

What is RECLAMA?

The histories and knowledges of Afro-descendant and Black women in Ecuador are often not recognised in national and international contexts. The RECLAMA project (*Harnessing Afro-Ecuadorian women's heritage*) is a **transnational, decolonial feminist research project, committed to documenting the heritage of Afro-descendant and Black women living in Esmeraldas Province, on the north coast of Ecuador and harnessing it to promote sustainable and equitable development.** The project is a collaboration between activists and academics from Northumbria University, Universidad de San Francisco de Quito, and the Mujeres de Asfalto collective. Young Afro-Ecuadorian women from across Esmeraldas have been key to the success of the project, working as peer researchers within their own communities.

Afro-Ecuadorian Orality and Memory

'Scientific knowledge' is often still overwhelmingly imagined as coming from white, male, English speaking and institutional contexts. **RECLAMA foregrounds and recognises historically excluded knowledges of Afro-Ecuadorian women, appreciating the intellectual and scientific work within community oral cultures.** To ensure this, the project has been shaped by its Afro-Ecuadorian participants and led by the objectives and agenda of our Esmeraldas-based partner organisation Mujeres de Asfalto. As knowledge transmission in Afro-Ecuadorian communities often happens through spoken word, loss of knowledge over time is a concern for Mujeres de Asfalto and the women involved in this project; this also means oral history interviews are particularly appropriate for the context.

From the earliest stages of the research, the project team particularly recognised the need to capture stories of joy and resistance to act as a counterpoint to dominant narratives of violence and stereotypical images of black women as victims. While not avoiding these difficult subjects, **the project foregrounds distinct knowledges and histories by capturing stories of happiness and pleasure,** ranging from happy childhood memories, gratefulness for strong connections within communities, knowledge of medicinal plants, recipes, hairstyling and aesthetics, and taking joy and pride in participating in events with traditional music, dance, and song. Such positive representations of black Ecuadorian women's heritage are not usually visible in Ecuador and beyond.

"Grabbing hold of our history in this moment is the only way to mark out a better future. They have always denied us our history, and I believe that telling it resignifies it, so that we become the narrators and protagonists of our own history."
(Juana Francis Bone, Mujeres de Asfalto)



#SOSEsmeraldas

Esmeraldas is the province with the highest percentage of Afro-descendant population in Ecuador. Many face poverty and marginalisation - 57% of people's basic needs are unmet; outside of the province capital, this number is over 80%. Living in a context of unsustainable natural resource extraction, racism and sexism, Afro-descendant women in Esmeraldas have long been among the most marginalised people in the country, and recent events have made their situation even more precarious.

Just weeks after an earthquake left thousands in the province homeless, growing violence related to drug-trafficking gangs led the national government to announce a 'state of exception' in Esmeraldas, which was in place between April - June 2022. In this context of violence and precarity, it is more important than ever to recognise not just the unique and complicated struggles afro-descendant women face, but also to provide a platform for their historically excluded knowledges, practices and visions for alternative development.

Intergenerational dynamics: Peer researchers as knowledge producers

Sixteen young Afro-Ecuadorian women, from all seven cantons of Esmeraldas, have played a vital role in the success of the research. The women took part in a series of participatory workshops, learning new skills and engaging with the practicalities and ethics of doing peer research, as well as reflecting on and sharing their own lived experiences of Afro-Ecuadorian culture. Supported by the team from Mujeres de Asfalto, **the peer researchers have collected over sixty oral history interviews with women in their communities who they identified as significant bearers of cultural knowledge and practices.** These inter-generational interactions are crucial in supporting the transmission of Afro-Ecuadorian heritage within marginalised communities and across generations.

The process of undertaking interviews was entirely new for the peer researchers, providing an opportunity for them to gain new skills and perspectives. **Many interviewees also found the process of being interviewed extremely positive, valuing the recognition of their knowledge and experiences, and the opportunity to share these with their own community.** Following the interview collection, a group of peer researchers and interviewees worked together to feed into the analysis by identifying commonalities in the experiences of interviewees, and highlighting key elements of their collective heritage to represent in a series of creative outputs, including a fanzine, a recipe book, artwork, and photography.

“...there’s situations you’ll only find here, and things that only we know.”
(Olga Angulo Micolta, Interviewee)

The Peer Researchers:

	Rosa Tejada San Lorenzo canton		María Preciado Benavides Esmeraldas canton		Jaritza Marquez Bone Muisne canton		Ruth Valencia Nazareno Rioverde canton
	Nathaly Chicaiza Castro Atacames canton		Karla Catillo Yáñez Quinindé canton		Evelia Quiñonez Bone Eloy Alfaro canton		Nimia Caicedo San Lorenzo canton
	Johanna Montaña Garces Atacames canton		Marivi Corozo Bacilio Eloy Alfaro canton		Mariana Oleas Moquera Esmeraldas canton		Jirabel Caicedo Valdez Eloy Alfaro canton
	Milagro Flores Rioverde canton		Genesis Catillo Yáñez Quinindé canton		Johanna Solorzano San Lorenzo canton		Nayeli Gonzalez Francis Esmeraldas canton

“I feel very proud because you are here to bring this message to many people, particularly to young people, as they are our future.”
(Maria Estela Miranda, Interviewee)

Research Team:

Mujeres de Asfalto: Juana Francis Bone, Denisse Preciado, Claudia Cortez, Nayeli Gonzalez Francis
Universidad de San Francisco de Quito: Sofia Zaragocin, Antonia Carcelen, Belén Izurieta
Northumbria University: Katy Jenkins, Hilary Francis, Inge Boudewijn

