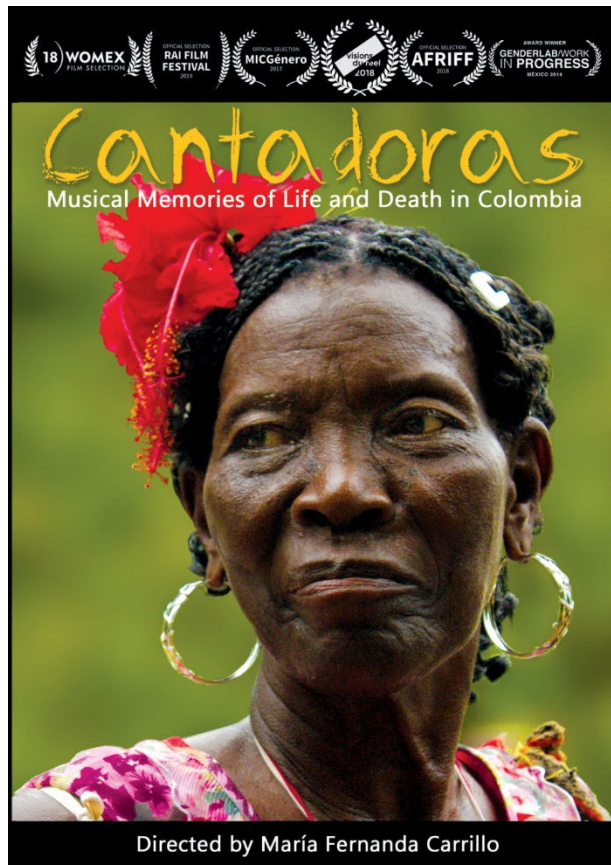




CANTADORAS MUSICAL MEMORIES OF LIFE AND DEATH IN COLOMBIA



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Cantadoras: Musical Memories of Life and Death in Colombia

Cantadoras is about five Afro-Colombian women living in the Pacific and Caribbean regions of Colombia. The word *Cantadoras* refers to women who compose and sing traditional Colombian songs influenced by African roots. Through these songs they share their experiences, which include stories of violence and other hardships, but also expressions of strength and dignity.

About Colombia

The Republic of Colombia—often referred to simply as Colombia—is a country in northwestern South America. Colombia borders Panama, Venezuela, Brazil, Peru, and Ecuador. It is the only country in South America to have coastlines on both the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea. Colombia is the continent’s fourth largest country, and one of its most populous. The majority of its people live in the northern and western parts of the county, while southern and eastern Colombia consists primarily of grassland and is less populated.ⁱ

Colombia has a population of about 48 million people. Spanish is its official language. The population is about 84 percent mestizo (mixed race) and white, 10.4 percent Afro-Colombian, and 3.4 percent Amerindian.ⁱⁱ The Washington, DC Embassy of Colombia reports that overall there are 85 different ethnic groups in Colombia.ⁱⁱⁱ



Inequality

Inequality has been a major feature of life in Colombia for years. A report by *BBC News* explains that the country is rich in natural resources. However, it adds, “It also has a highly stratified society where the traditionally rich families of Spanish descent have benefited from this wealth to a far greater degree than the majority mixed-race population.”^{iv} The result is a high level of inequality, where a small number of people control most of the country’s wealth, which a large percentage of the population lives in poverty.

Part of the inequality in Colombia is revealed in the country’s uneven distribution of land. The charitable organization Oxfam reports that the biggest one percent of landholdings control 81 percent of the land, while the remaining 19 percent is distributed between the other 99 percent of Colombia’s farms.^v Income inequality is also extreme in Colombia. According to the CIA’s *World Factbook*, Colombia is one of the worst places in the world for income inequality. Overall, more than one-third of the people in Colombia live below the poverty line.^{vi} Opportunity International, an organization that works to end extreme poverty, reports that more than 12 and a half million people in Colombia live on less than \$2 a day.^{vii}

Violence

Many of Colombia’s people also regularly encounter armed violence. Violence has been a feature of life in Colombia for more than fifty years. The country’s ongoing conflict involves numerous groups fighting for power. These groups include the government, drug traffickers and other criminal groups, paramilitary groups, and guerilla groups. The Center for Justice & Accountability explains, “Colombia has endured the longest-running internal conflict in the Western Hemisphere. For over 50 years, a triangulated war between guerrillas, paramilitaries, and government forces has resulted in a devastating loss of life.”^{viii}



Much of this loss of life involves ordinary citizens who get caught in the middle of the violence. For example, a 2010 report by *Human Rights Watch* explains the way that paramilitary groups often specifically target civilians. The organization says, “They massacre, kill, rape, torture, and forcibly ‘disappear’ persons who do not follow their orders. They regularly use threats and extortion against members of the communities where they operate, as a way to exert control over local populations. They frequently threaten, and sometimes attack, human rights defenders, trade unionists, journalists, and victims of the AUC [paramilitary organization] who press claims for justice or restitution of land.”^{ix}

The conflict in Colombia has caused the displacement of millions of people and the death and disappearance of hundreds of thousands more. In 2017, the Council on Foreign Relations reported that over the last half century, conflict in Columbia has resulted in the displacement of 5.7 million people.^x This is one of the highest rates of displacement in the world. The *World Factbook* states, “Colombia also has one of the world’s highest levels of forced disappearances. About 30,000 cases have been recorded over the last four decades—although the number is likely to be much higher—including human rights activists, trade unionists, Afro-Colombians, indigenous people, and farmers in rural conflict zones.”^{xi} Indigenous and Afro-Colombian people are affected disproportionately by Colombia’s violence.^{xii}

Continuing Problems

Researchers blame Colombia’s extreme violence on a number of factors. Poverty and inequality are believed to play a role. It is also argued that Colombia’s government has been weak and ineffective, especially in rural areas.^{xiii} Drug trafficking is also believed to play a role. Colombia produces coca—from which cocaine is extracted—and is the world’s leading cultivator of this plant.^{xiv} Drug traffickers have historically been part of the ongoing violent struggles for power throughout Colombia.

In 2016, Colombia’s government signed a peace accord with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the largest insurgent group in the country, and there was widespread optimism that the violence in this nation would finally decrease. However, many Colombians continue to be affected by violence. In 2018, the International Committee of the Red Cross reported that violence was still a serious problem in many parts of the country.^{xv}

Timeline:

- 1525: Spain begins the conquest of Colombia
- 1550: African slaves are brought to Colombia to work on plantations there.
- 1810: Colombia declares its independence from Spain.
- 1819: The Republic of Gran Colombia is created with Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, and Panama.
- 1830: Ecuador and Venezuela leave the Republic.
- 1886: Colombia changes its name to the Republic of Colombia.
- 1899-1903: During civil war known as “The War of a Thousand Days,” more than 100,000 people are killed.
- 1903: Panama separates from Colombia.
- 1948-1958: More than 200,000 people are killed in a period of civil war known as *La Violencia*.
- 1966: Colombia’s largest guerilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), is formed.
- 1984: Peace talks lead to a ceasefire agreement.
- 1987: The ceasefire ends.
- 1996: In its first major kidnapping, the FARC takes sixty Colombian soldiers hostage.
- 2002: The United States and Colombia launch an anti-drug strategy called “Plan Colombia.” Guerrillas kidnap presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt, and she is held prisoner for six years.
- 2011: Alfonso Cano, a top commander within the FARC is killed by the Colombian army.
- 2012: New Peace Talks are initiated.
- 2016: The Colombian government signs a peace accord with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).

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FOOTNOTES:

- i <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/co.html>
- ii <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/co.html>
- iii <https://www.colombiaemb.org/overview>
- iv <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-19390026>
- v <https://blogs.oxfam.org/en/blogs/17-07-06-colombias-challenge-addressing-land-inequality-consolidating-peace/>
- vi <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/co.html>
- vii <https://opportunity.org/what-we-do/where-we-work/colombia-facts-about-poverty>
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