



# ReAfricanizing for Black Student Success: The Maroon Model

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## Abstract

This study of a Maroon community (MC) is focused on culturally centered educational practices and the need to transmit an African-oriented culture to Black students to increase educational and cultural relevance. We wanted to know what can be drawn from MC that may have utility for Black children in the USA. The findings include the need for teaching that reconceptualizes socialization processes for Black children and the importance of understanding how schooling can become a battleground for reaching small goals for Black children.

**Keywords** Black education · Maroons · African American children · African centered education · Anti-racist education

## Introduction

Maroons are people of African descent who escaped from enslavement during the Maafa (trans-Atlantic slave trade) and created free societies that they protected with their lives (Harris, 2000; Price, 1979). “Maafa” is the more than 500-year period in which African people experienced enslavement and colonialization and were forced to submerge their culture and have their worldview switched from an African to a European-oriented worldview. Maroons defeated their European captors, escaped enslavement, and maintained their African ways of life. Maroon communities were established in the Americas (e.g., the community in Colombia, South America was the first one established) during the period of the enslavement of African people in the US (1619–1865) and colonization, and to date, some still exist (Harris, 2000; Price, 1979). Within existing Maroon communities, people of African descent still practice aspects of the culture they inherited (Schwegler & Correa, 2017; Shockley & LeNiles, 2019). The Maroons in the study created a public K-12 learning institution in their village. As African Americans, we were interested in learning about how Maroon children are educated in their local K-12 public institution and what can we transfer to our context in the USA.

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The Maroons believe that their pro African worldview is essential for aiding in identity development and the proper socialization of Black children and adults (Akoto, 1999; Hilliard, 2002; Kambon, 1998; Lee et al., 1990; Shockley & LeNiles, 2019; Watson-Vandiver & Wiggans, 2021; Wilson, 1993). After studying the village, we deemed MC to be a “successful” place because we found that it is a 100% Black community with no crime, the elders serve as the “police” via a council of elders who use dialogue and African-based approaches (such as the use of proverbs) for problem-solving. Additionally, families in the village are intact as nearly 100% of the adults are married, there is no violence, there are no instances of divorce or child abandonment, and every person in MC belongs to a “Kuagro” for a lifetime. “Kuagros” are small groups of gender-specific peers of the same age set who function as lifetime “brothers and sisters.” From the Maroon perspective, the above factors represent a thriving community that prioritizes its psychosocial well-being while building and sustaining culturally centered institutions (e.g., family and education). Hence, for Maroons, success is defined by a person’s ability and readiness to address community challenges and participate in the intergenerational cultural transmission processes.

In our efforts to learn about what MC school is doing both academically and in terms of the overall cultural/socialization processes of the children in the school, we traveled there for cultural exploration and data collection. The purpose of the study was to learn what could be drawn from that village that perhaps could make a difference for African American children. This study employed an Africological case study method and was guided by the following research questions: (1) How is African culture used to socialize young people within schools in MC? and, (2) What are the experiences of teachers and educational leaders who are working in a K-12 public school in MC? In relation to socialization, we considered the importance of African culture, identity, and community; thus, we sought to understand better how MC Maroons identified what cultural norms they want to be taught in the school, how that information gets communicated to school personnel, and in what ways students are culturally affirmed and socialized at school. It was our hope to glean information about how culturally centered learning environments advance and sustain community and nation-building activities. Our inquiry assumes the importance of African-centered educational practices and the importance of teacher preparation for transmitting culture to successfully work with Black children.

In the USA, since *Brown v. Board of Education* ended the notion of “separate but equal,” Black children have been thought of as being “deficient” in US schooling environment. The claim of a “lack of intelligence” on the part of Black children fueled the accountability movement and the desire to get African children to perform well on standardized tests. Perhaps the intellectual potential of African American children can truly be accessed via an African-centered approach to education and in learning environments that are designed to meet their needs. An African-centered approach is one where the specific learning styles and socio-cultural needs of Black children are at the center of pedagogy. African-centered education scholars and practitioners argue that such an education would bring about a reversal of the miseducation experienced by Black children. Rarely is the culture in the schools that Black children attend informed by an African-based history

and culture (Hale, 1982; Watson-Vandiver & Wiggans, 2021). What results from the lack of relevant culture in schools is a cultural mismatch between Black children and their learning environment. Within culturally mismatched environments, Black children have low rates of graduation, perform lower than all other racial groups in STEM, and Black children are more likely than other groups to experience physical/verbal abuse at school. The aforementioned problems are cause for concern, and given that schooling is compulsory, it is essential that teachers learn culturally affirming strategies in order to improve the educational experience of Black children. It is equally important that researchers learn from contexts where Black children are doing well. It is unfortunate that, post *Brown v Board* (1954), within the USA, the only types of schools where Black children have a legacy of success are African-centered schools (Constantine et al., 2006; Lomotey, 1990; Murrell, 2012; Shockley, 2008).

## African-Centered Theory and Literature

An Afrocentric (or African centered) ideology is the view that African people are actors, agents and are central to any phenomena involving them (Asante, 1988). African-centered thinkers view African people as being central to all of humanity's story given that archaeologists purport Africa to be the "cradle of civilization" (Asante, 1990; Burbanks et al., 2020). While some mainstream thinkers decry Afrocentric thinking as being too far from mainstream (Eurocentric/European orientated) thinking, African-centered theorists believe that African-centeredness has facilitated a positive and self-determined paradigm shift for many people of African descent, and it is needed to address the psychological and educational issues being faced by African (Black) people worldwide (Ani, 1994; Hilliard, 2003; Shockley & LeNiles, 2019). While many may view the African continent as a place incessantly in need of help, culturally speaking, African-centered theorists, both on the continent of Africa and in the African diaspora, have found Africa to be rich reservoir of resources. A result of the negative view of Africa as a continent is that people of African descent are also often thought in less than positive ways as well, especially since stories about African descended people are often told from a non-African-centered perspective. A Eurocentric perspective is one in which the opinions, perspectives, and values stemming from a European (or European American/white) origin are thought of as being normal globally, while other opinions, perspectives, and values are viewed as non-existent or insufficient. Fortunately, African-centered ideology addresses the relegation of African people to the status of object or spectator in stories deriving from a Eurocentric perspective about how history has unfolded (Asante, 1987; Keto, 1995). The reason African-centered theory is important is because since the end of enslavement in the Americas, there have been few effective efforts to reacquaint people of African descent with the cultural heritage they were forced to abandon. African-centered theory is one of the most successful attempts to reacquaint people of African descent with their cultural heritage (Akoto, 1999; ; Hilliard, 2002, Shockley, 2008).

African-centered researchers apply an African-centered cultural lens in their attempts to understand phenomena. For example, instead of using race as a primary lens, African-centered researchers use culture because they believe that the primary solution to the problems that people of African descent face is that they do not practice their own African-derived culture. African-centered education researchers and practitioners argue that in order for situations to improve for Black children, Black people must take on an African culturally based ideology (i.e., an African-centered ideology) and control the institutions where Black children are being educated.

African-centered education researchers and practitioners believe that educational institutions implicitly and explicitly teach children cultural and societal norms, in other words, such institutions socialize children. Black children worldwide are socialized to accept that Eurocentric ideals (or whiteness) are normal for everyone and should be integrated as part of everyone's life. However, European ideals are laden with culturally specific beliefs, values, behaviors, and understandings. For example, the notion that Christopher Columbus discovered the landmass now known as the USA is only true within a Eurocentric perspective/understanding. The Eurocentric notion on Columbus' discovery is that when Europe found that the landmass now known as the USA existed, that it when the landmass was discovered. Since Natives to the USA, Africans, and Asians had been on the landmass well before Columbus (Van Sertima, 1976), the assertion that Columbus discovered the landmass is a culturally specific truth (it is true in European ways of understanding and conceptualizing history) and not a global truth that should be accepted by all groups—Black children become miffed and confused by such conflicting information and it thwarts their educational progress (Asante, 2017; Hale, 1982; Hilliard, 2002). What is worse than being miffed and confused is being miseducated—which is when the non-Eurocentric perspective is completely blocked from Black children's view. African-centered theorists have led the way in highlighting culturally specific information parading as global truth (James, 1954). African-centered education researchers and practitioners (such as teachers and administrators) believe that a coherent and effective cultural construct grounded in an African-centered axiology, epistemology, and cosmology must be at the center of any institution where Black students learn—Institutions utilizing African-centered ideals and socialization techniques propagate an understanding that an African culturally paradigmatic way of thinking and sense-making is perfectly normal for a person of African descent.

African-centered education is the centering of African ideals, notions, and cultural practices in the education of children of African descent. When done well, African-centered education helps Black children apply African cultural concepts and perspectives to the world around them. African-centered education is part and parcel of the cultural mandate to develop an education focused on developing a sense of African agency within children so that they are prepared to address problems within their own communities.

Maroons are African people who resisted enslavement and Eurocentrism by successfully freeing themselves from captivity during the trans-Atlantic slave trade (the slave trade is often referred to as a “*maafa*” by African-centered researchers. *Maafa* translates in Swahili to “period of total destruction”). The Maroons maintained their sovereignty literally by any means necessary. The Maroons focused upon for this

study practiced the only culture they knew, an African culture (mainly from the Luongo people from Angola) to facilitate the creation and sustainment of their villages. They institutionalized African (Luongo) cultural practices for daily life and living as a natural part of who they are because their African cultural practices were still intact upon arrival in Colombia. The results of a relevant and culturally affirming education are communities where every member is valued and the community's greater good is served. Some scholars (Lefkowitz, 1997; Walker, 2001) have suggested that an African-centered focus is tantamount to "romanticizing Africa;" however, African-centered work makes no such effort, it instead unapologetically focuses on placing African people closer to cultural values and beliefs that represent the natural foundation from which they come.

Maroons believe that they are the Africans who successfully defended themselves against a racist onslaught and they believe that they have maintained an African-based way of living. From their perspective and according to psychologists such as Hilliard (1998) and Mbilishaka (2018), an African-based way of living is mentally healthier for a person of African descent. Hence, much can be learned from a group of people who successfully thwarted enslavement and have maintained, even in the present day, many aspects of their African-derived ways of life. The Maroons chose to battle for their survival, and in so doing, they have maintained a connection to their African culture which is necessary to continue to be self-determined in many areas of life.

Juxtaposing the Maroons to other African descendants in the Americas may provide some understanding of the level of importance for people of African descent to have access to African culture, the same way that other groups have at least some basic knowledge of and/or access to the cultural group(s) from which they come. Maroons have maintained many of their African culture practices and have not experienced many of the societal ailments faced by other African-descended groups in the Americas, such as incarceration, violence, and poverty. (Hilliard, 1998) The Maroons were also isolated for hundreds of years which helped avoid re-enslavement and helped maintain a military advantage. This study of the Maroons in Colombia is the first of its kind. The study addresses a gap in the literature related how Maroons advance African culture and then use the culture to socialize MC children and advance the MC community.

## Methods

The term "Africology" refers to a set of practices researchers must use when conducting studies deemed to be African-centered. In short, it is the application of an African-centered lens (as explicated in the conceptual framework) being applied to studies or phenomena involving people of African descent. The application of Africology requires knowledge of the culture, history, and heritage of people of African descent prior to engaging in studies about them, introspection and retrospection to uncover any unknown biases related to people of African descent that the researcher may have, and an ability to understand and interpret reality from the perspective of the (African descended) people under study. We used Africology to

explore a school within MC, and, to a lesser degree, in order to help contextualize the school, to explore aspects of the community itself. Asante (1990) defined Africology “as the Afrocentric study of phenomena, events, ideas and personalities related to Africa” (p.14). Asante (1988) states that Africology is,

The crystallization of the notions and methods of Black orientated social scientists and humanists. What they had explained, analyzed and promulgated in papers, lectures and private conversations has taken shape, which is one substance as a new, creative discipline squarely resting on the foundations of the African past... It [Africology] has made possible the conceptualization of the Black perspective and attitudes, thereby suggesting a new methodology (p. 59).

Asante’s definition posits that African-centered methods are helpful when studying African people. His argument is that Eurocentric perspectives are insufficient tools for analyzing the unique situation in which African people find themselves globally. We utilized Africology to ensure that an African-centered lens was used to understand and analyze the African phenomena at the center of this study. The use of both an Africological methodology and an African-centered conceptual framework created consistency and congruency for this study because both posit the centrality of African people, history, and culture, and they provide conceptual tools for an inquiry of this type.

Thomas (2015) offered that case studies are “defined not so much by the methods that you are using to do the study, but the edges you put around the case” (p. 21). Case studies provide the boundaries for investigations of real-life events while retaining the characteristics of occurrences under study (Yin, 2002). Especially true for a study of this nature is Stake’s (2006) position that as opposed to seeking for objectivity or similarity to other’s studies, researchers should be judged on the fairness and honesty of their own work.

We sought to understand MC axiology as it pertains to the school, how students are socialized in relation to that axiology, and what information is communicated in relation to socialization and the maintenance of an African-based way of conceptualizing. In adherence with the Africological mandate for cultural immersion over scientific distance, our qualifications include that we have collectively spent more than 30 years studying African history and culture, we have studied culture on the African continent, lived on the continent, worked as school administrators on the continent, and in relation to MC specifically, we have spent the past 4 years studying and learning from the MC Maroons in relation to how they practice African culture and apply an African worldview as part of cultural life in the village.

This study occurred over a 2-year period. We used African-centered theory as a basis for examining educational practices within MC school. In addition to our observations inside the school, we developed a documentary film that features MC history and their ways of maintaining their African folkways and mores. We filmed community events and incidences in which African socialization practices were observed, all of which gave us deeper insight into the case.

## Participants and Data Collection

MC is a Maroon village of 5000 people located 40 miles from Cartagena, Colombia, South America. The participants included 6 females and 6 males who held positions of administrator, teacher, school board member, and community consultant in the public school in MC. Data were collected using semi-structured, informal conversations, descriptive notes, meetings with community activists and leaders, consultations with teachers, and observations of curriculum and professional development meetings (e.g., ethno-education workshops). Data were collected during ten in-person visits to MC Community.

## Interviews

Semi-structured interviews conducted with teachers and school leaders occurred on-site and interviews with community leaders occurred off-site. Data were collected during interviews through audio recordings and note taking.

## Observations

We used participant observation to help gain access to data (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). We observed the daily routines, activities, interactions, and occurrences of MC community members. We created field notes from the observations of participants that were based on what we observed and experienced throughout data collection (Creswell, 2008, Goetz & Le Compte, 1984).

## Descriptive Notes

Vagueness was avoided to ensure that the words and actions of the study's participants were captured and represented with a high level of authenticity.

## Memo Writing

This study borrowed from ethnography by using memo writing to “create a vivid reconstruction of the phenomena studied” (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984, p.190). We engaged in memo writing to ensure a vivid recreation of events and to explore our own “...hunches, ideas, and thoughts” (Creswell, 2008, p. 447) and to better understand and explain certain intricacies.

## Data Analysis

### Coding

Coding is the process of disaggregating, breaking data down into manageable segments, and identifying or naming those segments (Schwandt, 2014). Codes were assigned to units of text, both salient themes and their relationship to each other were linked. The emergence of themes from the codes produced the major constructs upon which claims were made toward addressing the research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Our positionality as African Americans who have served as teachers, school leaders, and who now serve as university faculty members, created an important connection between us and the participants. Honest and forthright conversations have helped to provide depth for this study that otherwise would have been more difficult to obtain.

### Findings

The two core themes emanating from this study are as follows: (1) teaching and reconstructing MC Culture and 2) schooling in the context of cultural warfare.

### Teaching and Reconstructing MC Culture

The MC people's culture and history begin in Africa. Most MC residents descend from the Luango people of Angola, which is a country in southern Africa. After years of fighting against European powers such as the Spanish, not long after MC Maroons gained their freedom via a treaty with Spain, they went into isolation for approximately 200 years. After the isolation ended, MC Maroons began traveling and moving to larger cities in Colombia. Some older MC Maroons shared that they encountered racism and discrimination when they moved to larger cities. Colombians suggested to MC Maroons that they should abandon their African-oriented culture and come into the "modern world." Zujeli, a Maroon teacher shared that, "a lot of social situations affected the use of the MC language. For example, people used to say that our language was bad Spanish, so some MC people stopped using it. White people taught us that to be better, you have to speak Spanish." Zujeli continued and offered that as a result of hegemony, some MC Maroons desired to better understand and, in some cases, fully adopt a more European/mainstream Colombian culture, abandoning Maroon/African ways of knowing. As abandonment and assimilation began to increase, many MC rituals and cultural practices were lost. Some MC inhabitants left their villages and abandoned the culture while others stayed and sought to preserve their cultural practices and intergenerationally transmit their knowledge to the younger generations. As MC residents attempted to understand how to preserve and proliferate their culture, they realized that the local public school was not aligned to MC cultural retention, and was more aligned to assimilation into European/mainstream Colombian culture. Juel, a 39-year veteran teacher at the MC school shared,



In 1986 the [MC Maroons] rehabilitated the use of the MC language. A group talked with the elders in the community and discussed the need to preserve the language. It is important to keep our language so we can talk with other understandings. So people, especially grandparents, started to speak the language more. There is an effort to preserve the language by speaking it first in the house and second in the school. By doing that we are preserving our culture. For example, the language was born in Africa from the Kikongo and Bantu languages although it has elements of Spanish and Portuguese, these languages (Ki-Congo and Bantu) are talking with one another at all times. The language is a big part of the identity and creates closeness.

While Spanish is normalized within the school, MC language is spoken in the school courtyard by students and MC teachers who are from MC. An MC teacher named Gimbu shared that he leads an after school and weekend program where he teaches MC language and culture. Gimbu believes that an aspect of cultural reconstruction is teaching students about the need to preserve and proliferate the language. He shared that he exposes young people to world history so they can properly contextualize Maroon culture and how their village came into existence.

Many of the cultural aspects and traditions of MC Maroons originate in Angola from the Luongo people. Teachers at both the primary and secondary levels use measuring and weighing apparatuses that the ancestors of MC Maroons used in Angola before their forced migration. A math teacher named Codina shared, “in math, we have a traditional way to measure, so they may grab a [MC measuring] bowl and say this is a kilo and it is accurate. We also use traditional ways to measure length using a rod, and we discuss how both methods are as good as others.”

Codina expressed, “in math, there is a balance between how we use our cultural elements and resources such as thinking and solving problems. Sometimes we use our mental capacity and learn how to apply our thinking to the problems in our community.” She continued and shared that she believed her use of such apparatuses aids in cultural reconstruction by teaching MC Maroon students that many of their traditional methods in mathematics and science should be prioritized, used as often as possible, and are as good as those that come from other cultures. She believes that by repeating the behaviors of their ancestors, they are taking the necessary steps to reconstruct and proliferate their culture. Codina went on further to share,

We are repeating our ancestors’ experiences and in those moments we connect to them. We also have a balance scale that we use to measure and weigh. We take a fruit here that has a harder outer shell and take everything out of it and we then put them adjacent to each other using strings that come from medicinal plants that we use to cure the flu. Together they create a mechanism to see if the weights of different objects are balanced. Our ancestors used that technique in Africa and now we continue to use it.

The government of Colombia mandates that a non-Maroon principal and 2 non-Maroon teachers must also teach in the village. That mandate has created some unique issues for MC. A non-Maroon elementary teacher, Vastin, who taught math and science believes that the work she does is a part of a larger effort to save

traditional knowledge that would otherwise be discarded or not valued. Vastin shared, “we are helping the community create good people with knowledge of MC and how they can use their culture to resolve problems.”

MC Maroons continue to reconstruct their culture and distance themselves from what they consider to be false and negative stereotypes that surrounded the community and its people throughout the 1950s, 60 s, 70 s, and most of the 80 s. As one teacher shared,

The idea is that we preserve and rescue the culture. We were oppressed because we couldn't speak our language outside of MC and we started to lose cultural aspects because we couldn't be ourselves outside of our village. We must teach our community values of respect, love for community, solidarity, commitment to our jobs and integrity, and teach our culture.

Within MC, socialization practices play an important role in cultural reconstruction. The most important tool used in that socialization process is Kuagro.

## **Kuagros for Socialization and Cultural Reconstruction**

In addition to using the K-12 school system to aid in cultural reconstruction, the community equally participates in the continuity of African principles within MC. Every person in MC belongs to a “Kuagro” which is a small group of gender-specific peers in your age range who function as lifetime “brothers and sisters.” MC Maroons shared that Kuagros are a socialization tool they retained from Africa. They have used Kuagros for 400 years to advance unity, accountability, and solidarity in MC. For example, a young MC teacher, Jovan, shared that when he was growing up in MC, his Kuagro normalized studying which has caused him to be more serious about his academic performance. After school, he would meet with his Kuagro to complete homework, study for tests, and advance his understanding of the academic material. Jovan shared, “it is because of my Kuagro that I now teach. They taught me how to work hard and be committed to the people in our community and I use that knowledge to promote Kuagro-based activities in my class through group work and outside assignments in the community.”

MC educators shared that they use Kuagros in their classrooms, benefiting from the already established collective group. Anysa, a non-Maroon first-grade teacher, shared, “the Kuagros teach proper social interactions and principles of solidarity and consideration.” Anysa went further to state,

Inside of the school, we work first to make sure they (students) interact in the classroom as a Kuagro. A Kuagro is a group of people of reciprocal age and you grow with them and always want to help them. We also immerse our classroom in those principles (solidarity and consideration). The goal is that as children develop, they can demonstrate those principles and keep them in mind so they understand they are responsible for the success of their classmates and community. It is built into the culture.

Toman, the vice-principal at MC School graduated from the Maroon school, taught for seven years and has been in his current role for five years. When we spoke to him about Kuagros, Toman stated,

We believe we as adults should have the skills and unity to govern ourselves. In Kuagros our children learn how to work together while developing the skills needed to govern our community. We organized socially using Kuagros to teach self-determination and to keep our culture from changing. Kuagros are a protective measure we have taken to teach the unity of people and cultural solidarity.

Kuagros function as an organization. The students see themselves as groups within the school and each group is responsible for their collective success and the overall achievement of the school. MC Maroon teachers shared that within the school the Kuagro is mostly used for academics and socialization. However, those same teachers shared that as students transition into adulthood and leadership roles in the community, their Kuagros will be used for other types of organizing as well, such as helping with important tasks related to problem solving within the community.

## Identity for Cultural Reconstruction

An additional component of cultural reconstruction in MC School is the teaching of identity. Toman believes that the school must serve as a medium for instilling proper identity as well as culture. He described the relationship between the school and the instilling of proper identity in the following way:

The main goal of the institution is to create a good person with an identity as an MC Maroon - with pride in culture. A good MC Maroon first respects diversity and people's differences, they recognize themselves as an African, an Afro-Colombian and especially an MC Maroon. They are a person who is happy with the culture of the MC Maroons and is a person who is honest, humble and respectful.

Understanding one's identity as an African person was mentioned by all the participants we interviewed. Many of the participants shared that they believe MC Maroons are Africans because they are the descendants of African people and have a history in which they fought wars with Spain to stay free and live as Africans. Part of their identity as Africans is related to them seeing themselves as "luchadors" (fighters/liberators). We wanted to learn more about the ways they see themselves juxtaposed to other Colombians, so we asked if they identify as Colombian or Afro-Colombian; responses were not quite uniform. An MC Maroon teacher shared,

To be African is not necessarily to be born there but it is a feeling and we are African because we feel it. The feeling of being Colombian is not the same as African. Colombian is a nationality. It is difficult to express the African feel-

ing. Traditionally we have been educated as Europeans and universally as part of the world. Sometimes we don't know about Africa, but when we study, we understand the value of Africa to the world. Even if we want to express what it means to be African in words, it is frustrating because we can't say everything because there is so much and some feelings are beyond words.

MC Maroons believe they are the first free Africans in the Americas (post Maafa). As a result, some in MC believe they represent African sovereignty and are a model for African descendants worldwide. To not identify as African would be, as one participant stated, “disrespectful to our ancestors who fought for us to be who we were before we came here.” There is no consensus on what MC identity entails and participants shared that it is in a “process of reconstruction.” The connection between identity, educational goals, and what some community members perceive the function of schooling to be was implied by a veteran teacher who stated,

Schooling is an educational process rooted in our African identity. We have to believe that Africa is the model. With this ideology, we have been working in MC since the 1980s to recover our language, history, traditional medicine, and also the community needs to be a part of the process of education to make sure we are [re-Africanizing] the community.

Some MC educators and administrators believe that the school must serve as a medium for instilling a strong African identity and teaching African history and culture. Some participants discussed that the cultural reconstruction process that began in the 1980s has gained momentum in the community and the appointment of new school board members and the increased number of Maroon teachers working at the school present evidence of those gains.

MC cultural reconstruction is evidenced by the use of African-based pedagogy in some MC classrooms. In the next section, we explore the second theme, “[Schooling in the Context of Cultural Warfare](#)” where we discuss some MC community members' belief that there is a need for African-based approaches to learning. Our exploration examined how MC Maroons conceptualize and implement their pedagogy in the face of opposition.

### **Schooling in the Context of Cultural Warfare**

In order to contextualize the findings, it is important to have a general understanding of how educators are selected to work in the school. MC teachers and administrators explained to us that upon graduation from a teacher preparation program and earning certification, teachers are hired by the Colombian government and then they are placed into a school by the government. Six of the 10 teachers, one administrator, and a school board member interviewed for this study are MC Maroons. Others interviewed for the study are Colombians, but they are not MC Maroons. When asked if MC School was their desired work location, nine out of the 12 educators interviewed responded affirmatively. Eight of the 10 teachers shared that they identified as being either Afro-Colombian, Maroon, or African, and they said that they

were raised in a village or a city that practiced aspects of African culture. When asked “how do you identify racially and/or culturally?”, teachers’ answers varied; some said they were (a) African or Black, (b) a mix of African, Indigenous Colombian, European, or, (c) mixed Afro-descendant (without European). For example, a teacher who is from an island off the coast of Cartagena shared “I am Black because I am Afro,” while another teacher said, “I am Mestizo, which means a mix between Black, White and indigenous.”

Teachers and administrators in MC School said that some of their colleagues assigned by the government to work in the school are not interested in learning and promoting MC history or culture. Two of the non-Maroon participants interviewed shared that they had no interest in learning MC history or culture and that they were committed to their job as a teacher, not the community. For example, a non-Maroon teacher who lives in a village approximately 45 min from MC community shared,

When I came here, I thought the MC community was too far from my home, but I was impressed with the culture, such as the dance, language, and funeral rituals. I thought to myself, where do I start because there is so much to learn. It was too much and I live too far. Over time I became less interested because I know I can’t stay here and interact. I teach and go home, so I only know what I pick up in school from the kids. It is very little, but that is all I know.

The quote above from a non-Maroon teacher represents what Carlos, an MC school board member, defined as a “problem.” Carlos believes that educators who are not interested in MC culture should be removed from the school because they work against cultural reconstruction, they work against other MC initiatives, and they promote ideas that are meant to supplant MC’s African worldview. Often, they propagate that it would be better if students were exposed to a more mainstream (Eurocentric) worldview.

Carlos believes that non-MC teachers who spread Eurocentric ideas are likened to holding neo-colonialist views—with MC school serving as the vehicle they use to spread oppositional colonizing viewpoints. A teacher named Gimbu shared that he believed teachers who are not interested in learning the culture are promoting Eurocentrism. He said that the larger Colombian curriculum was Eurocentric and designed to miseducate Black people. Gimbu shared,

In Colombia at large, we are using the same models as Europeans. Black people are learning like they are European. There is a text by Samir Amin that speaks about Eurocentrism and he is a famous author for us because he talks about their vision and how, since colonial times, they have been implementing an agenda and capitalism. The education here [Colombia] comes from places like Germany, North America, and France and the mission is to teach us to think like a European and that we have no history and the only story we have is as slaves. What their mission aims to teach, is that we are savages and like Franz Fanon says, “we can then be denied our rights as people.” They did not create an education system that reflects our ethno-cultural world, only one that shows our story as negative.

Gimbu's belief that some educators in the school are miseducating MC children was shared by Vice Principal Carlos and four other teachers interviewed. For example, one day while walking in the courtyard, Carlos pulled us to the side shaking his head. We asked him if we had done something wrong, he said no and continued, "...she (the MC math teacher) is a problem. You see, she is, how do I say this honestly...an Oreo, like the cookie." We looked at Carlos befuddled for two reasons. First, we did not know what he meant by an Oreo and second, we were on our way to observe her teaching and then interview her. We asked him to explain what he meant by "Oreo." He shared,

She was born here in MC, but she left when she was an adolescent and moved to a larger city. There she adopted her European identity and different mentality. She knows how we think and operate, but she wants our children to be more like white people. The way she speaks is like a white person, but I know she uses our pedagogy. You see, sometimes the people who look like us aren't one of us and although she is black on the outside like an Oreo, she is all white on the inside.

We asked Carlos if he believed that the teacher of which he spoke was anti-black and he responded, "I don't know, but I know she is pro-white." Carlos' comments penetrated us deeply. We did not want to enter the math teacher's class unfocused because of Carlos' comments, hence, we took a 20-min break. Once we were ready, we entered the classroom for observation.

Within her classroom, all the walls in the classroom were painted white, and three of the four walls contained paintings of European scientists and mathematicians. As we scanned the walls, we saw hand-painted images of Galileo, Aristotle, Pythagoras, Einstein, Hawkins, Newton, Darwin, and others. The only images on the walls were those of Europeans. When we entered the classroom, the teacher glanced in our direction and then continued her instruction. She was talking to the students about their work ethic and the need for more motivation on their parts. After her 3-min speech, she continued her math lesson. After the class, we approached the teacher and asked her about the images on the wall. We wanted to know if the paintings were done by her and what criteria were used to decide who would be painted on the wall. She shared that she paid someone to paint the walls and she alone was responsible for selecting the people painted. She went further to explain that the people painted were the most important historical and contemporary contributors to science and math. We responded by asking, "We noticed you do not have any African or Black people on the wall, have they not made major contributions?" She responded, "not as significant as the men on the wall." We then asked her if any black scientists or mathematicians would be painted on the classroom walls in the future and she responded, "possibly." We then spoke about the idea that it was important for Black children to see images of Black scientists and mathematicians, and she responded saying, "it is important for them to see important people and those that have done the most important work, and Black people haven't made the impact that White people have made."

After observing and interviewing the teacher, Carlos approached us and said, "she is an Oreo right?" One of us looked at Carlos and replied to him, "that is for you to

decide.” Carlos responded, “I have, and we all know that even though she is Afro Colombian by blood, she is not MC in mind.” Carlos’ sentiment about some educators working in the school not being good for the school or community was supported by other participants. The vice-principal shared that the community and many MC teachers do not trust the (non-MC) principal. He shared that the principal was forced on the community due to national government policy and that every 5 years, a new principal is placed at the school. In the past, MC School has had Black principals, but the majority have been white. Vice Principal Carlos stated,

Sometimes the government wants to be superior and to continue with colonialism. Now we have a white principal who doesn’t understand us. This school was born from the idea of the MC people, the government never wanted it for the people. Every five years we get a new principal and the current principal has been in place for three years and she has done nothing for the community. We have teachers and a principal who are not for us and they are here because of the politics of the system.

MC is engaged in a continuous process of reconstructing their culture, which has been under attack since the village was first created in 1610. MC Maroons believe the school plays a major role in reconstructing cultural elements and instilling MC identity. Within MC School, language, socialization processes such as rituals, Kuagros, and mandates related to behavior, mural creation, and pedagogy are used as mediums to teach culture and restore lost cultural elements.

Contrary to the government’s mandate, MC educators said that MC history and culture should be known by all teachers working in the school. Non-Maroon teachers working in the school acknowledged that they had opportunities to increase their familiarity with MC history and culture by attending community events or learning from MC educators or elders. Educators at MC school said that several teachers and administrators needed to be removed from the school because they were not interested in learning or advancing MC history and culture and were in direct opposition to community objectives.

Our findings represent the notions and ideas formed, advanced, and conferred by teachers, a school leader, and a board member operating within the MC school system. In the section above, we discussed core themes introduced by MC educators, and we shared findings related to the research questions. In the next section, we analyze and discuss the findings, and offer recommendations for policy, practice, and future research.

## Discussion and Implications

MC community uses cultural and educational practices to teach and reach MC children. The cultural and educational practices they wish to imbue their children with come from Africa, have been maintained for more than 400 years in MC, and connect MC Maroons to African epistemology. Cultural practices such as placing children in Kuagros, speaking MC language, exposing children to African-based pedagogies and using an African worldview to understand the world are natural

practices for MC Maroons because their preferred practices provide the theoretical, conceptual, and practical understandings they use to live in an African way. The findings reveal the MC Maroons' attempts to embed significant parts of their cultural framework into all aspects of their children's education and attempts to socialize them—including what happens in MC school. MC Maroon culture represents inherited ideas, philosophies, and ways of being that can be traced back to Africa. Moreover, the MC Maroons' cultural inheritance, including those mentioned above, has been the life-sustaining sustenance upon which they have established their institutions (e.g., family, politics, marriage). Hence, MC institutions must be aligned with the cultural philosophies of their people so that MC Maroons can act in the same ways as their ancestors which includes advancing African culture within MC. MC School has both teachers and administrators who practice/understand their African culture and MC teachers who advance concepts such as the racial hierarchy, African inferiority, and Eurocentrism. The existence of both in the same space indicates that they are engaged in a cultural war within the school. Yet, the MC community's mandate for MC School to be rooted in African ideals and cultural practices to support the MC Maroon way of life has not been realized. In many ways, MC School falls short of the community's mandate because, within the school, MC children are often taught anti-MC ideas, and they are exposed to African culture inconsistently. What may offer this community some hope is that MC Community uses cultural and educational practices to teach and reach MC children outside of the school walls to help enrich children's experiences to address miseducation and make up for some of the inconsistency.

MC culture is disrupted in MC School by teachers and administrators who use non-MC educational and cultural practices within the school. We define cultural disruption as the intentional or unintentional interference of the cultural practices, languages, value systems, motifs, and worldview of African groups through the systematic restriction of African agency. The concept of reAfricanization represents those attempts which seek to (re)adopt and implement African cultural practices and perspectives into one's life. Based on the findings, we recommend that all educators working at MC School increase their awareness and use of MC culture and cultural practices and infuse what is learned into their pedagogy and into classroom curricula. That may best be accomplished by developing mandatory professional developments that teach MC history, culture, pedagogy, and other African cultural concepts pertinent to working with children of African descent in ways that are consistent with the desires of the MC community.

What is evident from the findings is that MC has the human capital (e.g., elders, teachers, community leaders) to work closely with educators to develop their pedagogy and expose them to African ideas, practices, and knowledge systems. Capacity and knowledge building must be prioritized at MC school to ensure that all educators are assisting in the process of cultural reconstruction. Professional development can serve as a mechanism to facilitate such growth.

The findings from this study illustrate that the MC Maroons must seek community control of the educational institutions within their community and create self-interested policies if they desire for their cultural practices and ways of knowing to be a large part of what is taught and celebrated in the school.



Within MC School, many of the educators are operating with divergent agendas. Some staff instruct and administer using styles that do not come from an African-centered perspective, while others do African-based strategies. Based on the findings, we recommend MC Maroons seek to control all aspects of the school, starting with the selection of teachers, administrators, the curriculum, uniforms, subject areas for study, and assessments. Perhaps MC community control of all aspect of the school will create their expressed desire for more cultural consistency and congruency between all institutions (e.g., family, school, politics) in MC.

The findings from this study indicate the need for inquiry into how institutionalized Colombian school policies and practices disrupt MC community, its institutional, and cultural goals. Future researchers should consider conducting an ethnographic study on the experiences of non-Maroon teachers working at MC School. A study of that sort could begin to inform researchers about the challenges experienced by teachers who are teaching in a different cultural context. The experiences of non-Maroon teachers may offer ways to better support Black educators working in public schools in Colombia and other places where there is a cultural mismatch between the teacher, the school, and the broader community.

## Recommendations

In the US context, the education students receive in public educational settings is part and parcel of the larger culture just as it is in Colombia. The cultural worldviews and socio-academic approaches from African and other non-Western societies are rarely if ever referenced in the USA because they are inconsistent with mainstream European-American-based pedagogical approaches. The findings of this study reveal that schools in culturally and linguistically diverse nations such as the USA should consider providing culturally centered and affirming learning contexts for diverse groups of children. Furthermore, this study reveals that for Black children, approaches to schooling must include input from the community and should also be rooted in some precepts from African cultural groups. In that sense, educators should have some basic knowledge about the African part of African American culture, and that knowledge should be transmitted to children of African descent.

## Conclusion

In this study, we examined a Maroon educational institution in our attempt to address the educational issues being faced by Black students in the USA. We advocate for an African-centered education for Black youth, and we believe that since the Maroons have established a successful community, we are able to learn from them and we should study their context more since they are producing successful Black children and adults. In our efforts, we found that the unity between the school and the community creates a supportive atmosphere in which an authentic culturally

responsive society is created. Although their society faces major challenges, they are still able to maintain a positive functioning society because the elders are the backbone of the community. Elders are sought after both formally and informally to address important matters within both the village and the school, and because of that way of functioning, they are able to create a mostly unified society. In our context in the USA, while the social arrangements are different, the elders should be more central—they should not simply be thought of as “old people.” The Maroons see themselves as “luchadors,” or “unstoppable fighters” always working to defend and maintain their communities. They never lose sight of the cultural war being waged by the government which threatens their existence. In our context in the USA, Black youth need Black adults who also understand the cultural war being waged against Black communities, and they need for adult members of the Black community to fight for them in the same spirit as the Maroon luchadors. Considering the failure of the educational system to reach Black youth, there should be more of an effort to examine models of education and community that work for Black children, but instead, efforts that have continuously fallen short or fully failed appear to be preferred.

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