

[00:00:00]

Renee Alexander Craft: And for my recorder, one more time please say your name.

[00:00:06]

Andrés Jiménez: Andrés Jiménez

[00:00:08]

RC: And how hold are you?

[00:00:10]

AJ: 69

[00:00:13]

RC: And where were you born? In Portobelo?

[00:00:16]

AJ: Portobelo, yes.

[00:00:18]

RC: Perfect. And you participate in the Congo tradition?

[00:00:24]

AJ: Yes

[00:00:25]

RC: Yes? When did you begin?

[00:00:30]

AJ: Well when I was young I would go see the Congos, the Congos when they danced. And from there ... older people would explain to me about the Congos.

[00:00:43]

RC: OK and did your parents participate?

[00:00:48]

AJ: Yes, but very little. They didn't really like the Congos.

[00:00:52]

RC: Yes? Why not?

[00:00:53]

AJ: Well because, it was at least, the thing with the Congos was not as popular then as it is today.

[00:01:02]

RC: Uh huh!

[00:01:03]

AJ: In those days, the Congos were the people, the lowest people in the village. There was this mistaken concept that the ones who dressed as Congo were the poorest people, the people without culture and all that.

[00:01:25]

RC: Yes

AJ: That was the idea but now that people have studied it more, they see that Congo is a tradition and it is beautiful.

[00:01:38]

RC: Yes, yes and when ... I know a lot of people thought the same as your parents but when did that way of viewing the Congos change?

[00:02:01]

AJ: Well, there are still people that see the Congos that way.

[00:02:06]

RC: For the same reasons or other reasons?

[00:02:08]

AJ: Yes for the same reason ... I don't know ... It's not attractive to them ... yes. They don't feel ... as a custom ... they see the Congos as ridiculousness.

[00:02:30]

RC: OK, I understand. In a few ways, it's similar to, and only in this way, rap in the United States because some people say that rap is a type of poetry. It's more important, super important, to the culture there (United States). But some people say no, it's not important. It's for poor people. The arguments ... Is that the word?

[00:03:15]

AJ: Arguments

[00:03:16]

RC: Arguments are a little similar. Tell me when did it change, when did the Congo dance in Portobelo become more popular. OK. When did the Congo tradition become more popular?

[00:03:39]

AJ: Well the tradition of the Congos became more popular with the construction of the road. People come from other places and they are seeing how they've given a lot of importance to the congo tradition. I don't know why people saw it as something that didn't have importance. At least talk with the elders and have them explain it.

[00:04:12]

RC: Tell me its history, of the tradition.

[00:04:15]

AJ: Well, the Congos are an expression of freedom, as they used to be slaves. When they freed themselves they remained free and they had a king and a queen as a way to make fun of the royal family. It's for that reason that they do everything backwards. Their language is backwards, the clothing backwards. It's all to make fun of the (Spanish) royals. Yes.

[00:04:54]

RC: OK and tell me what is the significance of each of the characters in the tradition? The king. The Queen. The Messenger?

[00:05:05]

AJ: Well, as far as I know, the King is the boss that pulls everything together and is in charge as in everything in the world is directed by him. The same for the Queen. The Queen is named Queen Maria Merced and the King is named Juan de Dioso.

[00:05:24]

RC: And why those names?

[00:05:28]

AJ: Well they say it's in honor of Our Lady of Mercies, as she is the liberator of prisoners.

[00:05:39]

RC: Yes.

[00:05:40]

AJ: You know? So Juan de Dioso gets his name from Saint John.

[00:05:49]

RC: OK. I understand.

[00:05:50]

AJ: He's called Juan de Dioso.

[00:05:52]

RC: OK.

[00:05:53]

AJ: Juan de Dios like a Godly thing to remove bad spirits.

[00:05:58]

RC: OK. And in your life, have you played one of the characters?

[00:06:13]

AJ: No

[00:06:14]

RC: King? Messenger?

[00:06:16]

AJ: No. I've never participated.

[00:06:18]

RC: OK.

[00:06:19]

AJ: I went to see it.

[00:06:20]

RC: Yes?

[00:06:21]

AJ: I went to see it, and I would also dance a little.

[00:06:25]

RC: OK.

[00:06:26]

AJ: But now I hardly ever go. I don't like the way it's been done now.

[00:06:31]

RC: Yes. Tell me why. That's important.

[00:06:32]

AJ: Because before they used to do it early. The kids had the opportunity to dance and see everything until the time came for them to go home and then it would just be the adults. Then, the Congos didn't ask for money. The Congos would do, would do things to make you laugh and have a good time and you would give a voluntary donation and they'd be happy. Because when a Congo comes and makes a joke or does something and you laugh, you give him something freely but when they ask for it, it's bothersome.

[00:07:27]

RC: OK.

[00:07:28]

AJ: Another thing, the Messenger. The Congo shouldn't request it. No. He does his thing, well you as an outsider ...

[00:07:43]

RC: Um hmm.

[00:07:44]

AJ: They come and see the Congos and they take out some such paper reading their codes and their laws or they say that you're bringing in contraband and you laugh and give them whatever but it's bothersome when you go out in the street and they say, "Give me." No.

[00:07:58]

RC: Yes

[00:07:59]

AJ: That's bothersome

[00:08:00]

RC: Yes. I understand exactly.

[00:08:02]

AJ: Yes that's bothersome. Then the women would go out on a Saturday at 4 in the evening going from house to house. Those that wanted would receive them and they would sing a Congo song. If the owner of the house liked to dance he would dance and if not he would give some kind of a donation.

[00:08:30]

RC: OK

[00:08:31]

AJ: And when they finished going around the village they would arrive at the rancho and there they would start to play so the people would come.

[00:08:41]

RC: OK. I want to be sure that I understood that part. I think you told me that the Congo women.

[00:09:02]

AJ: All the Congos.

[00:09:04]

RC: Oh. I thought it was only the women that sang.

[00:09:13]

AJ: Yes.

[00:09:14]

RC: Yes?

[00:09:15]

AJ: Yes, with the Congo men too.

[00:09:16]

RC: Oh. So the women and the men.

[00:09:17]

AJ: Yes.

[00:09:19]

RC: They still do it today or was this only in the past?

[00:09:20]

AJ: In the past. They don't do it now.

[00:09:22]

RC: Yes. Oh, how sweet. When did that part (of the tradition) end?

[00:09:29]

AJ: When the road came.

[00:09:32]

RC: Yes?

[00:09:33]

AJ: Yes when the road came they didn't keep doing that. But before there was a road they would go out from house to house and dance and enjoy themselves. Enjoy themselves a lot. And during the four nights of carnival the Congos wouldn't stop.

[00:09:49]

RC: Yes.

[00:09:50]

AJ: From the beginning of Saturday until Ash Wednesday was when the people would return to their homes.

[00:09:56]

RC: Wow. Everyday!

[00:09:58]

AJ: Yes, everyday. They would fix their food right there and everything and every night, and Ash Wednesday they would go to the church to sing ashes, and look for the ashes with a song. They would play with the Devil in the door of the church and afterwards, they would go to the rancho, rest there a little until like 1 or 2PM then leave out again to play with the Devils.

[00:10:29]

RC: OK

[00:10:30]

AJ: And when it was 4 or 5 o'clock they would tie up the Major Devil and go out to sell him. But not now. Now there are too many Devils and they start so late that it's 7 or 8 o'clock at night and their still tying up Devils.

[00:10:45]

RC: OK. Yes.

[00:10:46]

AJ: I don't like that.

[00:10:48]

RC: OK.

[00:10:49]

AJ: And another thing – only the Messenger had a whistle. Now, all the Congos have a whistle. No sir. He was at least the guide, the one that took care of things. When he would see another tribe coming, he would whistle and everyone would know that they're coming and would rob the rancho of its flag and the Congos would have to go look for it.

[00:11:25]

RC: Umm.

[00:11:26]

AJ: And that created an exchange amongst the villages. One Saturday, they would go to one village, another Saturday they'd go to another. It was an exchange. Like one Saturday (the villagers from) Cacique or Garrote would come and it'd be an exchange.

[00:11:43]

RC: There used to be an exchange or today there's more of an exchange?

[00:11:47]

AJ: Now they hardly do it. Very rarely they do it. Now they do everything for money. They only go where someone is paying them.

[00:11:55]

RC: Ok. Yes. I have seen that. I have seen it. What other kinds of changes happened after the road came.

[00:12:06]

AJ: Before the road came people would visit the neighboring villages a lot but after the road we lost all of that. Very rarely do they visit other villages.

[00:12:16]

RC: What other kinds of changes happened in Portobelo after the road?

[00:12:25]

AJ: After the road?

[00:12:26]

RC: Yes.

[00:12:27]

AJ: Well look! The game of the Devil also. Before the Devil played with the Congos.

[00:12:33]

RC: Umm hmm.

[00:12:34]

AJ: Now the game is with other people.

[00:12:35]

RC: OK

[00:12:36]

AJ: Before the Devil only played with the Congos and Angels and he didn't hit them. He just tried to grab them to take their souls. He played with the Congos.

[00:12:50]

RC: OK

[00:12:51]

AJ: But now there's a bunch of people in it and the Devils start whipping. They hit everybody. It didn't used to be like that.

[00:13:00]

RC: OK. And before the road, how many devils were there?

[00:13:10]

AJ: No. In those days there wasn't more than one or two devils.

[00:13:13]

RC: Yes?

[00:13:14]

AJ: Now there are too many.

[00:13:17]

RC: And in all of your memories, was there always a Major Devil or sometimes just regular Devils and other times Major Devils?

[00:13:39]

AJ: No. No. It's that before there was only one or two devils. No more. Now, there are a lot of devils and amongst those there's a Major Devil, who is the last one that they tie up.

[00:13:50]

RC: Ok. And when did the tradition of a lot of Devils start?

[00:14:01]

AJ: I don't remember exactly from what time that started.

[00:14:04]

RC: OK. It's pretty new or not so recent.

[00:14:11]

AJ: No, that's new. It wasn't the local custom.

[00:14:17]

RC: OK. Tell me what is your favorite childhood memory of the Congo tradition.

[00:14:27]

AJ: Well, the Congo used to be organized. The Queen and the King would govern from the time they raised the flag. They raised the flag on January 20th. It would come down whenever it came down. Whatever day it came down, weekday or not, it would go up on January 20th. That's the day they would crown the Queen. I would go to see it. For the coronation of the Queen, they would name a Godfather. Each Godfather would carry a plate of food or dessert because in those days they would make a lot of desserts from fruits to sell. So each of them would carry a dessert. At midnight they crowned the Queen and shared the food amongst everybody. And every Saturday, the Queen would go out. There would be a Congo. At least on February 2nd, the Congos would be out all night no matter what day of the week it was.

[00:15:37]

RC: Um hmm.

[00:15:38]

AJ: And they would go around singing El Zapatón, a Congo song dedicated to the people that were born on the Candle Mass day. The same for the 20th of January, for the people born on the day of St. Sebastian, they would sing them their song at their house. So on the 2nd of February, the Candle Mass day, they would go around singing El Zapatón to all the people who had been born on that day.

[00:16:18]

RC: Wow.

[00:16:19]

AJ: They don't do that any more. They don't do it anymore.

[00:16:22]

RC: And what happened? Why isn't it the same?

[00:16:27]

AJ: No it's not the same. They don't do that anymore. Now they just do the Saturdays and that starts at 11 or 12 at night. It doesn't have the same feeling and they're only thinking about getting drunk. It didn't used to be like that. The Queen would have her bottle of anis and she would give a little drink to the singers so they wouldn't get out of tune. They had enough to sing all night. Now, it's purely rum drinking and the men don't even go to the rancho. Also, if an outside person came, they would say that they were contraband and as contraband they would have to pay a donation, then they'd carry them out to dance and when they were dancing they (the Congos) would knock the drums over. They (the outsiders) would have to pick up the drums and give them back and pay a donation but it was all humorous, not like now where there just begging. It didn't used to be like that.

[00:17:36]

RC: Ok. Now it's all about money?

[00:17:41]

AJ: Yes.

[00:17:42]

RC: Ok. I understand. And when did Raul (his son) become interested in that.

[00:17:48]

AJ: I don't remember when he started.

[00:17:50]

RC: Ok. You don't remember when he decided, hey I want to play as a devil?

[00:18:06]

AJ: No. I don't remember.

[00:18:07]

RC: No. Ok. Tell me something, I'm interested to know, How did it change, or did it change, the tradition with the arrival of tourism. Because I know there's more tourism in Portobelo now than before. How has that changed the village and the tradition?

[00:18:42]

AJ: Actually there have been a lot of changes in the Congo play because as there are more tourist coming, it appears that IPAT, I don't know, gives money to the people that dance Congo and for that reason everyone wants to do it for pay. Before when they did presentations they would get something and be happy with what they got but now they require a specific amount and that's bad. Another thing is that there are so many people dancing Congo everyone should participate, not just make a group to participate monetarily. That's not correct.

[00:19:35]

RC: Yes. And there are three or four (Congo) groups in Portobelo?

[00:19:41]

AJ: Now there are two.

[00:19:44]

RC: At that rancho and the one over here?

[00:19:47]

AJ: Yes.

[00:19:48]

RC: And the group that Paloma wrote about, it's a regional group formed from two groups?

[00:20:07]

AJ: No. They're not combined.

[00:20:09]

RC: Ok. Then the municipal group is not an independent group?

[00:20:16]

AJ: No. It's like when there's a presentation then the municipal group goes but when it's like now, during carnival, they get together.

[00:20:30]

RC: And have the costumes changed?

[00:20:38]

[recording slightly distorted from here forward]

AJ: As well. The ladies have maintained a little more of their dress. They use polleras and petticoats. There are some that wear pants. That looks bad. Now the men should be tied up with rope and leaves because the Congo represents a rebel. They gave themselves animal and nature names to confuse the Spanish. But now they wear shirts and things that don't go with the tradition. The costumes have changed a lot.

[00:21:25]

RC: And the costumes of the King and Queen characters have changed a lot or they haven't changed much.

[00:21:37]

AJ: The Queen has the same still and well the King also – their crown and all that, no? The Messenger – well as I told you he was the only one that used to have the whistle but now all the Congos have one.

[00:21:51]

RC: OK.

[00:21:52]

AJ: So if a group comes from another village, no one knows because all the Congos are blowing their whistles. In those days, it was just the Messenger and he had a different costume than everyone else and his flag.

[00:22:05]

RC: Ok. I don't understand exactly what's a "pito."

[00:22:08]

AJ: The whistle is the thing you use to make a sound. You haven't seen when their blowing it?

[00:22:13]

RC: Oh! (makes whistling sound) So the Messenger is the only person that has it?

[00:22:21]

AJ: He should be the only one.

[00:22:25]

RC: Do the Devils have them too?

[00:22:27]

AJ: No. The Devils no.

[00:22:28]

RC: Ok only the Messenger should have it. And are the ranchos always in the same place?

[00:22:38]

AJ: No. Well it's the first time that they've had two ranchos. Before it was just one group.

[00:22:43]

RC: Wow! I thought it was two ranchos every year.

[00:22:48]

AJ: No. Just one. Just one every year but this year they've separated.

[00:22:51]

RC: OK. Why two?

[00:22:52]

AJ: I don't know.

[00:22:54]

RC: Ok. And in other years was the rancho always in the same place? All your life?

[00:23:03]

AJ: No. Before it used to be behind the treasury building.

[00:23:09]

RC: And when did it change places?

[00:23:12]

AJ: After the highway. With everything with the highway they put it here in front.

[00:23:18]

RC: Ok. I understand. And my last question – For you, what’s the most important part of the history of this village?

[00:23:31]

AJ: There are a lot of good things about this history of this village, like the Congo tradition or it’s religious history. One used to see more devotion when it came to the religious part. And the history of the discovery of the Black Christ is very beautiful.

[00:23:57]

RC: Yes.

[00:23:58]

AJ: Portobelo is very beautiful. Very beautiful.

[00:24:04]