

# Benkos Biohó y San Basilio de Palenque en Colombia

## THE LIFE OF BENKOS BIOHÓ

Benkos Biohó was a revolutionary leader who founded the first free town of the Americas, San Basilio de Palenque in Colombia. He was a young man when he was taken from Africa and enslaved by the Spanish. He came from a royal family from the West African Bissagos islands, near to the coasts of Guinea Bissau, Senegal and Guinea today. When in Colombia, Biohó escaped from Cartagena, a port city on the eastern Caribbean coast. He met with others who had escaped slavery and they formed a rebel army in the foothills of the mountain range, Montes de María, to the south of Cartagena. The group welcomed hundreds of Africans who escaped Spanish aggression and formed a small, walled community of formerly enslaved Africans called San Basilio de Palenque in 1619. The Spanish sent many expeditions to try to defeat the community, but none was successful. Biohó became known as King Benkos and the community continued to grow, as many more Maroons joined as they escaped the Spanish ships. Biohó then created an intelligence network, helping more and more Africans escape Cartagena and join the liberated peoples.



In 1605, the Governor of Cartagena, unable to defeat Biohó and the growing community of Palenque, offered a peace agreement. This agreement involved Palenque not welcoming any more escaped, enslaved Africans, not helping new Africans in Colombia escape the Spanish, and for the Palenqueros to stop calling Biohó 'King Benkos'. An agreement was reached in 1612. However, in 1619, the Spanish colonisers betrayed this agreement and captured the unsuspecting Biohó on the outskirts of Palenque. The Governor at the time said Biohó was a danger to Spanish rule as he was too powerful and had too much respect from the Africans whom the Spanish wanted to enslave. He was publicly executed by hanging, but his death did not kill the spirit of rebellion and his legacy lives on, immortalised by the people of Palenque. His betrayal and murder contributed to a long-standing mistrust of the government by the people of Colombia, which still exists today.

## LANGUAGE TASK:

### Los Cimarrones (the Maroons)

- Los cimarrones de Cartagena no eran únicos, pero es un aspecto de la historia que es poco conocido.
- Había muchas personas que escaparon de la esclavitud, y crearon comunidades lejos y separadas de los sitios coloniales.
- Existían por toda América y el Caribe. En algunos lugares, todavía existen comunidades cimarronas.
- Tenían que defenderse de los colonos continuamente y, para ello, usaban diversas estrategias ambientales y militares.
- Las comunidades cimarronas estaban formadas por descendientes de africanos e indígenas.
- Una de los cimarronas más famosas es Queen Nanny, de Jamaica. Hoy en día, se la recuerda en un billete de dinero jamaicano.



Queen Nanny of Jamaica.

### Answer the questions about the Maroons

- 1) The Maroons in Cartagena are the only known Maroons in history. True or false?
- 2) Where in the lands were Maroon communities built?
- 3) Where in the world did Maroon communities exist?
- 4) Who did they need to protect themselves from, and why?
- 5) Who made up the Maroon communities?
- 6) How is Queen Nanny remembered in Jamaica?





## PALENQUE SETTLEMENTS

San Basilio de Palenque is known as the first free town of the Americas as it came to an agreement with Spanish colonisers that the inhabitants of the town would be left in peace. However, at the time of its creation there were many *Palenques*. *Palenque* means 'walled space' and it referred to the settlements created by Maroons who escaped slavery and built walled communities, often in remote places, to defend themselves from the colonisers (*los Chapetones*). *Palenques* existed for a long time across much of Colombia and the Caribbean and the societies, language, music and traditions are what make up lots of what we recognise as modern Colombian and Caribbean culture today. Many *palenques* also included, or interacted with, local indigenous people: here, they integrated with each other or traded or, at other times, had violent interactions. Creoles of the Mountains was the name given to those who were born in *palenques*. Today, San Basilio de Palenque is the only community in Colombia to use this name still, which is why it can be referred to simply as Palenque.



'Aqui nacio la insurgencia del pueblo' - street art by Pedro Romero in Getsemani, a neighbourhood of Cartagena, Colombia.

## BENKOS BIOHÓ por Rigo Ruiz

(R; Julio Ruiz / C. Cabezas Valois)

Él no pidió venir a conocer estas (1) \_\_\_\_\_,  
él no pidió venir a que su gente muriera.  
Allá fueron maltratados y cazados como fieras,  
separados de sus (2) \_\_\_\_\_, arrancados de  
sus montes  
Y atados con cadenas.

Pero Benkos llegó y pudo vencer la (3) \_\_\_\_\_.  
Pero Benkos llegó desatando las cadenas.  
Pero Benkos llegó a que su pueblo viviera  
Una vida en (4) \_\_\_\_\_, como allá en su  
tierra negra,  
pues todos hermanos eran.  
Y su sueño se cumplió, ahora estamos tú y yo  
(5) \_\_\_\_\_ seguir su tarea.

[Estribillo/Chorus]

De la vereda a los montes,  
Benkos (6) \_\_\_\_\_ con sus sueños.

Organizó a los cimarrones  
Y derrotó a los (7) \_\_\_\_\_.

[Estribillo/Chorus]

Y demostró su autonomía  
armándose en los Montes de María.  
[Estribillo/Chorus] Llegó con el sueño de (8) \_\_\_\_\_  
a su pueblo.

Se liberó de las cadenas...  
Benkos Biohó, ¡cuánto luchó!  
Se liberó de las (9) \_\_\_\_\_ ...  
Que, sembrado de esperanza, gritaba ¡basta  
ya!  
Se liberó de las cadenas...  
Maltratado, separado de sus hijos.  
Se liberó de las cadenas...  
Pero siempre estuvo dispuesto a (10) \_\_\_\_\_.  
Se liberó de las cadenas...  
Y pudo darse a la fuga.  
Se liberó de las cadenas...  
Y a Palenque (11) \_\_\_\_\_ a parar.  
Se liberó de las cadenas...  
Espíritu de guerrero  
Y nunca dio [un] paso atrás

Benkos Biohó.  
Se liberó de las cadenas...  
Les contaré cómo (12) \_\_\_\_\_  
Se liberó de las cadenas...  
El gobernador de turno un tratado le ofreció.  
Se liberó de las cadenas...  
Y el otro (13) \_\_\_\_\_ lo traicionó.  
Se liberó de las cadenas...  
Pero nos dejó su (14) \_\_\_\_\_.  
¡Sí, señor!

1) Escucha y rellena los huecos con las palabras correctas.

Reto\* No uses las palabras del cuadro

legado murió llegó fue legado tragedia después luchar  
libertad tierras para chapetones liberar cadenas hijos



**2) Busca las siguientes traducciones en las letras**

a) He did not ask to come to know these lands

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b) And his dream was achieved, here we are now you and me

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c) He freed himself from chains

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d) From the pathways to the mountains

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e) Arming themselves in the María mountains

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f) Warrior spirit

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g) He left us his legacy

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**Video** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dg3TifagtRI>

**Lyrics and audio** <https://www.reverbNation.com/rigoruiz/song/11873084-benkos-bioho>

## SAN BASILIO DE PALENQUE TODAY

Today, Palenque has a population of about 3,500 residents. Society is structured differently in Palenque. There are no police and residents report that there is no crime. There is a non-hierarchical governing system called *Ma-Kuagro*, which has a system of rights and duties accepted by all, and the people look out for each other. The people who live there are mostly Afro-Colombians who are direct descendants of the Maroons, who developed communities in the mountain region with Benkos Biohó. In the main square stands a statue of Biohó, with his arm stretched out eastwards towards Africa.

Palenque is full of African food, traditions, religion, language, music and dance, and many of the residents maintain African names. In Palenque, the death of a resident is marked by a nine-day ancestral burial ceremony called *lumbalú*, a celebration in honour of the deceased in which the whole community participates. These nine days include singing, drumming, dancing around the deceased and performing a ritual that allows them to travel peacefully to their final resting place. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the ceremony was not permitted to take place and people had to grieve privately in their homes to avoid large congregations. During the pandemic, in an act of history repeating itself, the residents of Palenque built a barrier on the road leading into the town to protect the community from outsiders.



Monument in memory of Benkos Biohó.



Traditional fruits street vendor in Cartagena, known as Palenquera.



San Basilio de Palenque was declared 'Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity' by UNESCO and is considered the first free town in America.



## OBAMA VISITS PALENQUE

In 2012, Barack Obama, then President of the United States, visited Palenque and met with local people. He visited the town with Colombia's president Juan Manuel Santos to give the people of Palenque land 'titles'. These titles meant that the people of Palenque would be protected from being displaced due to companies in the tourist industry buying up land to develop hotels and attractions. This was a good thing for Palenque. However, across the Colombian Caribbean, other Afro-Colombian communities do not have land titles and have been, or are, at risk of being displaced due to tourism expansion.



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April 15, 2012. San Pedro Square, Cartagena. Sebastian Salgado (L), leader of the San Basilio de Palenque community of descendants of former slaves, shows a land title next to U.S. President Barack Obama (C) and Colombia's President Juan Manuel Santos (R) during a ceremony to restitute land to Afro-Colombians displaced from their homes by armed rebel groups.

## PALENQUERO LANGUAGE

When Biohó first arrived in Africa, the colonisers intentionally mixed enslaved people from different parts of Africa so that they could not communicate and form rebellions. When Biohó and others escaped, they created their own language, Palenquero, which is a mix of African Bantu languages and Spanish and is still spoken in Palenque today. Palenquero is a Creole language and is a huge part of the cultural tradition and African heritage of Palenque. Today, there are many initiatives which support the use of Palenque amongst the younger generations of Palenque to ensure that it does not die out and it is now taught at the school, the Institución Educativa Técnica Agropecuaria Benkos Biohó.

## LANGUAGE TASK:

ENGLISH	PALENQUERO	SPANISH
night		
bed		
mum		
child		
money		
house		
clothes		
scandal		
drum		
rubbish		

### Palenquero words

burú  
mai  
posá  
tambore  
chepa  
moná  
bumbilo  
barentiérre  
selelé  
uskulu

### Spanish words

niño/a  
escándalo  
basura  
tambor  
casa  
cama  
madre  
dinero  
noche  
ropa

### Creole languages

When people who speak different languages come together, mix their languages and create natural new ones, they are known as Creole languages. As a result of colonisation and slavery and the mixing of cultures from different parts of the world, many Creole languages are spoken across the Americas.

night - uskulu - noche, bed - barantíerra - cama, mum - mai - madre, child - moná - niño/a, money - burú - dinero, house - posá - casa, clothes - chepa - ropa, scandal - selelé - escándalo, drum - tambore - tambor, rubbish - bumbilo - basura

Answers



## KOMBILESA MÍ

Kombilesa Mí is a music group from Palenque. They describe their style as a fusion of rap and traditional Afro-Colombian sounds, such as the sexteto, pavo, bullerengue and chalusonga, which is called rap folklórico palenquero in Spanish. Their songs are performed in a mixture of Spanish and Palenquero, often smoothly blending both languages into the same verse. They use traditional instruments from Palenque. African and Palenquero pride are an important part of their musical projects and they run free language and traditional music and dance workshops in the town. They have been criticised by some for blending the Western influence of rap with traditional sounds, but they say that this is important to preserve and promote the language and culture amongst the younger, future generations of Palenque. Kombilesa Mí performs its music all over Latin American and the USA.



Upcoming Colombian music group, Kombilesa Mí.



## LANGUAGE TASK:

Listen to Kombilesa Mí's song Hairstyles (Los Peinados)

1) There is an important story told in the chorus. Can you translate it?

*Los peinados* \_\_\_\_\_

*Son una forma de expresión* \_\_\_\_\_

*Que ayudaron* \_\_\_\_\_

*Durante la esclavización* \_\_\_\_\_

*Dibujaron* \_\_\_\_\_

*El camino perfecto* \_\_\_\_\_

*Que ha llevado a los negros a la liberación* \_\_\_\_\_

2) Match up these different hairstyles.

el pelo rucho

finger coils

los nudos bantú

braids/cornrows

el pelo cucú

curly/afro hair

las trenzas

curly/afro hair

los gajos

bantu knots

3) Describe these two members from Kombilesa Mí.

There are some verbs to help you in the box.

tiene – he/she has, es – he/she is, lleva – he/ he wears



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## CORNROWS

In the chorus of the song *Los Peinados*, Kombilesa Mí tell the story of how cornrows were used by Maroons and the intelligence networks of Benkos Biohó as Africans in Colombia resisted slavery and escaped Spanish colonisers. The hairstyle originates from Western Africa and consists of braids that are tightly braided to the head. To plan and facilitate escapes, the Maroons used the patterns of the braids to communicate escape routes. They also hid seeds in the braids, which would be used to help sustain them when they arrived at their new, free location.



## FAMOUS PALENQUEROS

In 1972, Antonio Cervantes (from Palenque), who is also known as *Kid Pambelé*, became the world light welterweight boxing champion for the first time. He became a national hero in Colombia and fought all over the world. Due to his fame, Antonio's hometown of Palenque received a lot of public interest. Its unique history began to draw more tourists, and interest in the cultural heritage and language grew. The town is also home to other famous boxers such as Prudencio Cardona, world flyweight champion, and Ricardo Cardona.

San Basilio de Palenque, Colombia.  
Monument of Antonio Cervantes, A.K.A Kid Pambelé. He is a Colombian boxing trainer and former two-time world Jr. Welterweight champion. He successfully defended the title 16 times. He was born in Palenque in 1945.



Evaristo Márquez, an actor who starred in Hollywood films in the 1970s and in *Burn!*, alongside Marlon Brando, was born and lived in Palenque.

Palenque is home to *Champeta* music, which is popular all over Colombia and Latin America. Some of the most well-known artists from Palenque are Charles King, Louis Towers, Rafael Cassiani and Las Alegres Ambulancias.



BURN! Movie. From left, Marlon Brando, Evaristo Márquez.



Rafael Cassiani, leader of the group Sexteto Tabala, artisans of the ancestral Afro-Columbian son. Sexteto Tabala is one of the most representative musical expressions of the African communities in Colombia.

## DISCUSSION POINTS

- Many of the details of the life of Benkos Biohó and other Maroons are not known because colonisers destroyed books and records from Black and indigenous communities. Why do you think they did this?
- The Spanish government betrayed the peace treaty and killed Benkos Biohó. What should happen when governments lie?
- Many people now prefer to use the term 'enslaved people' rather than 'slaves'. Why are language and the words we use important?
- The song Los Peinados is about having pride in afro hair. Why do you think Kombilesa Mí made this song?
- Tourism is the industry that brings the most money into Colombia. However, expansion means that many communities become displaced. How should the government respond to this crisis?
- What have you found most interesting while learning about Benkos Biohó and Palenque?



## REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING



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<https://www.ozy.com/flashback/the-colonial-betrayal-that-haunts-colombian-peace/82022/>

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Melina Irvine** is an MFL teacher in Bristol. She has six years' classroom experience and has spent extended periods living abroad in Spain, France, Costa Rica and Brazil. She completed her undergraduate degree at Queen Mary University of London, then went on to study her PGCE at the University of Bristol, where she is currently completing an MSc in Education. She has a keen interest in ideas around students' sense of belonging and where this intersects with mental health and wellbeing, critical thinking, equalities and social justice. She has held pastoral roles in schools and has collaborated with South Bristol Youth as an academic mentor. She is passionate about making languages education inclusive and engaging for all learners and is excited by the potential for change sparked by increased awareness and conversations around race and equality in schools. She is co-chair of the ALL Decolonise Secondary MFL Curriculum Special Interest Group, alongside Lisa Panford.

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