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Embodying Resistance Through Ritual and Identity in the Afro-Colombian Currulao Dance Tradition

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Abstract

This paper explores Currulao, an Afro-Colombian dance tradition from the Pacific coast, as a site of embodied resistance, ancestral memory, and cultural sovereignty. Far from being a static folkloric form, Currulao operates as a dynamic archive of Black survival, where rhythm, ritual, and territory intersect. Drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives from performance studies, African diaspora theory, and ethnography, the study examines how Currulao encodes histories of colonial violence while simultaneously enabling contemporary acts of political and cultural reclamation. Through attention to sonic structures, gendered embodiment, territorial choreography, and transnational adaptation, the paper argues that Currulao is not only a cultural expression but a form of kinetic knowledge. In the face of displacement, commodification, and systemic marginalization, Afro-Colombian dancers mobilize Currulao as a space of refusal—where identity is not only remembered but performed. Ultimately, the dance offers a decolonial model of cultural continuity and transformation, where sovereignty is sensed through rhythm, and resistance is choreographed through joy, care, and ancestral invocation.

Keywords: Afro-Colombian dance, Currulao, embodied resistance, cultural sovereignty, ritual performance, African diaspora, Black geographies

1. Introduction

In the dense rainforests and riverine towns along Colombia's Pacific coast, the Currulao dance tradition endures as a living expression of Afro-descendant resilience, memory, and identity. More than a performative genre, Currulao functions as a cultural continuum—a sustained embodiment of communal values, ancestral knowledge, and historical survival in a region long marked by marginalization and extractive economies. Predominantly practiced in departments such as Chocó, Valle del Cauca, and Nariño, the Currulao is woven into everyday life: from religious observances and funerary rites to public festivals, village gatherings, and diasporic return rituals.

Rooted in the transatlantic legacies of African displacement and reinvention, Currulao traces its origins to Bantu-speaking groups brought to the Colombian Pacific during the colonial era. Its rhythmic structures and call-and-response singing styles preserve spiritual and sonic frameworks that resist cultural erasure. The use of traditional instruments such as the *marimba de chonta*, *cununo*, *bombo*, and *guasá* reflects centuries of adaptation to local materials and

ecosystems while maintaining African epistemologies of sound and collective expression.

As a dance, Currulao articulates a community's sense of place and belonging through synchronized footwork, spiraled gestures, and fluid exchanges between male and female performers. Movements are not merely aesthetic; they encode cosmologies, courtship customs, territorial belonging, and generational teachings. In village contexts, dance rehearsals double as sites of socialization, oral history transmission, and moral education. In this way, Currulao is less a bounded performance and more a cultural infrastructure, sustaining black life in the face of infrastructural neglect.

Importantly, Currulao has survived despite systemic exclusion of Afro-Colombian communities from national narratives of culture and citizenship. Its endurance through centuries of slavery, militarization, and neoliberal abandonment signals not only cultural resilience but also a political stance: an embodied refusal to disappear. Today, the dance continues to evolve, finding expression in urban folkloric groups, classroom pedagogies, and international festivals—yet it remains anchored in the coastal communities whose histories and futures it continues to animate.

2. Ritual Time, Ancestral Memory, and Sonic Structure

2.1 The Symbolic Function of Marimba, Cununo, and Guasá Instruments

Currulao is not merely heard; it is lived through the body. The core of its sonic landscape is built from a triadic interplay of the *marimba de chonta*, *cununo* drums, and *guasá* rattles, each of which carries both symbolic and functional resonance within Afro-Colombian ritual life. These instruments are not simply musical tools but sonic agencies—cultural technologies through which memory, power, and cosmological relations are activated. Their sounds are imbued with spiritual significance, believed by many communities to summon ancestral presences, purify ritual space, and recalibrate bodily energy.

The *marimba de chonta*, with its resonant wooden keys and natural gourds or bamboo resonators, serves as the melodic anchor of Currulao. The construction of the marimba itself is a ritualized process, often involving careful selection of *chonta* palm wood and ceremonial cleansing before use. In performance, the marimba's cascading pentatonic tones provide an auditory environment that is both repetitive and modulating, producing what some scholars describe as circular soundscapes. These sonic cycles echo not only African musical idioms but also local river flows, bird calls, and forest rhythms—positioning the dance as a form of eco-sonic embodiment (Ochoa Gautier, 2014).

Supporting the marimba are the *cununo* and *bombo* drums—two percussive voices that alternate between dialogue and grounding. The *cununo* typically provides syncopated accents, while the *bombo* lays down a steady pulse that anchors dancers' footwork. The *guasá*—a shaker made from dried gourds filled with native seeds—completes the rhythm section with a textured, almost breathing quality. Many dancers and musicians describe this sound as the voice of the earth or the whispers of the dead. Together, these instruments create not only rhythm but ritual affect, a sonic environment that facilitates altered states of consciousness and social cohesion.

In the context of Afro-Colombian spirituality—heavily influenced by African diasporic cosmologies such as Palo Monte and ancestor veneration—sound is not neutral. The playing of these instruments, especially during extended community rituals like *velorios* or *fiestas patronales*, is said to "clear the road" (*abrir el camino*) for spirits to enter the human world. Such practices speak to a belief in the porousness of ritual space, where sound bridges the visible and invisible. The instruments of Currulao thus function as ritual agents, shaping what Victor Turner might call "communitas" by dissolving social hierarchies through shared rhythmic immersion.

2.2 Ritual Choreography and Its Cyclical Temporality

Currulao choreography does not conform to Western conventions of climax, progression, or narrative resolution. Rather, it unfolds within what ritual theorist Catherine Bell (1992) would call a ritual frame—a performative space governed by repetition, transformation, and symbolic condensation. Dancers, usually arranged in circular, lateral, or mirrored pairs, engage in sequences that loop rather than conclude. These cycles mirror cosmologies where time is not linear but layered, spiral, and iterative—a quality shared by many

African-derived traditions across the Americas.

The temporality of Currulao emerges not only from movement but from its alignment with musical structure. The marimba's looping phrases allow dancers to enter what could be called rhythmic trance: a mode of presence where attention is decentralized, and memory is accessed not through words but through step, posture, and muscle. Dancers describe this experience as "dejando que el cuerpo escuche"—letting the body do the listening. It is in these moments that dancers become mediums of history, not merely interpreting past trauma but living it in real time through somatic re-enactment.

Currulao events, particularly in rural or ritual contexts, often extend for many hours or even overnight. The duration itself is meaningful, as fatigue gives way to altered perception and collective endurance. These extended sessions shift Currulao from being a social dance into being a ritual technology—a system for accessing what Paul Gilroy (1993) called the "diasporic double consciousness," where multiple temporalities and positionalities coexist. The choreography, in this sense, is less about steps and more about sustaining presence in the face of historical displacement.

2.3 Dance as Invocation of Ancestral Presence

In the Afro-Pacific cosmologies that shape Currulao practice, the body is not a vessel to be transcended, but a sacred archive—a moving archive of memory, loss, and return. Dancers carry stories in their hips, knees, and shoulders; these are not merely anatomical expressions but spiritual channels. The notion of "dancing with the ancestors" is not metaphorical but literal for many performers who claim to feel ancestral guidance during ritual movement. This is particularly visible in community events such as *novenarios* (nine-day mourning periods), where dance is central to honoring the dead and guiding spirits into the afterlife.

These embodied invocations are particularly intense when dancers reach a state of ritual resonance with the music, often marked by synchronized breath, sweat, and gaze. The dancer's body in these moments transcends individuality and becomes what Yvonne Daniel (2005) might call a "kinesthetic archive"—holding historical trauma and intergenerational resistance through movement. Rather than erase pain, Currulao encodes it, giving form to unspeakable pasts through rhythm, repetition, and symbolic gesture.

The experience of being "mounted" by ancestral presence—a concept found across African diasporic religions such as Vodun, Candomblé, and Palo—is echoed in Currulao's extended dances. While the community may not always label it possession in theological terms, the bodily phenomena—shaking, altered gaze, increased tempo—are recognized signs of spiritual encounter. These moments are accepted, even expected, within the cultural logic of Currulao, and signal that the ritual has fulfilled its purpose: not entertainment, but communion.

In this frame, dance becomes not only a political act but an ontological one. It reclaims black embodiment from colonial pathologization and repositions it as sacred, knowledgeable, and sovereign. Currulao's dance language—through hips that speak, feet that echo, and arms that invoke—is a grammar of survival. It transmits what was not written, and it does so with authority.

3. Blackness, Territory, and the Body as Archive

3.1 Movement as Territorial Reclamation in Postcolonial Landscapes

Currulao emerges not only as a choreographic tradition but as a spatial practice—a way of inhabiting, reclaiming, and re-signifying the territories that Afro-Colombian communities have historically occupied along the Pacific coast. In regions like Nariño and Chocó, where ancestral land titles are still contested and often under threat from state-backed extraction, paramilitary violence, and ecological displacement, dance becomes a tactic of emplacement. Through footwork and spatial formations, dancers inscribe presence into land that has been mapped out of legal or urban visibility.

Dancing Currulao is thus an act of territorial resistance. It asserts "we are still here" against a background of land dispossession and extractivist development. Particularly in rural contexts, dance stages are set on dirt floors, riverbanks, and cleared communal spaces—sites imbued with both memory and survival. The choreographic pattern, which often involves advancing toward and retreating from a partner, can also be read as a metaphor for the push and pull between forced displacement and ancestral rootedness. In this reading, the stage is not neutral; it is a terrain of memory, contested yet

claimed through the act of dancing.

Territoriality in Currulao is not abstract—it is linked to specific geographies: river crossings, mangrove edges, fishing routes. The dancer's movement does not just happen on the land; it happens with the land, echoing a broader Afro-diasporic ethic that sees land not as a commodity but as kin. Currulao thus becomes a choreography of place-making, where rhythm and territory converge to reassert black geographies in a postcolonial state.

3.2 Riverine Geographies and Ecological Embodiment

The Pacific coast of Colombia is shaped by water: vast river systems like the San Juan, Baudó, and Atrato form the lifeblood of Afro-descendant communities, guiding their economic practices, seasonal cycles, and spiritual beliefs. Currulao, as a tradition born from and with this ecology, reflects an aquatic epistemology—a way of knowing shaped by tides, currents, and humidity. Dancers often mimic the flow of water in their gestures: smooth shoulder rolls, undulating hips, and gliding footwork evoke the rhythms of the river and the ocean. This ecological embodiment situates Currulao not only in the forest, but in the water that surrounds and sustains it.

Beyond aesthetics, such movement articulates a relational politics of environment, distinct from Western environmentalism. In Afro-Colombian frameworks, the body is not separate from its environment; it is a continuation of it. When dancers perform Currulao, they do so not just on the land but as the land. The sensuality of the dance—the wet skin, the barefoot steps, the swaying waist—does not exoticize nature, but affirms the body's entwinement with it. It transforms dance into a form of environmental testimony, countering narratives that depict black communities as either ecological victims or passive inhabitants.

This ecological perspective is further emphasized in ritual Currulao performances conducted during river-based ceremonies, such as *lavado de muertos* (washing of the dead) or *bautismos de agua* (water baptisms). These moments blend movement, music, and nature into a single performative ecosystem. The choreography is not imposed upon the environment but emerges from it. Currulao, in this sense, is both an ecological practice and a political one—mobilizing the aesthetics of the river to affirm Afro-Colombian claims to place, dignity, and sustainability.

3.3 Dance as Memory Inscription and Historical Survival

Currulao not only tells a story—it remembers a history that was forcibly erased. In a national context where Afro-Colombian experiences have long been marginalized, the dance becomes a counter-archive, preserving what colonial documents could not or would not record. The body becomes the medium of transmission, and movement becomes its language. Foot patterns recall migration paths, torso movements echo boat rowing, and call-and-response songs contain coded references to survival strategies during enslavement.

In this way, Currulao performs what Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) calls "silences in history": the absences, the gaps, the things never written but always lived. Each dancer, particularly elders and community maestros, serves as a living library, whose gestures encode decades, even centuries, of political and cultural navigation. These bodily narratives challenge state-sanctioned versions of Colombian identity that have long privileged mestizaje while erasing the black and indigenous contributions to the nation.

Moreover, Currulao allows for the simultaneity of pain and joy, a hallmark of black expressive culture across the diaspora. In the same breath, the dance can mourn and celebrate, resist and heal. The steps—measured, weighted, rhythmic—carry the burden of displacement, but they also release it into collective rhythm. In doing so, Currulao generates a space of historical intimacy, where the act of dancing together becomes an act of memory justice.

Through Currulao, history is not something to be studied in archives or museums—it is something to be felt, sweated out, repeated, and shared. The dance thus reclaims not only bodily presence but historical authority. It affirms that the black body, long treated as a site of labor and violence, is also a site of profound knowledge and resistance.

4. Gendered Expressions and Embodied Matriarchy

4.1 Female Leadership in Choreography and Transmission

Although Currulao is often perceived through the lens of heteronormative partner dance—with men and women engaging in flirtatious

exchanges—such a reading overlooks the central role that women play as cultural bearers, choreographers, and spiritual leaders within the Afro-Colombian Currulao tradition. In many communities across the Pacific, particularly in Guapi, Timbiquí, and Tumaco, it is elder women—often referred to as *matronas*—who organize dance rehearsals, lead marimba ensembles, and determine the ritual content of performances. Their authority is not derived from formal institutions but from embodied experience, genealogical knowledge, and communal trust.

This female leadership is particularly visible in the domestic and communal spaces where Currulao is taught. Girls learn dance steps by mimicking mothers and grandmothers during household chores or festival preparation, with no need for formal instruction. This form of transmission reflects what feminist anthropologist Diana Taylor (2003) calls "the repertoire"—a mode of embodied knowledge transfer that exists outside of written archives and legitimizes affective, tactile, and intergenerational pedagogies. In this repertoire, women are not passive carriers of culture but active architects of memory and style.

Moreover, in many Currulao groups, the role of the lead singer—often called the *cantadora*—is held by an older woman whose voice both directs the musicians and mediates the spiritual atmosphere of the event. These women hold the power to improvise verses that reference personal grief, community struggles, or even political critique—wrapped in poetic form. As such, their leadership transcends choreography and enters the realm of communal storytelling and social intervention, reaffirming matriarchal authority not only in dance but in cultural discourse.

4.2 Currulao as a Space for Embodied Care and Resistance

The dance floor in Currulao is not simply a space for aesthetic expression or entertainment—it is a terrain of care, where gendered bodies reassert presence through softness, strength, and relational movement. Female dancers often deploy gestures that simultaneously communicate sensuality, labor, and community rhythm: swaying hips echoing the rhythm of pounding rice, balancing shoulders recalling the posture of carrying water, and focused gazes asserting agency rather than submission. These gestures do not conform to colonial models of femininity; rather, they articulate a black feminist praxis rooted in daily survival and celebration.

In this context, Currulao becomes a dance of embodied resistance. It refutes the hyper-sexualized or exoticized portrayals of Afro-descendant women that dominate national media and tourism. Instead, it offers an affirmative space where black women's bodies are central—not as spectacle, but as source. Through repetition, grounded posture, and muscular control, female dancers convey dignity and vitality without needing to adhere to Western standards of grace or polish.

Furthermore, the bodily configurations in Currulao often reverse the expected gender hierarchies. While male dancers may initiate movement, it is frequently the woman who determines pacing, spatial proximity, and expressive range. Her refusal or acceptance of advances within the dance sequence becomes symbolic of broader negotiations of autonomy, consent, and intersubjectivity. In this sense, Currulao operates as a rehearsal for sovereignty, allowing women to shape relational dynamics in a world that too often denies them such agency.

Ultimately, the Currulao stage—whether in a coastal village square or an urban cultural center—becomes a microcosm of Afro-diasporic matriarchy. It centers bodies that have historically been pushed to the margins and affirms their power not just to survive, but to choreograph the future.

5. Resistance in Motion: Colonial Shadows and Contemporary Frictions

Currulao is not merely a folkloric tradition preserved in time—it is a living act of resistance, continuously reshaped by the tensions between history, territory, and structural inequality. While the dance is often presented in national and international arenas as a vibrant marker of Colombian multiculturalism, this aestheticization often conceals the deep layers of resistance embedded in its rhythm and gesture. For Afro-Colombian communities, particularly along the Pacific littoral, Currulao is not simply a performance. It is an act of refusal—a refusal to be erased, commodified, or rendered silent in the face of enduring colonial logics.

The dance itself emerged from conditions of racialized dispossession. Enslaved Africans and their descendants developed Currulao not only

as a mode of survival, but as a coded language through which cultural memory could be preserved under watchful colonial eyes. The very structure of Currulao—the call-and-response singing, the coded lyrics, the complex footwork—functioned as a cultural cipher. Through gesture and rhythm, dancers negotiated identity, kinship, and defiance, even within systems of violent surveillance.

In today's Colombia, the colonial shadow persists in the form of territorial extraction, systemic underinvestment in black communities, and symbolic exclusion from the national imagination. Currulao continues to carry the weight of these historical injustices, but it also transforms them. Through its communal embodiment, the dance enacts what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o calls "decolonization of the mind"—but here it is through the body. The body, once marked as property or labor, now performs sovereignty.

Yet, Currulao's resistant power is not static. It navigates a complex and sometimes contradictory relationship with the state and market. On one hand, national cultural institutions now promote Currulao as part of a multicultural brand, funding festivals and educational initiatives. On the other hand, this visibility often comes at the cost of contextual erasure—where Currulao is stripped of its political force and recast as exotic entertainment. Afro-Colombian performers frequently confront the pressure to sanitize their traditions for touristic or institutional consumption, diluting the oppositional grammar that gives Currulao its enduring power.

These frictions are further exacerbated by internal community tensions. In urban centers like Cali and Bogotá, where displaced Afro-Colombians attempt to sustain Currulao amidst poverty and xenophobia, debates have emerged over authenticity, appropriation, and the limits of performance. Can Currulao be adapted to contemporary stages without losing its soul? Who controls the narrative of its transmission? These are not merely aesthetic questions—they are political ones, asking whose history gets preserved, who is allowed to speak through dance, and under what conditions.

Despite these challenges, Currulao persists as a kinetic archive of resistance. Its choreography is neither naive nor neutral. It is tactical, encoded, and alive. In each step, the dancer invokes centuries of survival, transforming repetition into resilience. In each beat of the marimba, there is a counter-beat to empire. In each turn of the body, there is a turn away from silence and toward sovereign movement. Currulao may exist within the cracks of the nation-state, but it expands them, reminding us that black freedom does not always march—it dances.

6. Transmission and Transformation across Generations

Currulao survives not simply because it is beautiful, but because it is transmitted—from grandmother to granddaughter, from village to city, from coastal rivers to international stages. The dance lives within and beyond bodies, reshaped by generations of Afro-Colombian knowledge-keepers who have ensured its persistence despite displacement, urbanization, and cultural commodification. This transmission is neither linear nor neutral; it is always affected by historical rupture, socio-economic pressure, and creative adaptation.

In rural communities such as Tumaco, López de Micay, and Guapi, Currulao is still taught informally, through embodied repetition, household play, and community festivals. Children learn the dance not through choreography sheets but through watching, mimicking, and being watched. These intergenerational exchanges carry ethical as well as aesthetic value. The elders who lead rehearsals are not merely dance instructors—they are guardians of rhythm, memory, and place. Their authority is built not on institutional certification but on lived experience, ritual literacy, and community trust. In this context, learning Currulao is not just learning steps—it is learning how to live Black, with dignity and joy, in a world that devalues both.

Yet, this system of transmission has increasingly come under pressure. Migration to urban centers, the growth of public arts education, and the rise of digital platforms have transformed how Currulao is learned, performed, and understood. In cities like Cali, Medellín, and Bogotá, Afro-Colombian youth are often taught Currulao in schools, cultural centers, or university workshops—settings that introduce standardized forms, theatrical conventions, and pedagogical hierarchies unfamiliar to village-based practice. While these programs can offer visibility and mobility, they also risk

flattening Currulao into a codified performance genre, severed from its ritual and territorial contexts.

This urbanization of Currulao has given rise to creative tensions. On one hand, younger dancers reimagine Currulao through fusion with hip-hop, contemporary dance, and experimental theatre. These innovations allow the form to speak to modern realities—violence, precarity, diaspora—while still holding onto its Afro-Pacific essence. On the other hand, elders and tradition-bearers often worry about the loss of depth, warning that rhythm without context is choreography without memory. This dialectic—between fidelity and innovation, continuity and rupture—mirrors the broader struggles of Afro-diasporic cultural survival.

Technology has also complicated transmission. YouTube videos, TikTok clips, and Instagram reels have enabled Currulao to travel far beyond Colombia's borders, inspiring dancers in Brazil, the United States, and Europe. Yet, in its digitized form, Currulao is often reduced to movement patterns devoid of ancestral codes. The relational energy between dancer, drummer, and community—central to the dance's ritual power—is difficult to reproduce through screens.

Despite these frictions, the adaptability of Currulao is its strength. It is not a relic, but a rhythm that changes without breaking. It can survive the migration from riverbank to studio, from ritual to stage, because it is rooted in the body's ability to remember, resist, and reimagine. For each generation, Currulao offers a language of movement that speaks of survival without apology. It tells young dancers that they are not alone, that their feet are not just instruments of grace but vehicles of history, and that through dance, they can claim space in a nation that often denies their presence.

Currulao does not fear change—it dances with it. In doing so, it ensures that Afro-Colombian identity remains not only remembered but re-performed, one generation at a time.

7. Currulao in Diaspora and Global Performance Circuits

Currulao has always been a dance of movement—between bodies, across rivers, and increasingly across borders. In the past two decades, as Afro-Colombian communities have migrated to major cities within Colombia and beyond, Currulao has traveled with them, transforming into a diasporic cultural practice that is both rooted and mobile, traditional and reinvented. Its rhythms now echo in neighborhoods of Cali and Medellín, but also in community centers in Madrid, festivals in New York, and Afro-Latinx collectives in São Paulo. With each relocation, Currulao enters new stages—geographic, political, and performative—raising questions of authenticity, appropriation, and cultural sovereignty.

In the Colombian diaspora, particularly among Afro-Colombian migrants displaced by conflict or seeking economic opportunity, Currulao becomes a bridge to belonging. For families navigating unfamiliar landscapes and systemic exclusion, performing Currulao in plazas, parks, or immigrant rights events functions as both affirmation and refusal: a way to assert Black cultural identity while resisting the homogenizing forces of exile. In this context, dance becomes survival—not in a folkloric sense, but as a means of preserving dignity and coherence across ruptured geographies.

At the same time, Currulao has entered global circuits of performance—world music festivals, multicultural showcases, academic symposiums, and digital archives. International demand for "authentic" Afro-Colombian expression has created new opportunities for professionalization, especially for groups based in urban centers. Choreographed Currulao pieces are now performed on formal stages, complete with lighting design, costume stylization, and narrative arcs tailored to foreign audiences. While this global visibility brings recognition and economic benefit, it also comes at a cost: the risk of cultural compression, where complex spiritual and territorial meanings are flattened into consumable spectacle.

Many dancers and cultural leaders express concern about the aestheticization of resistance—where Currulao is celebrated for its beauty while its political and historical dimensions are ignored. In some cases, government-backed cultural diplomacy promotes Currulao abroad as part of Colombia's multicultural image, even as Afro-Pacific communities back home continue to face neglect, violence, and displacement. This dissonance reflects what performance theorist Diana Taylor (2003) describes as "the politics of display"—where who gets to perform, for whom, and under what conditions becomes a matter of national branding rather than cultural

justice.

Yet, within the diaspora and global stage, Currulao also opens spaces for transformation and re-signification. Afro-descendant dancers in New York, Barcelona, and Buenos Aires have begun fusing Currulao with other black diasporic forms—Afrobeat, samba, hip-hop, rumba—creating hybrid expressions that speak to contemporary experiences of race, migration, and memory. These experimental forms are not betrayals of tradition; they are acts of diasporic authorship, where cultural inheritance is neither static nor sacred, but a living archive in motion.

In these cross-border adaptations, the core principles of Currulao remain: collective rhythm, embodied knowledge, intergenerational transmission. Whether danced on a dirt floor in Tumaco or a university auditorium in Berlin, Currulao insists on Black presence—not as object, but as agent. It is a rhythm that remembers, resists, and remakes the world across languages, borders, and bodies.

8. Rhythms of Refusal: Toward a Politics of Embodied Cultural Sovereignty

Currulao, in its many forms and evolutions, embodies more than rhythm—it embodies refusal. A refusal to be silenced, to be reduced, to be rendered invisible within the colonial and national orders that have long excluded Afro-Colombian life. In the hips of a grandmother, in the voice of a *cantadora*, in the calloused feet of a teenager dancing barefoot at dusk, Currulao carries a politics that does not require manifesto—it is articulated through motion, gesture, and breath.

At its core, Currulao asserts a claim to cultural sovereignty—not merely the right to preserve tradition, but the power to define, reconfigure, and transmit culture on one's own terms. This sovereignty is not granted by the state nor recognized by cultural institutions. It is performed, daily, on community stages, school yards, riverbanks, and city streets. In this sense, Currulao offers a model of resistance not grounded in protest alone, but in presence: to dance, visibly and unapologetically, is to refuse erasure.

This politics is deeply embodied. While legislative frameworks and ethnic recognition laws have offered Afro-Colombian communities limited protections, it is in performance—particularly in dance—that true autonomy is felt and enacted. Currulao enables a mode of knowing and being that transcends written discourse. It speaks the language of collective memory, of territory held in movement, of cosmology carried in cadence. In Currulao, sovereignty is not only about land or law—it is about rhythm.

Yet, this sovereignty is fragile. As neoliberal forces seek to commodify Black culture, and as urbanization and displacement continue to reshape Afro-Pacific geographies, Currulao dancers must constantly navigate the line between expression and exploitation. The challenge is not only to preserve the form, but to preserve the context, to ensure that Currulao remains tethered to the histories, spirits, and ecosystems that birthed it.

And still, Currulao dances on. It dances in festivals and funerals, in protests and processions, in the shadow of palm trees and on concrete school stages. It teaches that resistance need not always be loud—sometimes it is syncopated. Sometimes it is slow, deliberate, grounded. Sometimes it is the lift of a hand, the turn of a head, the shared breath of a community moving as one.

In the embodied knowledge of Currulao lies a future—a decolonial, diasporic, Black future—that is not utopian, but possible. A future where sovereignty is not imagined as separation, but as the freedom to dance, to speak, to breathe, and to remember in one's own time and rhythm. Currulao does not ask permission. It opens the circle, and invites the ancestors, the community, and the world to feel what sovereignty sounds like when it moves.

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