Colombia

Something deep in the blood of Domingo Bioho caused him to revolt against the enslavement of Africans that the Spanish practiced in Cartagena de Indias, Colombia. He probably would have said it was his royalty. Bioho claimed to have been a king when he was stolen from his African homeland, most likely in the early 1600s.

But it really doesn't matter what caused him to resist Spanish chains and lashes. What matters is that he did, and because he did the palenques took root in Colombian soil and culture.

Thanks to Bioho, who became known as King Benkos, the palenques became safe havens for escaped African slaves and repositories of the cultures and traditions they had brought with them from the Motherland. Many experts believe that the African slaves themselves were taken to Colombia by the Spanish in the early 1500s (which at first was known as New Granada). But some, Dr. Ivan Van Sertima among them, believe that some Africans were already there.

In his book, "They Came Before Columbus," Van Sertima cited the account of Fray Gregoria Garcia, a Dominican priest who indicated that he and other Spaniards saw blacks among the indigenous Indians they found in one of the islands off the coast of Cartagena. Spanish explorer Vasco Nunez de Balboa also encountered Africans after crossing over the Isthmus of Darien, now known as Panama.

"Darien and Colombia were easily accessible to African shipwrecked mariners," Van Sertima wrote. "These places lie within the terminal area of currents that move with great power and swiftness from Africa to America." In other words, if ancient African sailors had gotten in their ships and merely fallen asleep, Van Sertima and other scholars believe they would have eventually landed in the Americas.

However they got there, whether as slaves or as free sailors, the Africans in Colombia began to grow in number. They also began to intermingle with the Indians and the Spanish, creating a black population that now is believed to be as high as 12 million, depending on what data is used. The mixing of the races, no doubt, has created the confusion about who is black in Colombia and who isn't.

The people of San Basilio are not confused. They know that they are black. It is tempting to romanticize this palenque that Benkos founded about 400 years ago and for which he died in 1619. But even with its preservation of African ways and concepts, it's also clear that in many ways modern Colombia has passed it by. It has no brick homes or paved streets. Its people live in shacks and huts. They travel on foot through dusty, rock-strewn roads.

San Basilio's residents lack potable drinking water. Some of them suffer from diarrhea and parasites. Some babies are afflicted with intestinal and respiratory ailments.

Yet, San Basilians routinely live to be 80 or 90 years old. Their poverty seems to have forced their diet to include more natural foods and less junk food. And while a doctor and nurse, in the employ of the Colombian government, direct a health clinic there, residents of San Basilio also rely on herbs for their healing.

Crime is low. Life is slow and relatively peaceful. The palenque has a mystique that calls out to its children who have left it for the education and jobs that Cartagena and other parts of the country offer – opportunities that San Basilio can't pretend to have.

Thousands of them return for annual homecomings. Others say with conviction that after they earn their degrees, they plan to return to the palenque.

The power of the palenque permeates Colombia, even as revolution, drugs and murder threaten to strangle it. African heritage is found in the music and art of the country, as well as the hue of its people. Perhaps it is the spirit of Benkos, urging his children to rebel against the status quo and embrace the African heritage he died trying to protect.

Many of them, a wide range of blacks and browns, may finally be ready to hear him.