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From Legal Frameworks to Cultural Institutions: African Heritage and the Fight Against Racism in Colombia

Abstract

In Valle del Cauca, one of Colombia's regions that is both socioeconomically unequal and culturally rich, Afro-Colombian communities continue to struggle against the effects of racism, spatial segregation and historical marginalization. The threats faced by activists such as Yaneth Valencia, director of *Lila Mujer* (an organization supporting women with HIV and survivors of gender-based violence), highlight the persistence of colonial legacies in everyday life. Against this backdrop, African heritage is not only commemorated, but also strategically harnessed to reclaim space, dignity and identity.

Drawing on decolonial theory, Afro-diaspora studies and African philosophy — particularly Ubuntu — this research analyses three key ways in which Afro-Colombians express their presence: legal frameworks such as Law 70 and the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP); the commercialization of Blackness in tourist circles in Cali and Valle de Cauca; and the cultural work of institutions such as the Museo Afro in Cali and the community-run Museo de Mulaló. These places and strategies demonstrate how African descent functions as both a political resource and a site of cultural expression.

Drawing on fieldwork, expert interviews and analysis of cultural and political discourse in Cali and the wider Valle del Cauca region, the study explores how Afro-Colombian actors navigate the tension between visibility and appropriation, and between state recognition and grassroots resistance. Ultimately, the research explores how African heritage endures as a collective memory, a political assertion of identity, and a social force in the ongoing struggle for justice and belonging in Colombia.