



# The Afro-Ecuadorian *Chigualo*: A Ritual to Face Death and Racism

## Research Article

Correspondence:	Estupiñán-Lince María Lorena <mestupinanl@uteq.edu.ec>	Graduate, Technical State University of Quevedo, Ecuador.
-----------------	---	--

## Publication Details

**Received:** June 30, 2025

**Accepted:** November 28, 2025

**Published:** November 30, 2025

## Abstract

The Afro-Ecuadorian *chigualo*, a traditional funerary ritual performed for deceased children under seven years old, stands as a powerful expression of cultural resilience, spiritual continuity, and resistance to systemic marginalization. This sociolinguistic research explores how *chigualo* functions not only as a mourning practice but as a dynamic sociocultural tool through which Afro-Ecuadorian communities confront historical and contemporary forms of racism and omission. Through the analysis of oral histories and literature searches, primarily in the provinces of *Esmeraldas*, *Guayaquil* and *Manta*, this study highlights the role of *chigualo* in transforming death into a celebration of life, identity, and communal solidarity. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, interviews with cultural leaders, journalistic and scientific publications, this research establishes the difference between *chigualo*, *arrullo* and *alabao* and affirms that the *chigualo* in Ecuador is not simply a funerary custom, but a living archive of resistance. As such, it plays a crucial role in sustaining Afro-Ecuadorian identity. The Afroecuadorian *arrullo*, in its modern form, explores the theological search for divine presence amid human suffering. It contrasts despair and faith through symbolic and liturgical language. Symbols such as God, the high altar, and stars convey spiritual transcendence and resistance to racial violence. These symbols transform communal grief into a ritual of hope, reconciliation, and theological resilience.

**Keywords:** Ecuador, *chigualo*, *arrullo*, funeral, racism



## 1. Introduction

Rituals surrounding death are among the most enduring and symbolically significant expressions of human culture. These rituals serve to mourn and honor the deceased, as well as reaffirm collective identities, beliefs, and social bonds among the living. In Afro-descendant communities across Latin America, funeral rites are particularly rich in oral, musical, and performative elements blending African, Indigenous, and Christian cosmologies into unique syncretic traditions.

One such tradition is the Afro-Ecuadorian *chigualo*, which emerges as a powerful site of spiritual continuity, communal solidarity, and cultural resistance. The *chigualo* is not a passive or folkloric practice; it encapsulates centuries of Afro-Ecuadorian struggle for recognition, dignity, and survival in the face of systemic marginalization. As this study contends, it is both a ritual of mourning and an embodied act of resistance against racism.

To understand racism in Ecuador, it must be situated within colonial history and current structural inequalities. Since the Spanish colonial period, racial hierarchies have been fundamental to the region's social, political, and economic stratification.

The educational system, in particular, reflects and reproduces racial and ethnic inequalities. As shown by Martínez Novo and De la Torre (2010), schooling in Ecuador often reinforces whiteness and marginalizes non-white students. These structures make Afro-Ecuadorians more vulnerable to invisibility, prejudice, and institutional neglect.

In recent decades, scholars have documented various forms of racism beyond overt discrimination, including environmental racism in Esmeraldas (Moreno Parra, 2019), language-based discrimination (Cruel, Preciado, & Vernaza Arroyo, 2022), and anti-Blackness in education (Johnson, 2021). For example, Moreno Parra's *Environmental Racism: Slow Death and the Displacement of Ancestral Afro-Ecuadorian Territory in Esmeraldas* demonstrates that the dispossession of ancestral lands, health harms, and cultural erosion constitute a form of slow violence experienced by Afro-Ecuadorian communities. Similarly, in *Understanding the Afro-Ecuadorian Educational Experience: Anti-Blackness, Schooling, and the Nation* reveals how the Ecuadorian education system perpetuates exclusionary racial dynamics. Together, these works establish that racism in Ecuador is structural, multifaceted, and deeply felt.

Based on these foundations, this article argues that the *chigualo* ritual, especially among Afro-Esmeraldan communities and when reactivated during times of crisis, is an embodied response to exclusion. A funeral ritual for children under seven, the *chigualo* is performed with song, percussion, and community participation. It transforms private mourning into collective memory and a demand for recognition. Similar rituals exist, such as *alabaos*, but the *chigualo* is unique in its combination of grief, music, improvisation, and spiritual cosmology. This combination makes visible both life and the threats to it, such as racism, violence, and societal neglect.

The political dimensions of death rituals have been theorized in the field of necropolitics. Achille Mbembe (2019) argues that modern sovereign powers manage life and determine who may die, exercising a politics of death over racialized, colonized, and marginalized bodies. These rituals

also serve as reminders of injustice. Nowadays, in Ecuador the *chigualo* is one such act. It restores dignity to deceased children and gives a political voice to Afro-Ecuadorian grief.

To illustrate these claims, this article examines a recent case in *Guayaquil* involving the deaths of four Afro-Ecuadorian children. This event sparked public outrage and a *chigualo* ritual that served as both a mourning ceremony and a means of denouncing state neglect and racial injustice. It also demanded truth and reparation. This case demonstrates how the *chigualo* ritual can become a public display of grief and protest, challenging dominant narratives that often render the suffering of Afro-Ecuadorians invisible.

This study employs a qualitative, descriptive design and relies on multiple sources, including scholarly literature on racism in Ecuador, audiovisual materials, and interviews with cultural bearers in *Esmeraldas* and *Manabí*. The data are analyzed thematically to highlight the ritual functions, aesthetic forms of the *chigualo*. Particular attention is paid to comparing regional usages and the semantic ambiguity of the term *chigualo*, examining how power relations (symbolic, political, and cultural) shape its interpretation and use.

First, the next paper situates the *chigualo* within the broader social history of Afro-Ecuadorian marginalization. It draws on literature regarding racism, education, environmental dispossession, and state violence. Second, it provides a descriptive account of *chigualo* rites in *Esmeraldas* and *Manta*, focusing on performance, musicality, gender roles, and spiritual cosmology. Third, the paper analyzes the *chigualo* as a political ritual, especially as it is witnessed in *Guayaquil*, identifying how grief is transformed into a demand.

This article contends that the *chigualo* is much more than a funerary custom. It is a site of resistance, a means by which Afro-Ecuadorian communities confront death, racism, and historical erasure through song, community, and spiritual memory. The *chigualo* demands that the state and society acknowledge the humanity of Afro-descendant children and the political and moral weight of their lives. By centering black grief, dignity, and justice, the *chigualo* challenges narratives of nationhood and belonging.

It is important to acknowledge the significant role of cultural and religious syncretism in Ecuador. This concept refers to the dynamic fusion of indigenous, African, and European cultural and religious elements, resulting in hybrid practices and identities that persist today. With roots in the colonial era, this process is particularly visible in the provinces of *Esmeraldas* and *Manabí*, where diverse communities including Afro-descendants, Indigenous peoples, *montubios*, and *mestizos* coexist and shape rich symbolic traditions.

In *Esmeraldas*, Afro-descendant musical forms such as *arrullos*, *chigualos*, and *alabaos* fuse Catholic rituals with African spirituality. These forms serve as sacred expressions and acts of cultural resistance.

Meanwhile, *Manabí* exhibits syncretism in its vibrant religious festivals honoring Saints Peter and Paul and in the *ChigualoManabita*, where Christian, *Montubio*, and peasant traditions intertwine. These practices reflect cultural resilience and the evolution of local identities through rituals, music, and community celebration.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Syncretism in Ecuador

Cultural and religious syncretism is defined as the process by which elements of different cultures, religions, or worldviews coexist, intertwine, and mutate to create hybrid forms of identity, ritual practice, and symbolic expression. In Ecuador, this phenomenon resulted from the colonial superposition of indigenous, African, and European cultures, and it continues to manifest in festivals, popular religiosity, music, art, and social organization (Torres-Candelejo, 2022).

Cultural and religious syncretism is particularly evident in Ecuador's provinces of *Esmeraldas* and *Manabí*. These regions are characterized by the coexistence of Afro-descendant, indigenous, *Montubio*, and mestizo communities. These interactions have produced hybrid cultural expressions that blend African, European, and Indigenous elements. This has given rise to a popular religiosity that is rich in symbolism, resilience, and adaptation (Antón-Sánchez, 2014).

In *Esmeraldas*, musical traditions of Afro-descendants, such as *arrullos*, *chigualos*, and *alabaos*, are notable examples of syncretism. Used primarily in funeral and religious rituals, these songs fuse Catholic practices with African worldviews, demonstrating the relationship between music, spirituality, and collective memory (Hinojosa-Trujillo, 2012). Ritual music serves as both an artistic expression and a form of resistance and cultural preservation against the hegemonic discourses imposed since the colonial period (García-Flores, 1984).

In the province of *Manabí*, syncretism is notably evident in religious festivals, such as the celebrations honoring Saints Peter and Paul. These festivals integrate Catholic rites, maritime traditions, and Afro-Montubio cultural expressions, reflecting an evolving blend of identities (Domínguez-Sacón et al., 2025). Processions, dances, theatrical performances, and community banquets reflect popular religiosity, where the sacred and profane coexist and reinforce each other (Vidal-Fernández et al., 2022).

Another tradition in *Manabí* is the *ChigualoManabita*, in which carols are sung alongside games and prayers during Christmas. Mieles-Mieles (2024) explains that this tradition combines Christian elements with *Montubio* cultural expressions, including peasant music, oral traditions, and extended family organization.

### 2.2 Racism in Ecuador

Racism has been a pervasive structural issue in numerous societies throughout history, and Ecuador is no exception. This phenomenon manifests not only in individual and collective attitudes but also within the political, social, and economic frameworks of the nation. Over time, political discourse in Ecuador has played a significant role in both perpetuating and, at certain junctures, challenging racism (Castillo, 2022).

Racism in Ecuador is inextricably linked to the country's complex colonial history, in which the racial hierarchies imposed by Spanish colonizers continue to reverberate into the present day. This persistence is evident in various manifestations, such as the exclusion of indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorian peoples from positions of power, the perpetuation of racial stereotypes in political

narratives, and the ongoing inadequacies of public policies aimed at addressing racial discrimination (Vera, 2021).

This research explores the ways in which racism has been ingrained in Ecuador. Additionally, it examines the social and cultural expressions such as *arrullos*, *alabaos* and *chigualos* that have sought to challenge these discourses and evaluate the extent to which they have succeeded or failed in dismantling the structural forces of racism.

### 2.3 The Afro-Ecuadorian “Arrullo”

*Arrullos* or lullabies are one of the most representative musical expressions of Afro-Ecuadorian culture in Ecuador, strongly linked to oral tradition and popular religious practices, particularly within Catholicism. This cultural manifestation is transmitted intergenerationally as a mechanism for preserving identity, notable for its relevance in ritual, festive, and community contexts (Castro-Mina, 2021).

From Valdiviezo-Dávila (2022) perspective, *arrullos* are divided into two categories: to the Divine and to the Human. They are dedicated to sacred figures such as God, the Virgin Mary, the baby Jesus, and the saints, with lyrical content that is religious but not liturgical in nature. The latter address everyday and existential aspects of human beings, their environment, and their emotions, with *chigualo* ritual were *arrullois* a particular type of song to the human, used in funeral rituals for children under the age of seven, as Macera (2017) shows:

In the northern Esmeraldas communities, when a child dies, they sing songs for these little angels. Buenviaje means have a good trip, because whoever embarks is going on a journey. They rock the child in a blanket while saying goodbye. They accompany the grief of the mother and father with their voices and the sounds of *cununos*, drums, *guasás*, and maracas.

In these events, singing fulfills symbolic and spiritual functions, aimed at facilitating the transition of the infant's soul to the afterlife, while mitigating the pain of the family through songs, games, and dances.

In terms of sociocultural spaces of representation, *arrullos* are mainly performed in the domestic sphere, but they also extend to the streets in religious processions. In both contexts, the songs are accompanied by traditional instruments such as the bass drum, *cununos*, *guasá*, or maracas, with a musical structure based on a dialogue between a soloist and the choir, in a responsorial form. During the processions, there is widespread and spontaneous community participation, with even people outside the organized groups joining in the singing, reinforcing its collective and devotional character.

### 2.4 The Alabaos

According to Whitten (1992), the *alabaos* or praises are funeral marches led by singers and prayers of the community. This ritual is a *novena*, or religious celebration for nine days, in the house of the deceased, where the relatives who no longer live in the community arrive day after day. It is surprising to see how in the *alabaos* rituals, games and the color white are present. At night, the drums that accompany the dead mix with the voices of the singers.

*Alabaos* are funeral rituals for deceased adults (Jaramillo, 2006). This distinguishes them from the *arrullos* and *chigualos*.

## 2.5 The “Chigualo”

In Colombian and Ecuadorian literature, three authors talk about the *chigualo* or funeral ritual; based on this data, it can be considered a ritual with songs and music for the funeral of a black child. Regarding the etymology, there are several possible theories for the word *chigualo*. Bravo García (2012) refers to it as a variant of the *Embera*, an Amerindian language and *guaguá* that means child. Costales (1995) believes that its etymology could be traced back to Atacameño, African, Tsáchila and even Caribbean. Cornejo (2025) states that the origin of the word *chigualo* is from the region of *Manabí* in Ecuador and that it was extracted from some of the songs that were part of the Christmas celebration.

## 2.6 A Case: The Malvinas' Children

In 2024, Ecuador was shocked by the murder of four children in *Guayaquil*, an event that sparked national and international outrage. The children, aged between nine and fifteen, were victims of brutal violence linked to the growing wave of organized crime in the country. According to investigations, these children were not involved in illicit activities and the last research showed that the four children were kidnapped and killed by the Ecuadorian military (FGE, 2024).

During the funeral ceremony of the four children (Josué, Steven, Ismael and Saúl), the Afro-Ecuadorian people did the *chigualo* ritual and sang the *arrullos*. But this *chigualo* also had a charge of resistance (Caro, 2025).

Based on Moncada (2025) people interviewed at the funeral said that they would not forget the racism embedded in this case and in all those involving attacks against innocent blacks. Black people demanded truth, justice, punishment, reparation and non-repetition. A participant, from a black dance group, said that the case of the four of *Guayaquil* was the last straw and that the *chigualo* also aimed to make the government understand that the Afroecuadorian people have rights.

## 3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative, descriptive research design grounded in bibliographic and audiovisual analysis, supplemented by primary data obtained through semi-structured interviews. The objective was to explore the *chigualo* rite through a multidisciplinary lens, integrating both academic and community-based perspectives.

### 3.1 Bibliographic Research

The bibliographic research phase involved a comprehensive review of primary and secondary literature. Academic books and scientific journals were consulted to establish a theoretical framework and provide context grounded in established scholarship.

In addition to academic literature, local and international newspapers were analyzed to obtain insights into the socio-cultural and historical dimensions of the research topic from a community-

based perspective. These newspapers were selected based on publication date relevance, regional specificity, and the presence of content directly related to the research focus.

### **3.2 Audiovisual Materials**

To enrich the analysis with contemporary and culturally embedded perspectives, a selection of YouTube videos was included. These audiovisual materials were chosen based on criteria such as content relevance, and the credibility of the content creators. Each video was critically assessed for accuracy, representation, and contribution to the broader understanding of the subject matter.

### **3.3 Primary Data Collection via Zoom Interviews**

To obtain firsthand perspectives, semi-structured interviews were conducted with native Spanish speakers from Esmeraldas and Manta (two cities in Ecuador) through Zoom video calls and voice recorder. Two adult participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure cultural and linguistic relevance. Interviews were conducted in the participants' native language (Spanish). Each session was recorded—with permission—for transcription and subsequent thematic analysis.

### **3.4 Data Integration and Analysis**

Data from all sources were triangulated to enhance validity and provide a multidimensional understanding of the research question. Thematic coding was employed to identify patterns and relationships across the various types of data. Particular attention was paid to aligning the scholarly discourse with vernacular and experiential knowledge, thereby enriching the study's analytical depth.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

The three analyzed interviews reveal that *chigualo* is not just an isolated cultural practice; it is a system of meaning deeply rooted in the Afro-Ecuadorian worldview. Through music, words, the body, and community, *chigualo* redefines the concept of childhood death, establishes a connection to the sacred, and becomes a powerful form of symbolic and political resistance in contexts of racial violence.

### **4.1 Chigualo as a Ritual of Passage, Community, and Musicality**

In the first interview, *chigualo* is presented as a ritual specific to the Afroecuadorian people, activated by the death of a young child. The ceremony takes place during the wake and on the way to the cemetery. It is characterized by its collective, musical, and improvised nature, in which attendees sing verses called “*arrullos*” through a responsorial structure, for example:

*Cantemos, cantemos, vamos a cantar,  
el niño se ha ido y en el cielo está.  
No llores, negrita, por tu hijo ya,  
los ángeles del cielo lo van a cuidar.*

*Dancemos con el niño, el niño se va.*<sup>1</sup>

The lullaby shifts between two primary semantic fields: Those of loss and death: Examples include "The child is gone," "He is in heaven," and "Don't cry." and that of celebration and consolation: "Let's sing," "Let's dance," "The angels will take care of him."

The child represents purity, innocence, and a life cut short. The sky serves as a symbol of transcendence, rest, and eternal peace. It implies that death is not the end but an elevation. Angels embody divine protection and loving care in the afterlife. Singing and dancing have ritual value. They are not merely festive acts, but rather communal expressions of emotional catharsis where pain is transformed into song.

The poetic voice takes on a comforting, collective tone. Addressing a *negrita* (a maternal or affectionate figure) directly and using the plural let's sing and let's dance includes the community. This expresses solidarity in grief and a search for relief through unity and spirituality. This tension between sadness and consolation is central; the poetic voice transforms the pain of a child's death into a ritual song that seeks to mitigate grief.

The repetition of let's sing and the use of imperatives don't cry, let's sing emphasize the idea that action is a form of emotional resistance. The rhythmic structure reinforces the idea that singing communicates and heals.

Attendees improvise couplets expressing grief, hope, and spiritual connection while playing Afro-Cuban instruments such as the bass drum, *cununo*, *guasá*, and *maracas* (see Appendix A).

*Adiós, niñito, la gloria me está llamando...*  
*Adiós, niñito, la gloria me está llamando.*  
*Niñito, sube hasta el cielo, la gloria me está llamando.*  
*Anda a limpiar los caminos, la gloria me está llamando,*  
*para cuando te vayas ahí,*  
*la gloria me está llamando.*  
*Tu padre y tu madrina, la gloria me está llamando...2*

The lullaby falls within the semantic field of death and spiritual transcendence. In this context, the departure of the little boy is depicted as a transition to a sacred space called glory. The constant repetition of the phrase glory is calling me acts as a central semantic axis, linking earthly and heavenly life. Semantic elements associated with travel and purification also appear (climb up to heaven, go clean the paths) reinforcing the idea of an ascending path to a divine dimension. Together, these elements articulate a dual semantic field: one of human farewell and one of hope in the immortality of the soul.

From a symbolic standpoint, the little boy represents innocence and spiritual purity (traits that render him worthy of glory). In turn, this term functions as a symbol of salvation and an encounter with the divine. It evokes the heavenly glory of Christianity and the culturally shared notion of eternal fulfillment. Cleaning the paths can be interpreted as a symbol of purification before spiritual

<sup>1</sup>Extract 1: Lullaby esmeraldeño taken from the interview with participant number 1.

<sup>2</sup>Extract 2: Lullaby esmeraldeño taken from the interview with participant number 1.

transition, a ritual preparation for entering the afterlife. The secondary characters, the father and godmother, represent the child's connection to the earthly community. Although they remain in the material world, they symbolically participate in the farewell and elevation of the child's soul.

In the face of the child's death, the poetic voice adopts an attitude of serene resignation and transcendent acceptance. Rather than a heart-wrenching lament, there is a tone of acceptance of the child's departure as a natural and divine calling. The repeated use of the imperative go up and go reveals a guiding voice that accompanies the child on his journey to Heaven, giving the text a ritualistic character. In this way, the poetic voice acts as a mediator between human loss and religious hope.

The repeated phrase *Glory is calling me* serves a fundamental semantic and aesthetic function, transforming the lullaby into a litany or ritual chant. Semantically, the musicality of the poem provides emotional catharsis by softening the pain of loss through harmonious repetition of hope. Thus, the poem communicates an experience of grief and transfigures it into a spiritual chant. In this chant, the poetic word acts as a vehicle of consolation and transcendence.

This form of farewell transforms death into a shared act of cultural affirmation. As Pérez (2018) points out, Afro-descendant funeral rituals are mechanisms for community building and collective healing, as well as religious expressions.

#### **4.2 Intercultural Differences: The Ambiguous Appropriation of the Term Chigualo**

In the second interview, the participant from Manabí uses the term *chigualo* to describe a type of lullaby or soft couplet with pious or emotional content. It is used at children's wakes and religious celebrations, such as Christmas. Unlike in the Afro-Esmeraldas context, in this case, the *chigualo* is an individual or family practice. It lacks the rhythmic-percussive component and is more closely linked to *Montubio* (from the region of Manabí) Catholic religiosity, for example:

*Duerme, mi niño, duérmete ya,  
que viene un ángel y te cuidará,  
y entre los cielos vas a pasear,  
con el buen Dios que te va a cuidar.*<sup>3</sup>

The *lullaby* is set within the semantic field of divine protection and eternal rest. In this context, the figure of the child is central as the object of heavenly care. The terms sleep, angel, heavens and God create a semantic universe that links sleep to spiritual peace and transitioning to a higher state. In this context, sleeping becomes a metaphor for death as rest and liberation, transcending its literal meaning. The poem's maternal and calm tone suggests that death is not a definitive loss but part of a natural cycle of protection and spiritual continuity in the divine realm.

The symbols that structure the *lullaby* (the angel, the sky, and the good Lord) refer to a Christian belief system in which the soul of a child is guarded and guided by higher powers. The dream symbolizes peace and purity, and the angel represents a mediator between the earthly and heavenly realms, ensuring the child's well-being after death. Mention of the good Lord reinforces the

---

<sup>3</sup>Extract 3: Lullabymontubio taken from the interview with participant number 2.

symbolic value of divine benevolence, suggesting a destiny of salvation and eternal comfort. Together, these elements form a symbolic tapestry that offers hope in the face of death and human frailty.

The poetic voice is characterized by a maternal, protective, and resigned attitude, expressed through a tone of tenderness and acceptance. The use of gentle imperatives, such as sleep and go to sleep, reflects a desire to provide comfort and companionship rather than command. Semantically, this voice establishes an intimate relationship with the recipient, the child, where poetic discourse becomes an act of love that mitigates the sadness of separation. There is no explicit despair or pain, only a serene acceptance of spiritual destiny. In this view, death is an extension of maternal care, now delegated to heavenly figures.

The repetition of the verb sleep and the rhythmic structure of the sentences (sleep, my child, go to sleep now) is a characteristic of lullabies or children's funeral songs. This musicality has a semantic function of softening pain, as it transforms the discourse of death into a song of consolation. The melodic cadence and repetition of soft sounds contribute to creating an atmosphere of peace and transcendence. In this way, musicality is not merely an aesthetic device, but a semantic means of transforming grief into a ritual act of love and hope, where poetic words accompany the child's soul on its journey to the divine.

This illustrates how the same term can have different meanings depending on the culture that uses it. However, it also raises the possibility of symbolic appropriation or displacement of the original Afro-Caribbean meaning (see Appendix B). As Segato (2007) notes, dominant cultures often absorb expressions from subaltern cultures, stripping them of their political or spiritual content and rendering their origins invisible. Thus, the semantic ambiguity of the term *chigualo* reflects not only cultural diversity but also the unequal relations of symbolic power within Ecuadorian society.

### **4.3 The Chigualo as a Cry of Resistance and Racial Justice**

The third interview is linked to a collective funeral for four Afro-descendant children who died in Guayaquil. It positions the *chigualo* as an act of political resistance and a denunciation of structural racism. Statements collected by Moncada (2025) and cultural leader interviewed demonstrate how the *chigualo* becomes a form of symbolic protest. Through song, crying, and ritualized memory, it demands justice, reparation, and rights for the Afro-Ecuadorian people. Thus, this funeral practice is neither passive nor neutral; rather, it activates a historical memory of violence, discrimination, and impunity against black bodies,

*Que yo no lo veo,  
¿en dónde está Dios?  
Que yo no lo veo,  
está en el altar mayor.  
Juntito con las estrellas,  
está en el altar mayor.<sup>4</sup>*

---

<sup>4</sup>Extract 4: Afroecuadorian lullaby taken from the funeral of Malvinaschildren (Ecuavisa, 2025).

The lullaby falls within the semantic field of searching for the divine in the face of human suffering. It articulates the tension between God's absence and his transcendent presence. The initial question, *Where is God?* introduces a semantic axis of doubt, despair, and protest in the face of injustice. This contrasts with the affirmative answer: He is on the high altar. This contrast creates a dual semantic space. On the one hand is earthly reality, marked by pain and racist violence. On the other hand is the spiritual dimension, where the existence of a higher order is affirmed. In this mournful context, the poem takes on a tone of symbolic reconciliation where the grieving community seeks to reframe loss from a theological, transcendent perspective.

The symbols in the lullaby (God, high altar, and stars) have a strong symbolic meaning that goes beyond their literal religious significance. God represents the Christian deity as well as the ideals of justice, comfort, and hope in the face of racial suffering. The high altar symbolizes a sacred, elevated space where the incorruptible and eternal reside. It functions as a metaphor for a realm where the innocent souls of children find refuge. The stars evoke celestial transcendence and purity, and their proximity to the altar suggests a union between the cosmic and the divine. Together, these symbols convey a message of spiritual resilience, offering faith as a refuge from the brutality of racism.

Repeating the phrase *I don't see Him* and stating *He's on the high altar* gives the text a liturgical musicality and a semantic function of emotional insistence. This reiteration reflects the persistence of doubt and the collective affirmation of faith, functioning almost like a litany or ceremonial chant. In the context of a funeral, this rhythmic structure becomes cathartic and communal, transforming grief into prayer. Thus, the musicality embellishes the text and fulfills an essential semantic function: rebuilding hope and the presence of God through singing. This reframes racial suffering as a gesture of spiritual resistance and collective memory.

As Mbembe (2003) argues, in necropolitical contexts, where the state decides who lives and who dies, racialized bodies are often most exposed to premature death and institutional neglect. In this sense, the *chigualo* is a practice that restores dignity to deceased children and simultaneously challenges power through collective emotionality.

Furthermore, this type of ritual demonstrates an epistemology of Afro-descended mourning, as described by Quintero (2016), where death is politicized and embodied as an act of spiritual justice.

Three levels of analysis were identified by integrating the three interviews, see Table 1.

Table 1: Interpretive Summary: Rituality, Memory, and Justice

Dimension	Interview 1 (Afro-Ecuadorian)	Interview 2 (Manabita)	Interview 3 (Guayaquil)
Function	Funeral, spiritual, musical ritual	Religious-emotional verse	Act of racial and political denunciation
Form	Improvisation,	Simple verse,	Ritual lullabies

	choralsinging, percussion	withoutmusic	with symbolic meaning
Meaning	Festive farewell to the “little angel”	Catholic poetry, intimate	Afro resistance, demand for justice

**Nota:** This table summarizes how, despite its various practices and meanings, the chigualo remains a symbolic expression in the face of death, though its meaning varies depending on the cultural group and sociohistorical context.

This study makes a significant contribution to the field of Afro-Latin American cultural and political scholarship by examining the *chigualo* ritual as a form of mourning and resistance. By highlighting the *chigualo* as both a spiritual and communal practice and a form of symbolic protest against structural racism and violence, the study emphasizes the resilience and agency of Afro-Ecuadorian communities. Specifically, the study adds to the growing body of literature on Afro-descendant epistemologies by demonstrating the intimate ties between mourning, music, ritual performance, and collective memory, justice, and demands for recognition.

One of the primary impacts of this study is its interdisciplinary scope. Drawing on sociolinguistics, anthropology, ethnomusicology, critical race theory, and political philosophy, it situates the *chigualo* within a broader framework of historical marginalization and cultural survival. By incorporating interviews and audiovisual material, the study centers the voices of Afro-Ecuadorian cultural bearers, bridging the gap between academic discourse and lived experience. The study opens pathways for critical intercultural dialogue in Ecuadorian society by challenging dominant narratives that render black suffering and resistance invisible.

However, this study has several limitations. First, the sample size of the primary interviews is limited to two participants from two regions, which limits the representativeness and generalizability of the findings. While these participants provided valuable insights, a larger and more diverse pool, including elders, ritual leaders, and youth, would have strengthened the ethnographic depth. Second, while qualitative and interpretive analysis is appropriate for cultural studies, the study would benefit from being complemented by quantitative data.

Another limitation is the lack of historical archival material on the evolution of the *chigualo*, particularly from colonial or early republican sources. This restricts our ability to map its historical shifts in meaning.

Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable insights into Afro-Ecuadorian resistance through ritual. The study calls for greater recognition, preservation, and institutional support of cultural practices like the *chigualo*, not merely as folklore but as living strategies of survival and political assertion.

## 5. Conclusion

Racism in Ecuador is a complex and enduring phenomenon, deeply rooted in the country's colonial history and continuing to shape contemporary social and political dynamics. The *chigualo* ritual and *arrullo* song continue to be a way of protesting against the situation of racism in Ecuador.

The Afro-Ecuadorian *chigualo* is a multifaceted cultural practice with spiritual, communal, aesthetic, and political functions. Rather than being a simple funeral ceremony, the *chigualo* represents a form of living resistance to historical systems of racial, epistemic, and symbolic exclusion affecting Afro-descendant peoples in Ecuador.

The Afroecuadorian *chigualo* is a collective ritual that redefines the death of a child through song, improvisation, percussion, and community participation. This coping mechanism not only mitigates individual pain, but also strengthens the bonds of belonging, memory, and ancestral continuity. Music, the body, and language become vehicles for spiritual journeys and identity affirmation.

Contrasting the *Manabi* tradition, in which the term *chigualo* refers to gentle or religious verses without explicit musical or ritual content, with the use of the term in other contexts reveals a phenomenon of cultural polysemy. While both traditions share elements of tenderness and religiosity, using the same term in different contexts can obscure the practice's African origins and diminish its political and communal significance. This underscores the importance of adopting a critical intercultural perspective that acknowledges the diversity of practices while recognizing the deeper meanings of subaltern cultures.

The *chigualo* is not only confined to the religious or traditional sphere, also could be used as an act of public protest in the wake of the violent deaths of four Afro-descendant children in *Guayaquil*. The *chigualo* has evolved into a tool of symbolic resistance, expressing grief, dignity, and the demand for justice. In this context, ritual lullabies become a form of political memory that demands reparations and a commitment to prevent future occurrences.

Finally, the progressive loss of the *chigualo*, should serve as a warning about the processes of cultural dispossession affecting Afro-descendant communities. The *chigualo*'s preservation should extend beyond folklore and archives to include intercultural public policies that recognize and strengthen the living legacy of Afro-Ecuadorian peoples. Preserving the *chigualo* is also a way to honor the lives, history, and rights of those who have faced death with dignity, community, and song for centuries.

**Funding:** This study was not funded in any shape or form by any party.

**Conflict of Interest:** The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

**Bio-note:**

**María Lorena Estupiñán Lince** is an academic researcher specializing in linguistics and language teaching in Ecuador. She is affiliated with the Quevedo State Technical University (UTEQ). She holds a Master's degree in Linguistics, and her publications are in Russian, English, and Spanish. Her research focuses on topics such as teaching English as a foreign language, online learning in rural contexts, and intercultural experiences, including culture shock.

## References

- Antón-Sánchez, J. (2014). *Religiosidad afroecuatoriana*. Instituto Nacional de Patrimonio Cultural. <http://repositoriointerculturalidad.ec/jspui/handle/123456789/37055>
- Bravo García, K. L. (2012). *El libro objeto, la pieza editorial ideal para relatar y exponer el ritual fúnebre chigualo*. <https://red.uao.edu.co/bitstream/10614/3280/1/TDG01041.pdf>
- Caro, I. (2025, January 3). Quiénes eran los 4 de Guayaquil, los menores detenidos por militares y encontrados incinerados y con signos de tortura en Ecuador. *BBC News Mundo*. <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articles/c8dql5m755o>
- Castillo, A. (2022). La función epistémica del chigualo en los pueblos afrocolombianos. <https://revistas.udenar.edu.co/index.php/rmopa/article/view/7401>
- Castro M., J. (2021, July 20). *Arrullo-Afroecuatoriano* [Video]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=54IN8oOV8Uc>
- Cornejo, J. (2005). *Chigualitochigualo*. Casa de la cultura ecuatoriana.
- Costales, P. (1995). *Lo indígena y lo negro*. IADAP.
- Cruel Preciado, M., & Vernaza Arroyo, G. D. (2022). Lenguaje y discriminación racial del afroecuatoriano [Language and racial discrimination of Afro-Ecuadorians]. *Centro Sur*, 6(2). <http://portal.amelica.org/ameli/journal/384/3843149004/>
- Domínguez-Sacón, Y. N., Navarro-Zambrano, M. L., & Bravo-Macías, C. C. (2025). *Diagnóstico del patrimonio cultural inmaterial de las comunidades del cantón Bolívar, Manabí, Ecuador*. Turismo y Patrimonio.
- Ecuavisa. (2025, January 3). *Los cuatro menores de Las Malvinas fueron sepultados en Guayaquil* [Video]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7R1GbifRxf&t=1s>
- FGE. (2024, December 31). Caso Malvinas: Fiscalía formula cargos contra los 16 militares involucrados. <https://www.fiscalia.gob.ec/caso-malvinas-fiscalia-formula-cargos-contralos-16-militares-involucrados/>
- García-Flores, B. I. (1984). *La religiosidad del negro esmeraldeño (Análisis y experiencias)*. CAAP.
- Hinojosa-Trujillo, M. H. (2012). *Estudio sociológico de la percusión afro-esmeraldeña en Borbón y el centro de Esmeraldas en los últimos sesenta años* [Tesis de pregrado]. Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador. <https://repositorio.puce.edu.ec/handle/123456789/22145>

- Jaramillo, M. M. (2006). Los alabaos, los arrullos y los chigualos como oficios de difunto y ritos de cohesión social en el Litoral Pacífico colombiano. *Inti: Revista de literatura hispánica*, No. 63, Article 17. <https://digitalcommons.providence.edu/inti/vol1/iss63/17>
- Johnson, E. (2021). Understanding the Afro-Ecuadorian educational experience: Anti-Blackness, schooling, and the nation. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 96(2), 135-149. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2021.1905324>
- Macera, T. (2017, April 30). *Chigualo: Buenviaje* [Video]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7NrEFTRgZ2c>
- Martínez Novo, C., & de la Torre, C. (2010). Racial discrimination and citizenship in Ecuador's educational system. *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies*, 5(1), 1-26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17442220903506875>
- Mbembe, A. (2019). *Necropolitics* (S. Corcoran, Trans.). Duke University Press. [https://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/2640/Necropolitics?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/2640/Necropolitics?utm_source=chatgpt.com)
- Mbembe, A. (2003). Necropolitics. *Public Culture*, 15(1), 11-40. Duke University Press. <https://read.dukeupress.edu/public-culture/article-abstract/15/1/11/31714/Necropolitics?redirectedFrom=fulltext>
- Mieles-Mieles, C. D. (2024). *Identidad y mediación comunicacional del pueblo montubio en la fiesta navideña del "Chigualo manabita"* [Tesis de pregrado]. Universidad Central del Ecuador. <https://www.dspace.uce.edu.ec/entities/publication/0cb6d36a-37af-43f4-8b4f-e2aab0015879>
- Moncada, R. (2025). *Chigualo and Justice: Collective Mourning as Resistance in Afro-Descendant Ecuador*. Ediciones Orisha.
- Moreno Parra, M. (2019). Environmental racism: Slow death and the displacement of ancestral Afro-Ecuadorian territory in Esmeraldas. *Íconos – Revista de Ciencias Sociales*, 19, Article e3686. <http://www.revistaiconos.ec>
- Pérez, J. (2018). *Death and Celebration in the Afro-Descendant Pacific: An Ethnography of the Chigualos*. Universidad del Pacífico.
- Pila, V. (2011). El sistema de administración de justicia penal y los afroecuatorianos. In J. Antón, V. Pila, & D. Caicedo (Eds.), *Pueblos Afrodescendientes y Derechos Humanos. Del Reconocimiento a las Acciones Afirmativas: Una perspectiva jurídica, antropológica, social e histórica de los derechos humanos de los afrodescendientes en el Ecuador* (pp. 167–193). Ministerio de Justicia, Derechos Humanos y Cultos.
- Quintero, M. (2016). Songs of struggle: Ritual and politics in Afro-descendant communities in northern Ecuador. *Identidades Magazine*, 4(1), 55–72.

- Segato, R. L. (2007). *The Nation and Its Others: Race, Ethnicity, and Religious Diversity in Times of Identity Politics*. Prometeo.
- Torres-Candelejo, J. M. (2022). Las prácticas shamánicas del pueblo Chachi en el norte de Esmeraldas, Ecuador. *SciELO Preprints*. <https://doi.org/10.1590/SciELOPreprints.3807>
- Valdiviezo Dávila, L. G. (2022). El arrullo: de su presencia en la provincia ecuatoriana de Esmeraldas. *Revista Estudios del Desarrollo Social: Cuba y América Latina*, 10(3). [http://scielo.sld.cu/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S2308-01322022000300012&lng=es&tlng=es](http://scielo.sld.cu/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S2308-01322022000300012&lng=es&tlng=es)
- Vera-Santos, R. E. (2021). Hate crime and racial discrimination in Ecuador: The case of Michael Arce in ESMIL. *International Journal of Discrimination and the Law*, 21(2), 117–138. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13582291211002972>
- Vidal-Fernández, P., Navas-Guzmán, L., Quiroz-Párraga, M., & Murillo-Bustillos, H. P. (2018). Sociedad e identidad cultural manabita y su transmisión en la educación general básica en Manta. *Revista San Gregorio*, 1(24), 24–33. <https://doi.org/10.36097/rsan.v1i24.662>
- Whitten, N. (1992). *Pioneros Negros. La cultura Afro-Latinoamerica del Ecuador y de Colombia*. Afro-Ecuadorian Cultural Center. <http://repositoriointerculturalidad.ec/jspui/handle/123456789/4549>

## Appendices

### Appendix A

#### *Transcript of the interview with participant # 1*

**Date:** August 23, 2025

**Modality:** Virtual interview (Zoom)

**Duration:** 15 minutes, 10 seconds

**Participant:** Interviewee 1 (Middle school teacher from Esmeraldas)

**Interviewer:** Principal investigator of the project

**Entrevistadora:** Buenos días. ¿Cuál es su nombre completo?

**Participante 1:** XXXXX

**Entrevistadora:** Un gusto. Mi nombre es XXX.

Le doy gracias a Dios por tenerla aquí, y para mí es una oportunidad muy grande de conocer sobre la cultura afroecuatoriana, ya que, a pesar de yo ser afroecuatoriana, no he vivido mucho en Esmeraldas... muy poco tiempo, solo en vacaciones: un mes, cada dos años, cada tres años. Y desconozco esta cultura. Pero quería tener la oportunidad de entrevistarle para conocer este tema, que son los chigualos y los arrullos afroecuatorianos. Entonces, si me cuenta un poquito de usted, ¿de dónde es?

**Participante 1:** A ver, le comento. Yo soy de aquí, de Esmeraldas. Soy la directora de una agrupación de música y danza afro.

**Entrevistadora:** Ya.

**Participante 1:** XXXX se llama mi agrupación. Aparte de eso, compongo música afroecuatoriana, unos que otros poemas también, y me dedico a lo de la cultura, muy aparte del presente. También trabajo con chicos, fomentando la cultura para que no se pierda. Con el pasar del tiempo, usted sabe, son cosas que de pronto nos enseñaron los abuelos, y ahora la tecnología está dejando a un lado todo lo que es lo de nuestra cultura.

El chigualo es una ceremonia fúnebre del cadáver de un niño menor de siete años, que se practica aquí en Esmeraldas y en el Ecuador, ¿no? A veces lo toman en algunas zonas del Pacífico, pero realmente es ecuatoriano. Esto es un ritual entonado por músicos, cantadoras, cantadores... donde se despide al niño, a la criatura, con cantos alegres —en algunas ocasiones con baile— y se asegura que el niño que ya ha fallecido va a llegar, aparentemente, al cielo, ¿no?, porque en la tierra está sin pecado. Así se dice.

En la ceremonia de los arrullos son cantos a capela, una voz —como usted dice— replica dependiendo de la canción o lo que quieren expresar, y las otras personas responden como coro de acompañamiento, ¿no? Y otros palmean, y así se va cantando un recital. Es marcado por bombos, cununos, maracas, guasá, al ritmo bambuqueado, bunde y juga, ¿no?

En general, cuando fallece un niño... Le doy un ejemplo, ¿no?

**De ahí:** “Adiós, niñito, la gloria me está llamando”, ¿sí?

Entonces comienza el solista. Comienza:

Adiós, niñito, la gloria me está llamando.

Niñito, sube hasta el cielo, la gloria me está llamando.

Anda a limpiar los caminos, la gloria me está llamando,

para cuando te vayas ahí, la gloria...

**Y así sucesivamente:**

Tu padre y tu madrina, la gloria me está llamando...

Entonces eso es el solista y el coro. Y así sucesivamente va cantando mucho, mucho chigualo:

que vamos a cantar al niño que se va al cielo, “no llores, negrita...”, y así sucesivamente.

Y usted va expresando por medio de versos. El verso que se le venga a usted, mientras están tocando, lo envía... y la gente comienza y responde. Porque usted canta pongamos, como le estaba diciendo—, porque hay gente que se alegra y otra que sí llora... y así sucesivamente, ¿no? Y de eso se trata lo que es el chigualo.

**Entrevistadora:** O sea, podemos decir que el chigualo es la ceremonia, y el arrullo es el canto, ¿no?

**Participante 1:** El arrullo es el canto que se hace durante la noche, porque son angelitos.

**Entrevistadora:** Entonces, una pregunta: ¿usted en algún momento ha tenido la oportunidad de estar en un velorio de un niño y escucharlos cantar y participar?

**Participante 1:** Participar, sí.

**Entrevistadora:** Entonces, una pregunta: ¿quién empieza con el canto? ¿Es alguna persona de la familia o llaman a alguien que sepa hacer estos cantos?

**Participante 1:** Por lo general, contratan a personas que canten... que saben. Justamente es la familia, ¿no? Si en la familia alguien sabe, algún rato “mete un verso”, porque así les dicen: “meter un verso”. Están los instrumentos y comienza cualquiera. Comienzan a tocar, y quien se sabe el verso lo manda. Y así justamente la gente que sabe va metiendo un verso, y se va dando la algarabía del chigualo al niño.

Nosotros hundimos el bombo en un palo, o en las casas que tienen el techo con madera... usted ve, comienza a tocar y la gente a replicar.

Eso es el chigualo aquí en Esmeraldas.

**Entrevistadora:** ¿Y eso se da en la noche anterior al momento de la... o sea, la noche del velorio, donde están en casa velando al niño, y luego se lo lleva al cementerio o en el camino al cementerio?

**Participante 1:** A ver... el niño fallece, y en la noche del velorio uno se amanece tocando. Y si los familiares desean, pues en el trayecto que se lo lleva también se va cantando.

**Entrevistadora:** Pero usted me decía algo: que se está perdiendo la tradición.

**Participante 1:** Sí, se está perdiendo la tradición, porque más que todo aquí en Esmeraldas, poco le llaman la atención a nuestra cultura. Pocos son los de los arrullos. Más eso vemos en nuestra gente afro, y los abuelos conservan.

**Entrevistadora:** Entonces, usted ya me hizo ahorita una demostración. No sé si me puede hacer otro versito para ya culminar con esta investigación que me ha servido mucho. Me va a servir mucho poder transcribir toda esta información.

**Participante 1:** Dice un chigualo:

Cantemos, cantemos, vamos a cantar,

el niño se ha ido y en el cielo está.

No llores, negrita, por tu hijo ya,

los ángeles del cielo lo van a cuidar.

Dancemos con el niño, el niño se va.

¿Listo?

**Entrevistadora:** ¡Muy bien! Muchísimas gracias. Ha sido una bendición poderla escuchar, poder compartir con usted hoy día. No sé si tiene algo más que compartirme al respecto de...

**Participante 1:** Justamente, acotando un poquito con la manera de ustedes allá en Manabí de hacer un chigualo... Acá eso es un arrullo, porque uno arrulla a lo divino y a uno como persona, ¿no? Entonces, lo que ustedes hacen para nosotros es arrullo.

Entonces no es igual, sino que a veces nosotros por no saber las cosas, hacemos las cosas como que no es, ¿no?, por no tener el conocimiento.

**Entrevistadora:** Una pregunta: ¿en Navidad ustedes sí cantan estos versitos al Niño Dios?

**Entrevistadora:** Por ejemplo, mire, le voy a dar un ejemplo de uno de los chigualos de aquí de Manabí:

"Buenas noches, Niño, noche le estoy dando, con este versito le estoy saludando..."

Nosotros a eso llamamos chigualo acá.

**Participante 1:** No. Eso es el arrullo allá.

Y sí, se da en Navidad. Sí, uno hace la Navidad Negra, donde se canta arrullos afro, arrullos navideños, concursos en instituciones... y eso es.

Los arrullos serían a los santos, a la Virgen del Carmen, a la Virgen del Cisne, a San Antonio... Entonces, son...

**Entrevistadora:** Qué interesante, qué interesante esta diferencia.

Muchísimas gracias. Gracias de todo corazón por haberse reunido hoy día, que es día de vacaciones, y estamos aquí en nombre de la cultura, reunidas.

Un gusto conocerla.

**Participante 1:** Gracias. ¡Lindo día!

## **Appendix B**

### *Transcript of the interview with participant #2*

**Date:** August 22, 2025

**Modality:** Face to face, the voice recorder of a Samsung Android A 23 phone was used.

**Duration:** 10 minutes

**Participant:** Interviewee 1 (Middle school teacher from Manta)

**Interviewer:** Principal investigator of the project

**Entrevistador:** Este... estoy aquí con el participante número dos, que es de Manabí. Cuéntenos, ¿de dónde es usted?

**Participante 2:** Bueno, yo nací en Manta, pero mi familia es montubia de la zona de Junín, de Río Chico, de la zona de Calderón y Miguelillo del cantón, Portoviejo. Somos una familia que todavía guarda las tradiciones: en la comida, las costumbres, en la misma religión... Casi todos somos católicos, mantenemos tradiciones.

**Entrevistador:** Hablando del chigualo, ¿qué se puede... qué nos puede decir? ¿Cómo, qué es el chigualo para un manabita?

**Participante 2:** Bueno, para un manabita, un chigualo es un verso blanco, en el sentido de que son palabras suaves, canturreado, sencillo. No es pícaro como el amorfino. Es una especie de copla suave, un versito suave que se comparte en ciertas ocasiones.

**Entrevistador:** ¿Como por ejemplo?

**Participante 2:** Por ejemplo, para Navidad. Pero también, en la antigüedad, cuando había velorios. Nuestra costumbre manabita es que se realizaban velorios para la Virgen, para los santos, para los niños pequeños que mueren —que a esos se les llama "angelitos"—. Entonces, se organizaban velorios, y en muchos lugares de nuestra campiña se les canturreaba.

No es como el arrullo... el “arrurru mi niño”, así, en el campo. Aunque también lo he escuchado de gente que viene de fuera, que tiene tradición de campo, y también en Esmeraldas.

**Entrevistador:** ¿Y nos puede decir un ejemplo de chigualo?

**Participante 2:** Por ejemplo, hay uno que se canta cuando se muere un niño:

*"Duerme, mi niño, duérmete ya, que viene un ángel y te cuidará, y entre los cielos vas a pasear, con el buen Dios que te va a cuidar."*

**Entrevistador:** Muchísimas gracias.