

**Race, Resistance, and Human Rights:**  
**Agenda and Practices of a Multi-Ethnic Afro Community**

*This paper intends to offer an overview of different forms of activism by the Afro community of Bs. As. through a description of some of its many present grass-roots organizations and, in particular, of the work of three of its pioneer activists.*

In 2002, María Magdalena Lamadrid, fifth generation Afro-Argentine and founder of *África Vive* five years earlier, had a shocking experience at the Ezeiza International Airport in Buenos Aires as she was going to travel to a summit organized by Afro-Latin Americans in Panamá. While presenting her Argentine passport before taking her flight, she was accused of holding a fraudulent document and detained at the airport jail. Six hours later, and after checking with Interpol, authorities freed Lamadrid and profusely apologized for the misunderstanding. Among the many rationalizations that the authorities used to express regret, one had a deep impact on her: “Me decían que no podía ser argentina si era negra.” (*They were telling me that I could not be an Argentine if I was black.*), she later explained to reporters (Kinigsber; Infobae). Apparently, the experience had been as shocking for Lamadrid as for the airport authorities, while its impact would reach the local news and literally put the presence of Afro-Argentines back in the social map. It is well known by researchers that during the XIX century the African population was close to 40% just in Buenos Aires. So how about today? Are they Argentina’s first “desaparecidos”? Which were the mechanisms that made them “invisible”?

Researchers have given several reasons for the decline of the black population; among them, their often times forced participation in civil and foreign wars and the devastating Yellow Fever epidemic that took over the city in 1871. Most important, however, is the striking form of “statistical genocide” that was put into place during the same period by erasing their race difference from the demographic national census and, thus, achieving a much desired “whiter” population (Reid Andrews 113-135). It is true that there has been a dramatic decline in the Afro-Argentine population. But it is also

true that inequitable State mechanisms, the compliance of hegemonic historical discourse, and the racial narrative of exclusion inherent at the core of the foundation of the nation imposed an “invisibility” on the Afro-Argentine community that gradually transformed vital social, political, and economic accomplishments into perpetual inequality.

Over a decade has gone by since María Magdalena Lamadrid’s humiliating experience at Ezeiza Airport, and much has changed. The Afro-Argentine association Lamadrid pioneered has now become the research based *Asociación Misibamba* and has been joined by a myriad of organizations established by different Afro-descendant groups. Among them, certainly stand out those established by the Cabo Verdean community, who have been in Buenos Aires since the 1930s and whose *Asociación de Socorros Mutuos “Unidad Caboverdeana” de Dock Sud* is the oldest one. On the other hand, DIAFAR, the *Diaspora Africana de la Argentina*, which, under the direction of Federico Pita, has recently become a force in the struggle for “visibility” and thus recognition of the history and rights of the community, offers workshops on varied topics as well as a weekly radio program, and has now launched the newspaper *El Afroargentino* –as a reflection of the many newspapers run and produced by the Afro community during the XIX century.

On the other hand, the new migrations of African and Afro-Caribbean nationals to the capital City of Buenos Aires that started in the 1990s have also helped change the old perception of “invisibility” during the past decade by grouping themselves in a variety of active organizations such as the *Asociación de Residentes Senegaleses en Argentina*, whose president, Ndathie Moustafá Sene, I had the chance to interview in January 2014. Sene underlines that the influence and drive to disseminate the heritage and to create awareness of the socio-economic challenges this multi-ethnic community faces works in a synergistic manner: With the arrival of large numbers of African immigrants, Argentines have become more interested in learning about the culture they know well was present in the country from colonial times, and thus grow to respect it. At the same time, young Africans arriving in the city cannot avoid becoming involved in cultural events and political participation so that, together, they can work for the benefit of locals and newcomers in the recognition of the African legacy and of the Human Rights they have historically been deprived of. Through this process, Afro-Descendants as well as

members of the African diaspora that got established in the city in the mid-1990's have developed and put in practice an agenda that questions the socio-cultural and economic disparities that marginalize them. Their work has anticipated one of the main objectives of the United Nations Resolution that proclaims the period 2015-2024 as *International Decade for People of African Descent*, in order to "Promote a greater knowledge of and respect of the diverse heritage, culture, and contribution of people of African descent to the development of societies", with a special interest on Latin America.

In this presentation, I would like to emphasize the work of three pioneers who, from the early 1990s, have embraced different forms of activism and political involvement that strive for social rights and cultural recognition: Sandra Chagas, who is Afro-Uruguayan and one of the founders and directors of the *Movimiento Afro-cultural*; Mirta Toledo, whose personal commitment as an Indo-Afro-Argentine visual artist and writer started by exploring her own family roots, and Nengumbi Celestín Sukama, who is from the Democratic Republic of Congo and offers reach and support through his online journalistic work and his organization IARPIDI. I had the opportunity to interview each of these three indefatigable activists of the Afro community of Buenos Aires while completing research in Argentina in December 2013-January 2014, and have kept up to date with their projects through frequent e-mail communications with each of them.

Sandra Chagas is one of the founder members of the *Movimiento Afro-cultural*. This organization, established in Buenos Aires over a decade ago, started as a space for research, promotion, and teaching of the "cultura afro", and in particular as a meeting place for Afro-Uruguayans living in the city. The *Movimiento Afro-cultural* is, in fact, a continuation of the *Grupo Cultural Afro* that goes back to the 1980s.

Chagas likes to define herself from four positions that in no way compete with each other: As a woman, as an Afro-Descendant woman, as a lesbian Afro-Descendant woman, and finally as an Afro-Candombera Lesbian Woman. *Candombera*, a woman who practices the African music and dance that slaves used to perform in public, is one of the main identity attributes that Chagas likes to emphasize. As part of the goal for "invisibilization" of the Afro-Argentine community, dancing Candombe was forbidden in the streets in late 19th century Buenos Aires. As a consequence, and for long decades, Chagas explains, there was a remarkable difference between the Candombe danced in

Uruguay and the one danced in Argentina. While in Uruguay it has all along been performed in the streets, with participants parading down the roads while playing the drums and dancing; in Argentina, Candombe gradually became a private event. Thus, for over a century and for the most part, Afro-Argentines were forced to play Candombe in their homes, in their patios, often while sitting down and playing their drums between their legs. This description goes a long way to underline the consequences State orchestrated racism has on cultural practices.

Since the early 1990s, and in consonance with other members of the Afro-Uruguayan community, it has been Chagas's mission to revert the distortion of this artistic expression in society. Thus *Movimiento Afro-cultural* not only performs Candombe in the streets on a weekly basis, but also offers classes to learn the dance as well as Candombe percussion. The most important event takes place on Saint Baltazar's Day, celebrated every year on January 6th. On this day, the group performs through the streets of San Telmo, as they parade from Plaza Dorrego (where slaves were sold) to Parque Lezama (where slaves were kept before being taken to Plaza Dorrego). Chagas has recently contributed in the production team for the documentary film *Soy tambor* (2015), which focuses on Afro-Uruguayan immigration and Candombe in Bs. As. The *Movimiento Afro-cultural* also offers classes on a variety of African dances given by renowned Brazilian professor Isa Soares, plus conferences, chats, book presentations, capoeira classes, among many activities. The premises house a display of artifacts and maps related to African cultural practices and history, while emphasizing its contemporary political stand with an altar commemorating the life of José Delfín Acosta Martínez –a young Afro-Uruguayan activist who died in the City of Buenos Aires in 1996, coherently presumed, as a consequence of discrimination and police brutality (Acosta Martínez; CIDH).

Sandra Chagas is also deeply involved in the fight for the recognition and rights of the LGTBD Community, placing a special emphasis in addressing the political representation of the particular challenges faced by Afro-Argentines. Her latest project, developed with Lucía Dominga Molina, founder and director of the *Casa de la Cultura Indo-Afro-Americana* in Santa Fé Province, has materialized in the recently launched *Grupo Matamba: Red de Mujeres Afropolíticas* –which intends to specifically recognize

the work and political activism of women in the Afro community in Argentina. This new endeavor holds a significant importance, since it expands and creates bridges at a more inclusive, federal level, while challenging Buenos Aires perennial centralization and its exclusive control over the production of legitimized cultural discourse.

Mirta Toledo, Indo-Afro-Argentine visual media artist and writer, has also combined art and activism seeking to revert hegemony and social segregation in Argentine culture. She has been deeply interested in the issue of race and diversity for most of her life –at this point, I must clarify that she recognizes the concept of *diversity* as a first step towards *interculturalism* as a means for promoting cultural dialogue and interaction– and is also an active member of IARPIDI. She has a formal training in the arts, with advanced degrees in painting and sculpture from several schools of fine arts in Buenos Aires, including the Prilidiano Pueyrredón University of Fine Arts. Toledo had the chance to live in different cities in the US from 1988 to 2007. During this period she worked on the concept of diversity, producing a collection of paintings that resort to a variety of techniques in order to reflect on this idea. The collection, from the early 2000s, is panoramic in its scope and covers: *Diversidad en las flores, mujeres y pájaros* (painting on *maquiladora* women from Ciudad Juárez, Mexico), *Diversidad en Religión* (Pachamama e Inti), *Diversidad Pura: niños y juguetes* (reflecting on the fact that there is no one prototype of beauty), and *Diversidad en los Invisibles*, which was developed specifically to recognize Afro-Argentines and Afro-Descendants and their contributions during the period of the Nation formation as well as today.

This project originated with a painting in mixed media on paper titled *Diversidad Pura* (1993). The work, explains Toledo, provides an alternative vision to Euro-center cultural conceptions. She is now closely working with IARPIDI and has been commissioned by its president, Nengumbi Celestín Sukama, to create the series *Héroes Afrodescendientes Argentinos Invisibilizados*, which intends to “visibilize” Afro-Argentines and their descendants. This series of portraits was displayed in city cultural centers as an itinerary exhibition during the year 2013-2014. The success of these presentations has lead IARPIDI to explore the possibility of establishing a permanent exhibit for the collection. As a form of activism, Toledo also gives chats at schools, engaging students in a form of collective art expression by having the class copy and

paint (in large dimensions) one of her portraits representing a member of the Afro-Argentine community that has been part of the itinerary exhibition in the city. Mirta Toledo has also published a collection of short stories, *Dulce de leche* (1996) and a novel, *La semilla elemental* (1993), in which she explores her family genealogy and African heritage.

IARPIDI, acronym for *Instituto Argentino para la Igualdad, Diversidad e Integración*, was founded by Nengumbi Celestín Sukama –a Congolese national who migrated to Argentina in 1995. IARPIDI has certainly been one of the precursors in the struggle for “visibilization” of Afro-Argentines, and is one of the best known organizations in the city because of its continuous commitment to fight for the rights of all migrant workers. He has participated in many radio and TV interviews as well as in conferences and workshops, and has made presentations in the US and in Brazil. His participation in the conference on *Trabajo y cultura afro en la Argentina*, organized by the Department of Labor in 2011, is a good example of his pledge to fight for the rights of migrant workers. As part of the panel “Traces of slave work in xxi century Argentina” (*Huellas del trabajo esclavo en la Argentina del siglo XXI*), he discussed the vulnerability of African street vendors, the racial persecution they are subjected to on a daily basis, and the legal steps migrant communities have followed to protect their members (65-69).

Through the IARPIDI website, Sukama keeps the community informed about developments related to Human Rights, local laws, race relations, and the rights of migrant workers. He has also created the online magazine *Kimpuanza*, in order to give a voice to the many professionals who specialize in, teach, and promote African cultures. The first issue can be read in the IARPIDI website. Working with Mirta Toledo, Nengumbi Celestín Sukama, who is the director of the project, has launched the *Héroes Afrodescendientes Argentinos Invisibilizados* series –the collection of portraits already described. At the core of this idea is the dream to finally establish a Museum of Afro-Argentine Culture and History in the city of Buenos Aires in order to achieve a full “visibilization” and recognition of the Afro community and its many intellectual and social contributions to the country since colonial times. In the IARPIDI website Nengumbi Celestín Sukama offers a detailed description of his and Mirta Toledo’s collaborations regarding the *Héroes Afrodescendientes Argentinos Invisibilizados* series.

The different collaborations and exchanges among Afro communities in contemporary Buenos Aires have been gradually forging alliances and transnational interactions as well as playing a significant role in influencing national policies while raising awareness of the realities and challenges faced by this multi-ethnic Afro community in Argentina. The myriad of projects and forms of activism I have described along my presentation can only continue growing in many productive, inclusive and transformative ways throughout this coming decade for the benefit of all Argentine society.

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\* All Websites last accessed on January 9, 2017