela)., pero si yo no hubiese tomado ese jarabe en la fase lunar correspondiente, su eficacia habría sido nula ” (88-9).

This proves that Natividad allows the black tradition to have an effect on himself, thus incorporating, in a tentative manner, their cultural values into his system of values. The intertwining of world views demonstrates the conflict between the beliefs of the two cultures. Another example of conflict and dual identity is seen in Natividad’s religious tendency. Natividad cherishes a *pepa de zamuro*, which is an amulet that has special powers and is a vestige of African tradition, that was given to him by Prudencio during the time they would gather to hear Venancio el Pajarero’s fables. His belief is that it protects him, “Ella me protegería de todo peligro, tanto de los humanos como de los divinos, de las asechanzas de los vivos y de los difuntos ” (136). He calls this a bad custom that remains with him, one he can’t avoid, “Aún hoy no puedo evitarlo ” (136).

He questions his feelings toward the amulet. During his search for Cruz María, he wishes he had a amulet or a cross to protect him and during Natividad’s convalescence following his fight with Pascua’s former boyfriend to protect Federico, his dual nature and the combination of the Catholic and African religious traditions again surfaces; “Con mi pepa de zamuro apuñada en la mano derecha y el pensamiento columpiándose en la delgada cuerda del terror, recitaba cuantas oraciones pude aprender en mi

vida y, agotadas éstas propias plegarias " (165). The duality of his identity is further justified from the thoughts that go through his mind while attending don Guillermo's funeral. The section is worth quoting in full.

"Había "algo" en mí que repugnaba ceer en las brujerías de los negros. Todo eso, decíame, es una farsa ridícula: los ensalmos, las oraciones, los bojotes "preparados." Pero este "algo" sólo influía en una modesta región de mi espíritu; el resto creía, creía sin poder remediarlo, con toda la fuerza que presta el miedo a esta clase de sentimientos. Creía, sobre todo, de noche, cuando había luna y soplabla el viento mugiendo. Desde hacía algún tiempo venía luchando yo de manera consciente -y en cierto modo desesperada- contra esta dualidad de mi propio espíritu. Mi mente, iluminada a medias por los conocimientos adquiridos en el contacto con ciertas leturas y con ciertas personas, hacía esfuerzos por vencer al monstruo informe que se aposentaba en mi corazón. Era -así lo sentía yo mismo- como un pantano lleno de miasmas en el debatíase la pequeña y débil forma blanca de mis anhelos de superación. Es humillante y odioso el saberse prisionero de tales supersticiones. Esas cosas -decíame- no pueden ser, no deben ser; todo en la naturaleza es lógico y razonable; cada fenómeno tiene su explicación. Sin embargo, a poco que las circunstancias le fuesen propicias, la bestia volvía irresistible y avasalladora. Y yo creía entonces más que ninguno. Algo por el estilo debía ocurrir a ciertos borrachos que en sus momentos de lucidez

anhelan liberarse del vicio de alcohol. El pantano no tiene límites " (97-98).

His struggle between the two world views is significant. The black world view is seen as the most troublesome at this moment. Natividad finds it difficult to accept the ceremony that is designed to avenge Cruz María's death by causing the death of don Guillermo. Although he is against the ritual, he believes don Guillermo's death is a direct result of the ceremony.

The dualism encountered by Natividad emerges throughout the text. In one instance he describes the blacks as living in a fantasy world, one with which he is only partially in touch:

“Cuando los negros se ponen a imaginar cosas, su fantasía no conoce límites; la frontera entre lo natural y lo fantástico se rompe y el absurdo conviértese en atmósfera de la existencia. Después de la muerte de don Guillermo el Musiú, a consecuencia de ésta, los duendes y los demonios se soltaron en el cocal de Cumboto y los habitantes de la hacienda rivalizaron en propala fantasmagorías” (100-101).

Natividad speaks of the the blacks as not knowing the limits of fantasy, yet at times, he doesn't seem to comprehend the limits of the fantastic himself. As seen above, he, Natividad says that blacks live in a world where the fantastic is normal, but at the same time he tells of the goblins that run through the hacienda. For instance, Natividad speaks of the spirits and beliefs as being valid and true. In the above quotation he describes the goblins and demons that run through the plantation in a very matter of fact way. He believes that the cure given to him by Pascua worked because he took the medicine during the proper phase of

the moon. In addition, he believes that Anita's stories are true, and he carries his amulet to protect himself. In the following quote he tells of Anita's stories as being stories of truth and not fantasy : "Las suyas eran verdaderas historias, hechos de los cuales podía dar fe jurada, manifestaciones de un universo que no por estar más allá de lo perceptible era menos real que el universo donde nos movemos todos los días. " (44). As seen before in the chapter on African traits, Anita's stories often revolve around spirits and ghosts.

Another element within the novel that demonstrates two cultures coming together is the occurrence of oral tradition and written tradition in the text. The stories of Anita are written in dialogue and follow the structure of oral tradition. They are written in a different dialect and, as noted by Natividad, they begin with one of two statements or formulas she uses to tell stories, "Ustedes pueden creerme si quieren,.. " or "A pesar de lo que digan los incrédulos..." (45). The dialect used by Natividad is of an educated man and reflects his years of learning along the side of Federico. He doesn't use the same dialect of the other blacks on the plantation. Some distinguishing factors of the dialect of the plantation blacks in the novel are: the dropping of the /s/ and /d/ at the ends of some words such as *usté* (79), *Crú* (94)., the use of a /j/ in place of an /s/ or an /r/ as in *pasoj* (94), *tripaj* (95), *máj* (95), *muejte* (95), or the substitution of an /r/ for an /l /as in *farte* (94).¹¹ Language use is an identifying characteristic that points to transculturation according to Rama. The protagonist is able to function in both dialects, as is his intended audience. There is no glossary and none of the words

The words are usually spelled in the following way: *usted*, *cruz*, *pasos*, *tripas*, *más*, *muerte* y *falte*.

that are known only within the regional dialect are defined. Therefore, the author assumes his audience will know these words.

In conclusion, basic contrasting elements such as, the two world views, a cosmological African vision versus a cosmological European vision, and the dialectal differences used in the narrative discussed demonstrate the coming together of two cultures and how the notion of transculturation is expressed through literature. To continue, the next section of this chapter will look at the search for identity in the protagonist and Federico.

El Pantano and Dual identities

A recurring image in the novel that relates to the struggle for identity and dualism faced by Natividad and Federico is *el pantano*. The two share an almost identical childhood and share a similar burden discovering their identity and the search to define themselves. This section will describe the struggle for identity in both characters and how it relates to *el pantano*, which is symbolic of a part of Natividad's spirit which wrestles with defining who he is. In his internal search for self, conflicting world views are evident and point further to the process of transculturation. First, pertinent information from the storyline and structure of the novel will be discussed, followed by the discussion of dualism as it is related to the image of *el pantano*.

Natividad and Federico are both raised in the white house. As a youth Federico makes a trip to Europe to study, and while

he is there Cruz María is killed and Natividad moves out of the white house and into Cervelión's home. Up until Federico's trip to Europe the two boys have a very close relationship. Federico teaches Natividad to read and they make the adventure to the river together that initiates both of them into the world of the blacks on the plantation that includes the wonderful food and stories of Anita. Thus, each of them serves as a mediator to the culture which is socially assigned according to the color of their skin. The purpose of Federico's absence is to emphasize Natividad's contact with the people of African dependency on the plantation. During Natividad's stay at Cervelión's, he is exposed to the rebellious religious ritual of revenge following Cruz María's death, which is mentioned in the previous chapter, and a heavy exposure of the blacks' customs and traditions. Having gone from the white house to the world of the blacks on the plantation leads him to adapt aspects from both cultures as noted in the previous section. When Federico returns from Europe he discontinues his relationship with Natividad. He ignores him for a long time. Finally, however, Federico opens up to Natividad and shares his own struggle to find his identity. Both reveal elements of both cultures in their "spirits" or inner selves. Natividad refers to his spirit and to *el pantano* when he discusses his struggle with finding himself. Ultimately, both of their identities are influenced by both cultures. The issue of dual identity is mentioned throughout the novel and the author describes some of the problems created by the struggle with dual identity and by the end of the novel he proposes a solution to this problem.

As explained before, the novel opens and closes in the present when Natividad is approximately fifty years old. The novel is told

from the narrator's perspective as a grown man. Most of the novel is a flashback in which Natividad tells the story of the Cumboto plantation. In the opening pages of the novel, Federico, who is about 50 years old, is taking a walk through the countryside with Natividad following along like a shadow. The image of the shadow recurs throughout the novel and reinforces the image of Natividad's role as a slave in society even though the novel is set after emancipation. Both Natividad and Federico contain aspects of both African and European heritage in their nature. In the first part of the novel Federico's ties with African heritage are alluded to when Federico is described by Natividad as being familiar with the night. Federico, although white and of European heritage, is at one with nature as opposed to at odds with nature in this description. Natividad states that Federico identifies with the night which has been personified in the following quote:

"Puede identificar cada una de sus palpitaciones, cada uno de sus suspiros. Sabe distinguir la comprimida risa de la lechuza, el helado graznido del chupa-huesos, el roce de la mano del viento en las caderas de los árboles, la ondulante caricia del manare y el maraqueo impaciente del cascabel " (pg10).

Natividad earlier on in life has inspired Federico to take walks as a solution to his desire to find himself which is brought out later in the novel through the flashback. The relationship between the white master and the black slave figure is strong and according to Harvey L. Johnson, Cumboto is a work that "digs deeply into the cultural and racial history of the plantation era of Venezuela and that through the lifelong relationship of the white master don

Federico and the black slave Natividad we see the mutual growth in knowledge, understanding, and cross-fertilization of the two cultures” (Johnson 156). In some instances, both seem to represent one being. Natividad says that he has lived by his master’s side all his life and that no one but Federico knows the history of the town, country, and plantation like Federico, but Natividad is the one who narrates the story which he says he cannot forget. Natividad learns to read from Federico and he shares certain aspects of white beliefs, while Federico is initiated into the black culture through Anita, Pascua, his black lover, and other blacks on the plantation. Both struggle to find themselves, although Natividad’s search is the one discussed more in the novel, Federico’s search is mentioned in a similar way and justifies the notion that both are affected by transculturation. Dualism, an important theme in the novel, represents an issue true to the history of people caught in the processes of transculturation.

Natividad describes the duality of his spirit: “Desde hacía algún tiempo venía luchando y de manera consciente -y en cierto modo desesperada- contra esta dualidad de mi propio espíritu ” (97). Dualism according to Martha Cobb creates a sense of division between one’s self and that of the dominant culture (qtd. in Persico Ethnic Vision 4). In Cumboto the dominant culture is the black culture on the plantation, but the European world view is strong in Natividad due to his upbringing and creates the sense of division between him and the African culture. In other words, Natividad is caught between both worlds and struggles with the division between the dominant black culture and his inner Eurocentric vision of the world. He describes the *pantano*, as a

part of his heart that is invaded by a monster, as a place where a small white figure debates against the superstitious cultural beliefs that he is unable to ignore. "Era ---así lo sentía yo mismo- como un pantano lleno de miasmas en el cual debatíase la pequeña y débil forma blanca de mis anhelos de superación " (98). "El pantano no tiene límites" (98). The small white figure symbolizes his European world view and is tied to Federico, "La pequeña forma blanca de mi espíritu tenía la figura de Federico. Era él quien había iniciado aquella formidable labor de rescate que quizá no llegara a coronarse jamás " (98). As mentioned previously, *el pantano* symbolizes his internal struggle to find himself and define his identity. As justified by the previous quote and symbolized by the white figure in his *pantano*, the European world view is something Natividad values and holds on to. This is also evident during a period in his life when he is abandoned.

Natividad is abandoned for a time by both whites and blacks who are close to him. This contributes to his insecurity and adds a certain confusion to his search for self identity. Natividad is abandoned by Federico when he goes to Europe and also for awhile after his return when he ignores Natividad for awhile. After his return he is cold and fails to acknowledge Natividad. The stability in Natividad's life comes from blacks at the point in his life when his playmates leave to study in Europe. "Los únicos que parecían invariables eran la Abuela Anita, Cervelión y Venancio " (56). Unfortunately, he is also abandoned by his black extended family later on when they move out of the plantation for awhile. Once abandoned by his black extended family Natividad pulls towards *el pantano* in search for

answers, “Largo rato permanecí meditando, solitario y sombrío, en aquellas estancias abandonadas. Mi corta existencia desfiló en un momento por mi memoria y de nuevo evoqué la imagen del pantano en medio del cual zozobraba la minúscula forma blanca que iluminaba mi espíritu” (105). The white figure, although very small, illuminates his spirit, unlike the small black figure in Federico’s *pantano* that is described as “insignificant.” This points to the importance he attributes to the European world view. Thinking back on the time of his abandonment, Natividad describes it as a time he would like to forget, “Fue una época que no quiero recordar ” (108). Natividad doesn’t belong entirely to either the black or white world. In this section, the difficulties faced by Natividad are due to his isolation which is due to abandonment, but also his sense of not belonging. The struggle to find himself is significant and painful to endure, but eventually comes to an end with the acknowledgement that a new identity that is formed from two can exist. Transculturation is a process that affects Federico and Natividad.

Cultural change not only influences Natividad, but Federico as well. After Federico’s return from Europe he becomes depressed and questions his place in life. He is drawn to Europe and to Venezuela as he questions his identity. Natividad realizes that Federico is as susceptible to the struggle to find an identity as he is:

“¡El pantano! También hay un pantano blanco o de los blancos. En el mío, formado por una acumulación informe y viscosa de terrores supersticiosos, la única esperanza de salvación era un figurita blanca que me evocaba el recuerdo de un niño amigo. No sabía entonces si en el pantano de Federico se perfilaba alguna

figura semejante. Comprendí que se hallaba al borde de una crisis " (134).

This crisis he speaks of involves Federico's search for identity. Again, as noted above, the fact that Natividad struggles with accepting superstition arises. One day, Federico leads Natividad to the window to look at the "trees dancing in the wind" and shares his feelings with him and their relationship is renewed.

_Natividad _me dijo Federico-, estoy solo y desorientado. No sé si debo quedarme o marcharme. Tú eres para mí algo más que un amigo: juntos nacimos y juntos nos levantamos aquí, en Cumboto. Si pudiera pensarse en un espíritu de hombre formado por dos naturalezas distintas, yo diría que tú y yo formamos ese espíritu. Tú eres como la parte pura de la tierra; y debiera ser su inteligencia. Pero, ¿Lo soy? ¿Pertenezco acaso a esta tierra? No te imaginas cuánto me ha hecho sufrir esta idea en los últimos días. No quiero ser odiado, pero no sé hacerme amar. Dime; ¿qué debo hacer?

Le miré estupefacto. Era el pantano. Me los mostraba él mismo describiendo con un inesperado ademán las herméticas cortinas de su corazón. Era el pantano blanco y en medio de él, luchando contra las oleadas viscosas, una insignificante figurita negra " (134-135).

Examining the excerpt above one notes that Federico searches for acceptance, while struggling with a dual identity. The notion that Federico and Natividad share identities is alluded to. The idea that one man is formed from two cultures is evident as well as the struggle to discover himself and his place in the world. The small black

figure is insignificant, while the small white figure in Natividad's pantano is luminous. In this case the insignificance of the black figure, besides demonstrating Natividad's opinion of the black part of the spirit as being less significant can also be symbolic of the suppression of black history by the colonizers. Shirley Jackson concludes that a duality of cultural heritage is reflected in Cumboto and "Characters are defined by traditional beliefs between African and Spanish culture conflicts and historical suppression of the African heritage in the Americas which is a product of the merging of these cultural factors." (Jackson African World 40). Again, *el pantano* signifies the struggle they face within themselves and their inner spirit as they come to terms with their identity.

Natividad suggests that Federico take walks to ease his confusion. He does and Natividad follows along like a shadow. Natividad, in order to try and solve Federico's problem, believes that Federico needs a black conscience in order to comprehend the "universe" he lives in. "Mirándole avanzar con la chaqueta al brazo y casi disuelto entre las nubes de polvo que levantaban sus pies, me afirmaba en la idea de que era esto lo que faltaba al hijo de don Guillermo para penetrar en la entraña viviente de este universo: una segunda conciencia, una conciencia negra. He aquí mi papel" (136). Natividad begins to solve his struggle with identity by attempting to combine black and European world views as he begins to come to terms with himself and his black heritage. The process of forming a new culture as seen through the acceptance of both cultural world views by

Federico and Natividad justify that an internal process of transculturation is evident in this literary work.

The two begin to spend time together once more. They walk together and visit the surrounding villages. In his search for identity, Natividad, also seeks to define his position in society. Even though Natividad is black, he represents the white and the black. His negative view of blacks reflects racism. Unfortunately, this racism is a reflection of history. As a black, he suffers in his existence as house-slave and which he often describes as shadow-like.

Natividad tells of a series of dreams he has had during a period of illness. His ambivalence towards the two cultures is particularly apparent during dreams in which he criticizes Federico. One dream in particular condemns the part of his identity that is white. In regards to Federico in his dream his feelings towards his master are ambivalent and symbolically also represent his love/hate relationship with his European world vision. In his dream Federico brings his face next to Natividad and says: "Desde niño te consagraste a mí. Luego no has vivido sino para servirme, para estar a mi lado como una sombra. Todo lo has sacrificado por mí. ¿No es cierto?"(166). Natividad questions his relationship with Federico:

"No supe al pronto qué responderle, porque aquélla era la pura y absoluta verdad. Yo mismo, más de una vez, me hice esta pregunta y no hallé qué responderme. Hubo un tiempo en que amé a Federico porque encarnaba todo lo que yo no podía ser en la vida, todo lo que yo hubiese anhelado ser. Pero, después de hombres, el sentimiento que me ataba a él no hubiese podido llamarse afecto. ¿Qué era? Muchas veces sentí la

tentación de apretarle el pescuezo con ambas manos, más si me hubiesen separado de él habría sufrido mucho (166).

A desire to destroy this entity of his identity is demonstrated and at the same time the separation from this part of his being would be too painful. According to Rama, as mentioned previously, in the process of transculturation adapting elements from another culture is inevitable and suicidal in that one loses part of the original culture, but refusing to adapt is suicide as well because change is inevitable.

To continue the discussion of social position, Natividad, at one point, asks himself if his position is that of a man or the mere shadow of a man:

“¿Había vivido como un hombre? No. No fui más que un reflejo de Federico, algo menos que un perro. El perro, al fin y al cabo, posee cierto albedrío, se emancipa cuando lo acucia la urgencia del sexo. Yo no supe nada de esto. Era una sombra. Mi pasión silenciosa por la música, mi callado deseo de llegar algún día a tocar como Federico, me lo comprobaban " (166).

He acknowledges his limited freedom and goes on to describe Federico's inability to represent the black heritage of Venezuela. Natividad continues to describe how he would have learned how to play the piano quickly and how Federico could not express nature or the African beats through his music, “Aquel instrumento debía poseer aún posibilidades de expresión que Federico no había logrado arrancarle, las mismas que había intuido Pascua: la posibilidad de expresar y recrear nuestra naturaleza, nuestros árboles, nuestros ríos, nuestra sangre roja y delirante " (167).

Expressing African heritage through music is something Federico can not do, but something that is desired by Pascua and of importance to Natividad.

At the end of the novel the reader is returned to the present. Natividad describes the young mulato's arrival to the white house and his encounter with Federico. This technique frames the story which has presented the problems confronted by the process of transculturation. In the final pages of the novel a solution to the problems is suggested by the author when he describes the music of the mulato son of Pascua and Federico. The flashback is the story of Cumboto, but more importantly it represents Natividad's struggle to find himself and find harmony between two opposing cultures. "He pasado una mala noche removiendo el pantano dormido bajo la costra de los últimos años. ¡El pantano dormido! (181). The pantano that has been ignored under the shell of the past 25 years has been stirred up with the arrival of Pascua and Federico's son, who as a mulato symbolizes a harmonious union between the black and white races, a hope for the future, and in essence an example of the product of the process of transculturation. The next section will examine how the author points to the future in the last section of the novel.

The Birth of a New Culture

This section of the thesis will demonstrate how the author alludes to a future and how he comes to terms with the dualism and struggle for defining self that Natividad wrestles with throughout his life. He acknowledges the formation of a new culture as symbolized by the mulato son of Federico and Pascua. Natividad, which means birth, has taken the reader through the internal process of transculturation as he has debated between African and European cultural world views. At the end of the novel the mulato son of Pascua and Federico becomes a symbol of the harmonious union of two cultures. The birth of this new and transformed culture is understood through the narration of Natividad. Thus, providing a symbolic meaning to his name. That is, through Natividad the birth of a new culture is examined.

The author seeks to explain the recreation of a people as he alludes to a future where an understanding of and acceptance of a transformed culture is suggested. As stated by Taylor, “The process of creolization took shape in response to the colonial drama and the colonizer-colonized relation. Creole culture enabled peoples disrupted by the slave trade to recreate themselves, to distance themselves from those who tried to control their minds, to rebel, and to resist with cunning.” (Taylor 228). As noted in Cumboto Natividad doesn’t distance himself completely because he remains a house-slave and is influenced by a eurocentric vision. He distances himself in the sense that his search for identity does not seek to mimic a European world view and that he seeks to define a unique identity which includes the incorporation of African traits. He incorporates elements from both cultures as he recreates himself. According to Rama both

cultures together attribute qualities to the new culture produced by transculturation. Natividad's chance meeting with Pascua and Federico's son brings on the flashback that tells the history of Cumboto and the struggle Natividad has faced with dualism, but of importance, the young mulato symbolizes a new culture. The mulato also signifies the future from an African world view. According to Barthhold, death and birth were like two doors, through one you entered the spirit world and the other was the entrance to the material world (Barthhold *Black Time* 11). She adds that having children was essential in order to continue the cycle of life and for an African to not have children was the "worst fate" (Barthhold *Black Time* 11). Although transformed, the young mulato symbolizes the continuance of the race. As Natividad begins his tale he sympathizes with the black plight and acknowledges the transformation that blacks have undergone since their arrival to Venezuela. "Muchas lunas como ésta debieron contemplar aquellos seres martirizados, perseguidos como las bestias, evocando sus lejanas tierras mientras el tiempo operaba su lenta transformación" (12). An acknowledgement of the change they made over time is expressed. This change includes a melding of cultures.

A desire to incorporate the African culture into the European culture is evident in the novel. For instance, Pascua, while listening to Federico play the piano, asks him to try to include an African rhythm in his music, "¿Por qué no tratas de componer una música tuya, en la que haya algo de nuestras canciones, de nuestros tambores, de nuestros campos y ríos? (163). He fails to capture the essence of the African music though, but his son succeeds in incorporating African rhythms when he plays the

piano towards the end of the novel.

When the young mulato arrives at the white house, Natividad lets the young man in and takes him to Federico who is playing the piano. He thinks to himself that the boy represents the secret of life, while Frau Berza's secret, her affair with Cruz María, was one of death. "Frau Berza tiene un secreto", me había revelado Federico. Y fue un secreto de muerte. Yo podría decir ahora al señor: "Este joven trae un secreto, pero es un secreto de vida " (182). This again reinforces the notion of the birth of a new culture or recreation, but also points to the acceptance of the mixing of the races.

Natividad leaves the two alone and goes outside. The blacks are playing the game of "echar cocos" as they sing a song. Natividad notes changes on the plantations such as new houses and a new generation of children, but the coconut game continues as before. This tradition that he remembers from his childhood remains the same. Although change is evident, it does not overpower all aspects of the previous culture. As he is outside music begins to fly through the air.

"Vuelan los sonoros trinos sobre el fondo solemne de los graves y proyectan una espiral hacia el cielo. Pasos fuertes en la tierra del bosque, tropel, quietud, un trueno que se aproxima. Es el allegro. Luego viene el adagio molto, reflexivo, cual si tratara de convencerse a sí mismos si su alegría inusitada. Las notas caen de lo alto, una por una, en el eremanso, y se vuelven canción; la cascada se precipita, rueda, insiste abriendo camino hacia el alegretto moderato que es como una carrera de amantes que se detienen, bruscos, para diluirse en una

especie de marcha (183).

Natividad believes that Federico is playing the piano and he wants to introduce all of the blacks, who have come to listen, to their "God", but when he looks through the window he sees the young man playing the piano. The God-figure, becomes the mulato who is the symbolic representation of the inevitable union of two races and cultures. The music has a telluric sense and affects the natural world around Natividad, "Yo miro a mi alrededor y todo me parece que arde en una llama luminosa, hasta el azul del mar que reverbera a lo lejos por encima del zócalo del cocal." (184). The young man plays another piece which expresses his African heritage.

"El acorde resuena con la gravedad de un trueno lejano. Pero esta vez no es ya la voz límpida, estilizada de la música culta, la que brota del piano, sino el gemido del pujao y el júbilo petulante de los pequeños tambores. Los seres que me rodean, sudorosos y estremecidos, se mecen y gruñen como los árboles en medio de la tormenta: - Cumboto... Cumboto.. " (184).

The rhythm of the African drums comes through the music. Through his music, the mulato youth expresses his dual character which, as symbolized by the music, has reached a point of harmony, something Natividad has searched for all his life. The youth represents a new culture and the future of Venezuela. Not only Natividad, but the plantation has been plagued with a difficult struggle to find peace between two cultures and races as evidenced by deaths of blacks who had white lovers. Within the novel black and white racism are presented as a problem as well. The author offers the mulato youth and his ability to combine both cultures in his music in peaceful union as the answer to the

struggle with identity. The youth unites African as well as European elements as a product of transculturation.

Conclusion

A variety of interpretations of Natividad's ambiguous and, at times, Eurocentric vision exists. Most interpretations of Cumboto stress the racist tendency implied by the sometimes negative portrayal of blacks in the novel. Often, the fact that black tradition is predominant and exalted is ignored by the critics. Henry Richards states that Natividad, who is a product of a culturally white environment, is distanced from other blacks because he demonstrates a negative view of his "black brothers" (Richards 138). African traits in the novel shouldn't be ignored just because some racism is evident. The chapter in this thesis on African traits and the importance the author implies in regards to acknowledging the African heritage proves that he holds a positive view of people of African descent. For example, in his ambivalence, Natividad demonstrates negative and positive opinions of both cultures. He enjoys Anita's stories and is very tied to nature in his vision of the world. His union with the natural world around him points to a strong African world view. The narrator is a complex character. His point of view is ambivalent and sways between positive and negative opinions of both black and white cultures, which is an outcome of the internal process of transculturation.

Stanley Cyrus suggests that the hypocrisy in works that demonstrate a psychological dualism and marked ambivalence may be due to the fact that "Afro-Hispanic American authors

know that the opposite of harmonious fusion is what, subtly or even overtly, exists. They are torn between two currents, to romanticize or exalt the ideal or to condemn what it cloaks. It is therefore not surprising that Ramón Díaz Sánchez who exalts mestizaje also strongly denounces the racial reality.” (Cyrus Ethnic Ambivalence 31). Cyrus fails to see that the process of mestizaje coincides with transculturation which demonstrates contrasting world views in which racism is not only denounced, but evident in Cumboto. Literature is limited in its ability express “racial reality.” The fact that the novel represents the contrasts, and struggles due to a conflict of identity and the process of transculturation make the work valuable and shouldn’t be ignored when judging the novel.

Catzaras believes that literature that lends itself to an analysis of transforming cultures is not a reflection of reality, but is the product of the critic and the critics attempt to comprehend the conflict of a hybridized culture (Catzaras Negrismo 94). The intention is to better comprehend the process of transculturation through literature without believing that it is an exact reflection of reality. The differences in the interpretations of Cumboto are striking. Some critics’ views of Afro-Hispanic literature are biased by what they expect the literature to demonstrate. For example Jackson believes that black literature should build the image of those people of African descent. As expected, Jackson reacts against the racism against blacks in Cumboto , but at the same time acknowledges that the work is valuable as shown in the following excerpt.

“On a practical and historical level Cumboto relates in fiction how the mulato came to take over the

plantations and property of their white fathers. Díaz Sánchez, then, is dealing in part with history. His psychological analysis of the forces working toward racial amalgamation, together with his richly poetic renditions of folklore, sociology, and anthropology, make this an ambitious novel from an artistic point of view worthy of the honors it has received. The novel is puzzling, however, when we realize that the black man here again is subjected not only to extinction but to racial preconceptions and insults as well” (Jackson Black Image 57-58).

In Jackson’s final analysis of the text he states that “Sánchez leaves little doubt that the mulato is his preference as a proper model for the future” (Jackson Black Image 58). The mulato is not necessarily preferred by the author, but the likely model of the future in Venezuela. The mulato symbolizes the outcome of transculturation. Federico and Natividad struggle with dualism and represent some of the processes of transculturation. Transculturation affects everyone despite the color of their skin. A man of color, such as Natividad, demonstrates the intertwining European and African world views. In seeking to provide the reader with a view of change, the author provides an excellent example of the internal process of dualism and the internal conflict of two world views. To continue, the mulato or miscegenation is an inevitable outcome in a society where interracial marriage is common. Again, as seen in the novel, one need not be of mixed blood to be affected by the process of transculturation. The mulato is symbolic of the union of two cultures.

A partial loss and integration of cultures is inevitable when

two cultures come together. For Persico the main theme in Cumboto is a search for harmony within the national character and between the races (Persico Ethnic Vision 30). The author in a search for identity reveals conflicting world views. Racism towards blacks and whites exists in the narrative and the ambivalence is due to the struggle to accept opposing visions. Racism within the text should be condemned in a discussion of the text, but its existence within the text should not lead one to conclude that the text is a poor example of Afro-Hispanic novels. Racial conflict is a component of transculturation. History shouldn't be ignored.

By the end of the novel, the author, through the symbolic mulato youth, demonstrates a new cultural identity; one that is the result of two cultures. Of importance and also a strong unifying source in the novel is the appearance of African traits in the novel. The reference to African tradition combined with the issue of transculturation create the sense that although the culture is ultimately transformed, the African element can not be ignored and will never entirely disappear. Referring to African history, one can enrich the overall meaning of the novel as suggested by Kubayanda.

Kubayanda believes that referring to African history and how it appears in black writing of the Caribbean is a much broader approach than just analyzing using concepts such as *transculturación*. Kubayanda states that critics that focus on the phenomenon of transculturation ignore the socio-cultural referentiality to African heritage (Kubayanda Afrocentric Hermeneutics 227). Kubayanda's concern is that "even though Latin American historiography has somehow moved away from

the Spanish colonial legalistic tradition (the theory of transculturation, for example), it has not yet taken the African component as seriously as it should.” (Kubayanda Afrocentric Hermeneutics 237). Transculturation is an important issue within the text, but the African traits within it can not be ignored. Both the unity created by African traits found within the text and the notion of cultural change provide the reader with a more complete understanding of ethnicity in Venezuela. The main message in Cumboto is that even though blacks face a difficult road of inevitable change, a strong underlying current of African tradition doesn't disappear and must be acknowledged.

“Africa is a major symbol of Caribbean culture, for the question of cultural existence has plagued that region ever since its western time began.” (Kubayanda The Phenomenon 175). “Africa, whether as a utopian core or a reality, in part provides the base upon which to build a new episteme (knowledge as power structure) because it has its own value systems, its own languages and modes of expression, in short the symbols of its own culture which it recognizes. However deformed or transformed those symbols have been in the Americas, they have nevertheless generated an anchor for the African diaspora where Eurocentric discourses have principally fostered dominance and subjugation” (Kubayanda The Phenomenon 175).

Even though the African culture has been transformed, it is recognized through symbolism, and in Cumboto it is further acknowledged by and through the protagonist. Thus, a search for a Latin American identity based in African heritage is evident in

the novel. According to Kubayanda, African oral traditions appear in Cumboto and these traditions, although transformed from the original traditions, function to affirm the roots of the minority culture (Kubayanda Minority Discourse 252).

Finally, Natividad does not belong to the black culture nor the European culture, rather he represents the transformation of and union of the two cultures, as does the mulato youth. Total deculturation, or the destruction of culture, is impossible (Moreno Fragnals 6). Again, a message of the author's, whether intended or not, is that the Latin American reflects a strong sense of his African heritage even though his culture has been ultimately transformed. The author also acknowledges the importance of history and knowing the origin of the Africans in Venezuela. Again this analysis proves that the protagonist's internal struggle represents a consequence of transculturation as demonstrated by the two opposing world views adopted by him. In Cumboto, Díaz Sánchez proposes a model for the future, one that represents a national heritage. R. Jackson states that even though Afro-Hispanic Black literature is Afro-centered it is definitely representative of Latin America, especially when it represents themes such as liberation and identity (Jackson xv). Such themes are evident in Cumboto. The following quote from The Narrative of Liberation by Frantz Fanon proposes a future for people of African descent based on change: "I am not a prisoner of history. I should not seek there for the meaning of my destiny. I should constantly remind myself that the real leap consists in introducing invention into existence" (Fanon qtd in Taylor 228). Facing the future while recovering elements of the past that allow for growth allows one to forge a new culture. In the process of

transculturation, elements from both cultures are gained and others are lost. Ramón Díaz Sánchez' novel is a valuable work that broadens one's understanding of ethnicity and transculturation processes in Latin America. The novel is an excellent example of the internal process of transculturation and African traits as seen through literature.

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