

## *Dictionary of Caribbean and Afro–Latin American Biography*

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**Bayano** (fl. 1540s-15502) is the most famous of the Black liberation leaders of colonial Panama. By the mid-sixteenth century, a large number of Africans who had escaped enslavement were living free in the forest of the isthmus. Called Cimarrones, from the Taino word *sima* meaning “flight,” they formed self-governing, African-rooted societies. Bayano was the leader of 1,200 Cimarrones (Pike, 2007; Arauz, 1997) in the eastern region that extended from the Darien to the Rio Chagres. The earliest references to Bayano appear in the

mid-1540s when Spanish colonial authorities warn travelers of the danger of Cimarron ambushes on forest roads.

Details of Bayano's birth, ethnicity, early life, and path to power are not known, but theories abound. Historian Fernando Romero (1975) speculated that his name may indicate Vai origin, one of many ethnic groups from the large area then known as Guinea in West Africa but there is no evidence to corroborate such a claim.

*Armas Antárticas* (1609), an epic poem of conquest and romance written by Juan de Miramontes Zuázola, a Spanish soldier turned writer, presents an origin story in which Bayano was never enslaved. In an account similar to later Cimarron stories in Ecuador, St. Vincent, Venezuela and Nicaragua, Bayano arrives in a ship transporting Africans from the slavetrading depot of Cape Verde that is shipwrecked on the reefs of Panama's northeastern coast. Bayano and other captives make their way to shore and start their lives anew in the forests. Zuázola may be referring to a shipwreck that occurred in 1533 on the San Blas coast from which 300 Africans escaped (Castillero Calvo, 2008). This account is supported by English corsair Francis Drake who came to the region four decades later and encountered Cimarrones who claimed to be descendants of the survivors.

*Recopilación Historial* (written 1609, published 1921), written by Franciscan chronicler Fray Pedro Aguado, presents an entirely different story of Bayano's origin. Here he is described as “muy ladino y españolado en la lengua” (very latinized and fluent in Spanish),

suggesting that he had been enslaved long enough to learn the customs and language of the Spaniards.

Historian Luis A. Diez Castillo, in *Los Cimarrones y los Negros Antillanos en Panama* (1981), has yet another theory that places Bayano as a slave in the residence of a government official. Upon learning of Spanish plans to attack a Cimarron village, he runs away into the forests to warn them.

Cimarron communities, or *palenques*, were strongholds of African culture, particularly in the early generations. Fernando Romero states, “Bayano’s palenque was in fact an African kingdom in the midst of Spanish territory” (De La Guardia, 1977). The palenques of Panama may have started out as mono-ethnic communities formed along bonds of common homelands, languages and cultures that became multi-ethnic with the arrival of newcomers. Visitors to Bayano’s *palenque* noted the presence of Amerindians and a chapel where Catholic-style masses and baptisms were conducted by an African “obispo” (Aguado 1609).

By the mid-1500s, Panama had become a vital transit link between Spain and her colonies in the Pacific. The viceroyalty of Peru was especially important because its rich silver mines made it possible for Spain to advance her political ambitions in Europe.

The transport of silver and merchandise in the isthmus required passing through territories inhabited by Cimarrones, who, took advantage of this situation by ambushing travelers and supply caravans to capture weapons, tools, iron, and clothes that they needed

for survival. Cimarrones also liberated their enslaved countrymen and women to join their ranks.

The frequency and ferocity of these raids disrupted the economy of the colony and caused the Spaniards to live “*llenos de miedo*” (filled with fear) (Aguado, 1609, p. 8). Militias sent to subdue Bayano failed or had little effect because the Cimarrones’ familiarity with the land allowed them to stay hidden or fight on their own terms.

Bayano’s main legacy is that he gave hope to enslaved Africans in Panama. His freedom and audacity toward the Spaniards represented an alternative to subjugation and his *palenques* gave the enslaved a destination to run to. The activities of the Cimarrones disrupted the slave trade. The great numbers of fugitives that joined Bayano and the resulting increase in ambushes and robberies, compelled the Spaniards to suspend the importation of Africans to the colony for a period. Recognizing his influence among the enslaved Africans, who made up 70 percent of the colony’s population, some colonists resorted to treating their servants well, even freeing them, to nurture sympathy in case of a Black takeover (Carles, 1969).

Unable to stop Bayano militarily, the Spaniards resorted to trickery. In 1556 Capitan Pedro de Ursúa arrived at Bayano’s *palenque* and offered a treaty that promised a peaceful coexistence by dividing the isthmus into two parts, one for the Spaniards and one for the Cimarrones. Then, inviting them to a banquet to celebrate the treaty, Ursúa served poisoned wine, disabling their military leaders and then attacking the *palenque* in the ensuing chaos.

Bayano was captured and taken to Spain, where he was presented as a fallen enemy king and where he is presumed to have died.



The defeat of Bayano was only a temporary setback for the Cimarrones. Survivors of the massacre regrouped and grew stronger. By 1575 Alonzo Criado de Castilla, the Oidor (Chief Justice) de la Audiencia de Panama, estimated that that there were 2,500 Cimarrones living outside the city of Panama. Panamanian historian Alfredo Castellero Calvo believes that there were as many as ten *palenques* in the eastern part of the country alone. The Spaniards took to referring to this region as the Bayano area, a name still used today.

Two centuries before George Washington and Simón Bolívar fought to free their respective colonies from European tyranny, Bayano and the Cimarrones of Panama fought for and gained their independence. Panama was the site of some of the fiercest resistance to

slavery in all of the Americas. Others notable Cimarron leaders of the era were Felipillo, Anton Mandinga, Luis Mozambique, and Pedro Mandinga.

In 1976, during the construction of a dam in the Bayano region, General Omar Torrijos named what would become the second largest lake in Panama in honor of the Cimarron leader. Since the juridical victories of national civil rights activists in May 2000, Bayano's story and those of the other leaders of color that had been omitted from previous history curricula are now taught in the nation's schools.

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