
Exploring Congo Cultural Heritage in Panama: Insights from an Immersive Study Abroad Program

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During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Spaniards used the port town of *Portobelo* on Panama's northern Isthmus to ship silver and gold from South America to Spain. Many people of African descent—transported as enslaved persons or later emancipated—formed alliances with the British against Spanish authority. These African descendants, known as *Cimarróns*, established settlements along Panama's Caribbean coast. Portobelo evolved into a critical *Cimarrón* community that has safeguarded its Congo culture, which endures as a vibrant artistic tradition and customary practice among these Afro-descendant populations. Congo culture represents a distinctive expression of Afro-Panamanian heritage and embodies themes of resistance and resilience in the face of slavery and Spanish colonial domination. Portobelo is recognized as a historic town renowned for its Congo cultural patrimony and is listed by UNESCO for its Spanish colonial fortifications. This photo essay uses the Transformative Learning Theory as the primary theoretical framework to examine the learning experiences of a group of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) students who participated in an eight-day study-abroad program in Panama to explore Congo culture. The students engaged in daily workshops and activities in Portobelo focused on art, drumming, dancing, costume and craft production, culinary traditions, storytelling, and other aspects of Congo practice. In addition, they explored regional contexts to gain deeper insight into Panama's history, geography, economy, and people.

KEYWORDS: Congo culture; African diaspora; Panama; Portobelo; Transformative Learning Theory, experiential learning; study abroad; HBCU students

INTRODUCTION

When US students think of Panama, their initial associations often center on geography. The country's narrow isthmus has long served as a land bridge between North and South America, a strategic position recognized since the early colonial period. They may also recall the Panama Canal—built under US administration between 1904 and 1914—which dramatically shortened maritime routes by eliminating the need to sail around South America and reduced East-West Coast shipping distances by roughly 8,000 miles.¹ Yet such common associations often obscure the historical forces that have shaped Panama's demographics and cultural life. Enslaved Africans first arrived in 1513 with *Vasco Núñez de Balboa*, brought to meet labor demands created by the catastrophic decline of Indigenous populations due to disease and exploitation. By 1517, the trade in enslaved Africans had become institutionalized. Throughout the sixteenth century, Africans labored in ports such as Portobelo and *Nombre de Dios*, transported goods across the isthmus, and worked in nearby gold-mining districts. Many resisted enslavement by forming autonomous maroon communities, whose persistent uprisings compelled the Spanish Crown to negotiate limited freedoms with some groups by the late sixteenth century.² These early Afro-descendant populations, known as Cimarróns, later joined by Afro-Caribbean migrants recruited during the construction of the Panama Canal, have shaped Panama's cultural, linguistic, and religious traditions for over five centuries. The practices maintained by these Afro-Panamanians are known as Congo culture. Introduced from Central or West Africa and gradually adapted by Cimarróns and other African descendants, these practices remain foundational to local identity.³ Unfortunately, few Americans are familiar with this history.

Study abroad programs are widely recognized as high-impact educational practices capable of fostering deep learning through cultural immersion, critical reflection, and experiential engagement. This manuscript draws

¹ Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Panama Canal," updated January 30, 2026.

² Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Vasco Núñez de Balboa," updated January 8, 2026; Melba New-some, "A New Discovery Puts Panama as the Site of the First Successful Slave Rebellion," *Smithsonian Magazine*, January/February 2023.

³ UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, "Panama—Elements on the Lists (2018): Ritual and Festive Expressions of the Congo Culture," Decision 13.COM 10.b.28.

on Transformative Learning Theory⁴ as the primary theoretical framework for examining student learning during a short-term study abroad program focused on Congo culture in Portobelo, Panama. Transformative Learning Theory posits that learning occurs when individuals encounter a disorienting dilemma—an experience that disrupts taken-for-granted beliefs—prompting critical reflection on previously unexamined assumptions. Through sustained reflection and dialogue, learners may experience a transformation in perspective, leading to more inclusive, differentiated, and critically informed ways of understanding themselves and the world. Study abroad experiences, particularly those involving immersion in historically marginalized or unfamiliar cultural contexts, are well-positioned to serve as catalysts for such transformative processes.

The program examined in this study was intentionally designed to support transformative learning through direct engagement with local communities, daily guided reflection, and post-experience analytical writing. Portobelo was selected as the study site due to its role as a living center of Congo cultural heritage, where traditions are actively sustained beyond tourism-driven representations. As students encountered narratives of history, identity, resistance, and cultural continuity that differed from dominant Western or US-centric frameworks, they were encouraged to critically examine their assumptions about culture, identity, and global citizenship. By analyzing student reflections through the lens of Transformative Learning Theory, this study seeks to contribute to the growing body of research demonstrating how thoughtfully structured short-term study abroad programs can facilitate meaningful perspective transformation and intercultural learning outcomes.

AFRICAN DIASPORA IN PANAMA

Located on Panama's Caribbean coast, the port city of Portobelo is a crucial hub of Congo cultural heritage and the site of monumental Spanish colonial fortifications recognized by UNESCO for their global historical significance.⁵ Home to a substantial Afro-Panamanian community, Portobelo offers a

⁴ European Colleges of Liberal Arts and Sciences (ECOLAS), "Transformative Learning: Theory to Practice," accessed [date], <https://www.ecolas.eu/eng/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Mezirow-Transformative-Learning.pdf>.

⁵ UNESCO World Heritage Centre, "Fortifications on the Caribbean Side of Panama: Portobelo-San Lorenzo."

distinctive pedagogical setting where the ruins of a world-historical port coexist with living ritual practices—most notably the ritual and festive expressions of Congo culture, inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2018.⁶ This photo essay follows the learning experiences of students from a HBCU who participated in an eight-day study-abroad program in Panama, designed to engage them in Congo traditions through experiential learning and deepen their understanding of the Black diaspora's lived experience. Additional site visits broadened students' appreciation of the country's intertwined histories, geographies, and economic transformations, situating Portobelo's Congo performances within national heritage frameworks and the broader Atlantic world.

The primary objective of this study abroad experience was to provide students with meaningful exposure to a cultural context distinct from their own through a structured, short-term international program. The program was designed to integrate experiential learning with academic reflection and awarded students three general education course credits upon successful completion. Academic requirements included a one-hour, faculty-facilitated group reflection session held daily throughout the trip, which encouraged critical discussion of cultural observations, personal growth, and disciplinary connections. In addition, students were required to complete a comprehensive term paper following their return, in which they reflected on their overall experience, articulated key learning outcomes, and examined the impact of cultural immersion on their perspectives. To capture the student experience more fully, excerpts from these reflective papers are incorporated throughout this manuscript. All student sentiments and opinions are presented anonymously to protect confidentiality and to provide an authentic representation of participant experiences.

Panama City is accessible from the Baltimore/Washington area via daily direct flights (Figure 1). The five-hour flight time is shorter than the time required to travel to the West Coast of the United States. Moreover, Panama and the US East Coast share the same time zone, minimizing jet lag. From Panama City, Portobelo lies a short two-hour drive through lush tropical forests and small towns surrounded by waterways. The port city sits on Portobelo Bay, a site of trade for centuries.

⁶ UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, "Panama," 2018.



Figure 1. Location of Portobelo and Panama on a map. The first image was taken by the author from the Copa Airlines flight screen. The second image was created in Google Maps by the author. December 2025.

Portobelo is a small town of roughly 5,000 residents, most of whom are Afro-Panamanian.⁷ Our group spent a week in Portobelo, residing in a small hotel/hostel. Tourism provides significant income for residents; consequently, modest hotels, hostels, and Airbnb accommodations are found throughout the town and surrounding areas. *The Diablos and Congos Festival* occurs in Portobelo between January and April every two years. Thousands of visitors from across Panama and abroad come to witness and celebrate the spectacular display of Congo culture.⁸ Our group traveled during spring break in March and did not experience the festival firsthand. Nevertheless, we learned about Congo culture by attending workshops led by local artists, who take pride not only in performing during the festival but also in sustaining the culture and passing it on to younger generations throughout the year.

LEARNING ABOUT CONGO CULTURE IN PORTOBELLO

Our first day was devoted to a geographic orientation in the historic town of Portobelo. Among the most visible landmarks is *Fort San Jerónimo*, built by the Spanish in the 1600s (Figure 2). Today, the fortifications around Portobelo and along the Caribbean coast of Panama are protected as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.⁹ The Spanish built these defenses to safeguard the trade route for gold and silver between the Pacific and Caribbean. Pirates and British

⁷ CityPopulation (based on INEC data), “Portobelo (District, Panama)—Population,” updated 2024.

⁸ UNESCO World Heritage Centre, as in note 3.

⁹ World Monuments Fund, “Fortifications of Portobelo”; LAC Geo, “Fortifications of Portobelo–San Lorenzo.”



Figure 2. Fort San Jerónimo overlooking Portobelo Bay. Photograph by author, Portobelo, Panama, March 2024.

buccaneers frequently attacked the forts to seize this wealth. Walking through the ruins while our guide explained the area's colonial history was deeply instructive. From vantage points overlooking Portobelo Bay, one can imagine Spanish conquistadors fending off pirates and British buccaneers seeking to steal treasure looted from South America.

Another landmark is the Church of San Felipe, which draws pilgrims from around the world, especially in October for the *Festival del Cristo Negro* (Black Christ Festival) (Figure 3). The church houses a life-size wooden sculpture of the Black Christ, now a significant site of religious devotion among Latin Americans.¹⁰ We attended a church service there, and our students were struck by the interior's grandeur. Additionally, the church service reminded some of our students of their home churches back in the US. In their reflective paper, they said, "The student's experience was one of awe and amazement. The church service was in Spanish, but the feeling of the service was very familiar. The pastor stopped the sermon to tell children to behave, which you can find happening at any black church in America, which was a funny thing to experience."¹¹ Another student wrote, "As a visiting black student in Portobello, the experience of encountering the Black Christ is deeply

¹⁰ Shannon Sims, "Panama's Black Christ Festival Stirs Up Sorrow and a Sense of Survival," *Smithsonian Magazine*, 2022; S. Kyle Johnson, "Panama Celebrates Its Black Christ," *History News Network*, 2019.

¹¹ Student Reflection Paper, Short-Term Study Abroad Program, Spring 2024.



Figure 3. Church of San Felipe, where the Black Christ statue is located. Photograph by author, Portobelo, Panama, March 2024.

profound and personal and it is an experience that will stay with me long after I leave Portobello as a reminder of faith.”¹²

Music is integral to Congo celebrations. To preserve Congo rhythms and repertoire, local musicians have established schools for children. The principal school is *Escuelita del Ritmo*, where children learn drums, string bass, trumpet, trombone, percussion, and flute (Figure 4).¹³ The drum is the central instrument at the Diablos and Congos Festival, and we spent an afternoon learning to play the drums and other instruments used in Congo celebrations. The school also offers dance lessons, a particular favorite among students. These classes are free, and the school’s mission is to promote culture and art while preserving Congo traditions.¹⁴

Dance is likewise essential to Congo celebrations. Mama Ari—also known as *La Cimarrona* or *Mama Guada*—is a respected local figure who has devoted her life to teaching children the customs and traditions of Congo dance (Figure 5). At her school, students learn choreography and the historical meanings of the dances. The festival’s principal characters include the Congo Queen, King, Prince, Princess, Angel, Singers, Drummers, and Devils. The dances enact triumph and liberation: the enslaved Congo people overcome the Spanish

¹² Student Reflection Paper, Short-Term Study Abroad Program, Spring 2024.

¹³ La Escuelita del Ritmo (official site).

¹⁴ Playing For Change Foundation, “Escuelita del Ritmo—Partner Program.”



Figure 4. *Drumming lesson at Escuelita del Ritmo, Photograph by author, Portobelo, Panama, March 2024.*



Figure 5. *Mama Ari highlighting the dance traditions of Congo culture, Photograph by author, Portobelo, Panama, March 2024.*

colonizers, represented by the devils.¹⁵ Mama Ari not only performed several dances with her pupils but also explained the history and the importance of preserving these traditions and stories for future generations. Witnessing an elder work so passionately to engage the next generation was both heartening and inspirational. Our students enjoyed both the dance and music classes as they were able to play various instruments and practice different dances.

¹⁵ UNESCO, *Decision 13.COM 10.b.28.*



Figure 6. *Diablo mask and headdress making workshop, Photograph by author, Portobelo, Panama, March 2024.*

Their understanding was even more intimate because of the history and stories the teachers tied into these art forms. One student said, “Learning about their strong spirit, rich traditions, and lively festivals, like the Congo dances, was seriously inspiring.”¹⁶

Another highlight of the Diablos and Congos Festival is the elaborate dance ritual. The devil, typically dressed in black and red, signifies the Spanish colonizers seeking to conquer or enslave the Congo queen and her people. The devil often carries a black-and-red whip as a symbol of power to enslave. The performances culminate when the Congo queen—assisted by the king, prince, princess, angel, and others—defeats the devil, thereby protecting her people from enslavement. Although all characters are essential, the diablos’ costumes and masks are especially noteworthy. Local artists dedicate years to mastering techniques for crafting costumes, masks, and intricate headdresses.¹⁷ We visited a local artist who makes Diablo masks and costumes (Figure 6). He began as a young apprentice and emphasized the importance of sustaining the tradition, particularly as many young people depart Portobelo for employment in larger towns and cities. He guided us in creating simple headdresses and allowed us to observe his work on more complex pieces.

¹⁶ Student Reflection Paper, Short-Term Study Abroad Program, Spring 2024.

¹⁷ Trans-Americas Journey, “Diablos y Congos Festival—Portobelo,” 2014.



Figure 7. *Cooking workshop, Photograph by author, Portobelo, Panama, March 2024.*

A further highlight of our visit was a cooking workshop (Figure 7). We visited the home of a local restaurant owner and chef, who taught us to prepare coconut rice with fried fish and *patacones* (twice-fried green plantains). Although not unique to Congo culture, these dishes are mainstays throughout Latin America and the Caribbean and are widely consumed in Panama. Our students assisted with preparing, cutting, and frying the meal. The resulting meal felt especially satisfying because we had contributed to the cooking, and it evoked familiar comfort foods from home. Throughout the week, we sampled Panamanian cuisine at both upscale restaurants in Portobelo that cater to tourists and small street-side eateries frequented by locals. Seafood—especially fish—paired with rice is a staple, though lobster, snail, octopus, and chicken were also on the menus. Trying the delicious food while mingling with the locals was something that our students thoroughly enjoyed throughout the trip. One student used a poem to reflect on her trip to Panama. They wrote, “From pescado frito to ceviche, each dish tells a story. The aroma of fresh coconut shavings and plantains fills the air, as families gather around the table to share, to dance and roam the streets. The rich culinary treasures in the town not only speak to the country’s rich history but also to the warmth and hospitality of the people.”¹⁸

¹⁸ Student Reflection Paper, Short-Term Study Abroad Program, Spring 2024.



Figure 8. Aerial drone shot of Playa Puerto Frances, Photograph by author, Portobelo, Panama, March 2024.

In addition to multiple workshops on the arts and cultural practices of Congo life, we balanced learning with rest and bonding. Panama is known for its beautiful sandy beaches, many of which surround Portobelo. We took a boat to *Playa Puerto Frances*, a secluded beach about thirty minutes from town (Figure 8). We had the beach to ourselves, which provided much-needed relaxation. We were surrounded by coral reefs, fish, and pristine water, and we could hear howler monkeys in the adjacent forest. Far from major population centers, the tranquility offered a genuine respite from daily routines. Even though the main objective of the trip was to experience a study abroad program and learn about Congo culture, many of our students bonded with each other on a very personal level. One student noted, “The entire trip was a great opportunity to bond with people that I may not ever have come across. Through our rooming together, and exploring the country, I have built great supportive friendships. Interestingly, by not being in a classroom, we were all able to get to know each other in a real way. I have learned a lot from my classmates, from topics of social justice to their own individual life stories and backgrounds. I can confidently say that our group created a great traveling environment.”¹⁹

¹⁹ Student Reflection Paper, Short-Term Study Abroad Program, Spring 2024.



Figure 9. *Diablo Rojo* ride to a local beach, Photograph by author, Mechi, Panama, March 2024.

We also experienced a quintessential Panamanian commute on a *Diablo Rojo* (Red Devil), a repurposed US school bus heavily modified by its owners (Figure 9). Exported to Panama beginning in the 1960s, these buses served for decades as the primary form of public transport. Although less common today due to pollution and safety concerns associated with age and modifications, they remain iconic.²⁰ Adorned with vivid hand-painted designs—depicting family members, celebrities, religious figures, or cartoon characters—the buses feature decorated interiors, loud music, and distinctive dark exhaust. Fares are very affordable, and our students thoroughly enjoyed riding one to a nearby beach.

OTHER AREAS OF PANAMA

After nearly a week in Portobelo studying Congo culture, we spent the final two days visiting an *Emberá Quera* village, the Panama Canal, and Casco Viejo, the historic center of Panama City. The Emberá are among several Indigenous peoples in Panama. Approximately one in five Panamanians belongs to an Indigenous group, while the Emberá constitute less than one percent of the population. Many still reside in small villages along rivers, although a significant proportion have moved to urban areas. Some Emberá communities have turned to tourism to generate income as traditional

²⁰ Wikipedia, “Diablos Rojos (bus)”; TVN Panamá, “‘Diablos rojos’: nunca se fueron,” 2024.



Figure 10. *Embera Quera native village, Photograph by author, Gatun, Panama, March 2024.*

hunting-and-gathering practices diminish with urbanization and changing livelihoods. The Emberá Quera village we visited lies a short boat ride from the main highway between Colón and Panama City (Figure 10). About a dozen families live there and invite tourists to interact with them. They perform dances and rituals to highlight their culture and cultivate crops for subsistence. They also sell crafts that are handmade in the village. A visit to such a community may not be fully “authentic,” yet it offers a meaningful way for some residents to maintain elements of their culture as younger generations depart for urban centers.²¹ Our students enjoyed interacting with locals and learning about their customs and traditions, as reflected in their papers. “Visiting indigenous communities gave me some really unique insights into their cultures, which totally broadened my understanding of Panama’s diverse cultural scene.”²²

The Panama Canal remains a landmark of modern engineering. The French attempted to build it in the late nineteenth century but failed due to high worker mortality from malaria and other tropical diseases. Ultimately, the United States assumed control of the project and completed the canal between 1904 and 1914. The canal shortens the route by approximately 8,000

²¹ VisitPanama (Autoridad de Turismo), “Indigenous Emberá-Wounaan Communities.”

²² Student Reflection Paper, Short-Term Study Abroad Program, Spring 2024.



Figure 11. *Miraflores Locks, Panama Canal, Photograph by author, Miraflores, Panama, March 2024.*

miles around the tip of South America, saving two to three weeks at sea.²³ Observing massive cargo ships rise to the level of *Lake Gatún* or descend to the Pacific is a slow yet astonishing spectacle (Figure 11). Learning about the canal's construction and its economic impact on global trade offers an excellent course-embedded lesson. Roughly three-quarters of the canal's labor force during construction was Black—comprising Afro-Panamanians and large numbers of migrant workers from the West Indies.²⁴

We concluded in Panama City. A short, scenic hike in the Metropolitan Natural Park at the city center provided a dramatic view of the skyline, in sharp contrast to the small-town feel of Portobelo (Figure 12). The park contains several trails and offers ranger-led tours. Its biodiversity is significant.²⁵ During our walk, we observed turtles, hummingbirds, howler monkeys, and a range of other birds and insects. The park affords a peaceful respite from the city's bustle.²⁶ For many of our students who come from highly urban areas, a hike through nature can be a new and refreshing experience. One student stated, "This hike was definitely a new experience for me. I had never been on a hike this intense before. However, I am so

²³ Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Why Is the Panama Canal Important?"; Panama Canal Authority, "Trade Routes."

²⁴ Michael L. Conniff, "Black Labor on a White Canal: West Indians in Panama, 1904–1980," LAII Working Paper (1983); Patrice C. Brown, "The Panama Canal: The African American Experience," National Archives (1997); Lia T. Bascomb, "Black Laborers on the Panama Canal," *Picturing Black History*.

²⁵ Parque Natural Metropolitano (official site).

²⁶ VisitPanama, "Metropolitan Natural Park."



Figure 12. *View of Downtown Panama City from the Metropolitan Park, Photograph by author, Panama City, Panama, March 2024.*

proud of myself for taking full advantage of this experience and getting to see the beautiful view and an overlook of Panama City.”²⁷ Our final stop was *Casco Viejo*, the historic district of Panama City, which now functions primarily as a tourist hub with boutique hotels and upscale restaurants.

CONCLUSION

Although Panama is not a large country, one could easily spend a week or two exploring and still feel that much remains unseen. Our program focused on learning about Congo culture, and our time in Portobelo offered deep immersion in local life. All workshops were led by residents, for residents, creating an unusually authentic experience. The people of Portobelo are welcoming and down-to-earth, and they appreciated that we came to learn about their culture. We interacted with community members daily and developed a more personal understanding of their way of life, making our experience feel less touristic and more embedded—an outcome we considered essential. One student reflected, “As I said goodbye to Portobello, my heart overflowed not only with gratitude for the experiences that had shaped me but for the experiences shared with my peers around me. I had discovered not only the beauty of Congo culture but also the beauty in the connection of the diaspora and the beauty of embracing our niche cultural differences.

²⁷ Student Reflection Paper, Short-Term Study Abroad Program, Spring 2024.

And though my time in Portobello may have come to an end, the lessons of serenity and the journey of self-discovery gifted from there will stay with me always, guiding me on my life-long journey.”²⁸

Students encountered challenges but responded with flexibility and patience. Ultimately, the trip proved transformative, offering our students a culturally immersive experience that enabled them to engage with the rich African diaspora in Panama. In addition, there is an element of professional and personal growth when students participate in study abroad programs that might be hard to experience in a classroom. One student reflected, “I faced some challenges, like dealing with language barriers and getting used to the cultural differences, but those tough moments helped me grow a lot. This program has had a lasting impact on my academic and personal life, and it’s given me a lifelong love for cultural diversity and global perspectives.”²⁹ Another student stated, “the transformative nature of study abroad is irreplaceable and invaluable. Being able to fully immerse into a culture, country, language, or tradition can powerfully change a person’s life. Being a part of this experience has introduced me to new ways of learning languages, improved my perspective on my family life, and enhanced my personal growth regarding my identity and culture.”³⁰

Portobelo was intentionally selected as the program site due to its role as a central locale of Congo cultural heritage in Panama and the community’s deliberate efforts to preserve its traditions through locally driven practices rather than tourism-oriented representations. From an assessment perspective, the site selection supported the program’s learning outcomes by facilitating sustained, authentic engagement with cultural practices and community members. Although certain logistical components of the trip could be refined to improve program implementation, overall outcome indicators suggest a highly successful learning experience for both students and the instructor. Students demonstrated measurable gains in intercultural awareness and critical self-reflection through active participation, in-depth group discussions, and post-trip written reflections. Analysis of these reflections revealed evidence of transformative learning, including shifts in cultural perspective, increased self-awareness, and articulated connections

²⁸ Student Reflection Paper, Short-Term Study Abroad Program, Spring 2024.

²⁹ Student Reflection Paper, Short-Term Study Abroad Program, Spring 2024.

³⁰ Student Reflection Paper, Short-Term Study Abroad Program, Spring 2024.

between experiential learning and academic concepts. For many participants, this short-term international experience served as a high-impact educational practice, offering a rare opportunity to engage meaningfully with global cultures beyond the classroom while supporting documented outcomes in personal growth and intercultural competence.

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