2001

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Mexico in the Context of the Transatlantic Slave Trade

Cover Page Footnote
This article is from an earlier iteration of Diálogo which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."

This article is available in Diálogo: https://via.library.depaul.edu/dialogo/vol5/iss1/5
The presence of people of African descent in Mexico, while a subject that never ceases to fascinate me in my studies, has scarcely raised an eyebrow neither in Mexico, nor in the larger world. Part of this is due to the fact that their presence is largely unknown outside of the rural regions where the majority of them live. Their numbers are relatively small, and they have not generally made a point of making their presence widely known. In this article, I will offer a brief historical foreground of the Afro-Mexican population, primarily to situate their experience within the larger framework of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. The purpose of this article, however, is to present some ethnographic data on the contemporary populations of Afro-Mexicans. The vast majority of Afro-Mexicans reside on opposite coasts of Mexico—the Pacific Costa Chica region, and the Gulf Coast state of Veracruz. This article will treat both populations in comparative perspective, and, instead of pretending to present a definitive piece of ethnographic truth, I hope to raise questions, and pose issues for further research.

When most think of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade that brought millions of Africans to the Western Hemisphere, Mexico is rarely a country one thinks of. When one considers the impact of the slave trade on Latin America, most of the attention is placed on the countries where we find very large Black populations today. In South America, one considers first and foremost, Brazil, and to a lesser extent, Colombia and possibly Venezuela. Attention then shifts to much of the Caribbean, be they the Spanish-speaking countries such as Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico, or the French-speaking Haiti, or the English-speaking Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, and Barbados. These are countries where the Black presence has been large, if not the majority, and they are places from which immigrants have increasingly arrived to the United States and have played an increasing role in our popular culture, music, and sports.

The vast majority of these Black peoples—a total of some 8.5 million!—arrived to the hemisphere at some point between 1519-1867. As is well known, these slaves were brought to augment, or replace an indigenous work force that for various reasons (some cultural), was determined to be less cost-effective, or otherwise inadequate for the labor intensive productive endeavors for which the slaves were used. In most of these countries, a mercantilist economy of extraction converted many of these countries into export-exclusive economies. Slave labor was the vehicle by which the treasures of the “New World” would be exploited: precious metals, sugar, coffee, cotton, etc.

New Spain (the Spanish colony that roughly corresponds to contemporary Mexico) also participated in this mercantilist political economy, and African slave labor was certainly utilized. Particularly in earliest stages of the slave trade—the 16th and early 17th centuries—Mexico played a prominent role. This was a time when the Spanish Empire controlled nearly the entire newly “discovered” hemisphere. Later, the Portuguese would begin to exploit Brazil unencumbered by the Spanish Crown, and the English would enter the traffic in human bodies at full strength, making the 18th century the peak of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. But before the large-scale traffic in sugar, tobacco, cotton, and human beings that would completely change the face of the Americas there lived a man named Juan—a slave who landed in Mexico in 1519.
The first African brought to New Spain is said to be one Juan Cortés, a slave who accompanied the conquistador Hernán Cortés in 1519. The indígenas, apparently captivated by his dark skin, never having seen an African before, took him for a god. Another of the early conquistadores, Pánfilo Narváez, brought a slave who is said to have carried with him the devastating smallpox epidemic of 1520. Juan Garret was yet another of these early Black arrivals, and in addition to participating in defeat of the great Aztec City of Tenochtitlán, is also thought to be the first man to sow wheat in Mexico. Garret took part in various Spanish expeditions, including a trek to Michoacán in 1523-1524, and Cortés’ last great expedition to Baja California in 1535-1536 (Gerhard 1978).

Perhaps the most illustrious of the early Black slaves in New Spain was Estebanico. Estebanico was part of an ill-fated expedition from Mexico City to Florida in 1528. Estebanico and 3 Spanish soldiers survived shipwreck and wandered lost for eight years. During those eight years, they wandered what is now the southern United States, and northern Mexico, from the mouth of the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean, by way of Texas, New Mexico, Chihuahua, Sonora, and Sinaloa. He and his party survived and eventually returned to Mexico City, where a last expedition was organized. Estebanico never returned from this one, and his fate remains a mystery (Cue Cánovas 1963:48-49; Orozco Linares 1992:100-101; Simpson 1976:65-66).

These early slaves were essentially personal servants of their Spanish masters. They were most likely taken from West Africa, then transported to Seville, where they were Christianized, and learned Spanish. These slaves were not part of a mass slave trade. The slave trade that changed the demographic face of Mexico began when the Spanish monarch, Carlos V, began issuing more and more asientos, or contracts between the Crown and private slavers, in order to expedite the importation of slaves in the 1590s. The Spanish Crown would issue these contracts to foreign slavers, who would then make deals with the Portuguese, for they controlled the slaving operations on the West African coast.

When one examines the geographic distribution of Afro-Mexicans today, it is tempting to assume that the Black experience in Mexico has been an entirely coastal one. However, the historical record evidences a large concentration of Blacks in urban centers. In fact, the majority of the slaves in New Spain worked in the central mining centers of Guanajuato and Zacatecas, as well as in the metropolis of Mexico City (see Ngou-Mve [1994] for Blacks in mines, and Bowser [1975] and Seed [1982] for more on urban Blacks in New Spain).

Africans were also deployed to the rural coasts of Veracruz on the Gulf of Mexico, and to the pacific coastal region called the Costa Chica, comprising the states of Guerrero and Oaxaca. In Veracruz, Black slaves were used primarily in the labor-intensive sugar industry of Xalapa in the late 16th, and early mid-17th century. In these sugar processing mill and cane fields, African slaves were imported specifically to replace Indian laborers. On the Pacific coastal plains, Blacks worked mainly as ranchers and cowboys, for livestock was the primary economic activity of this region in the colonial period, and continues to be important to the local economies today.

**THE COSTA CHICA AND VERACRUZ: ORIGIN NARRATIVES**

The Costa Chica and Veracruz are where the vast majority of Afro-Mexicans live today, and here I will offer some ethnographic notes that might serve as a point of departure for further analysis and comparison. When I refer to Afro-Mexican communities or towns, I am referring to any number of towns in both the state of Veracruz, and the coastal plains of the states of Guerrero and Oaxaca. These communities are home to significant concentrations of people who self-identify as negro or moreno. In Veracruz, these towns would include (but are not limited to): Tamiahua, Mata Clara, El Coyolillo, Jamapa, and Tierra Blanca. In the Costa Chica, the list is much larger, and a partial list would include: (Oaxaca state) El Ciruelo, Collantes, Cerro de la Esperanza, Corralero, Santo Domingo, Tapextla, and Chacahua; (Guerrero state) Cuajinicuilapa, Barajillas, Maldonado, San Nicolás, Montesillos, and Tierra Colorada.

In Veracruz, most Afro-Mexican people that I have spoken with trace their origins to Cuba, while in the Costa Chica, there is a less-developed idea as to how they (Blacks) came to live where they are. Because of Veracruz’s proximity to the Caribbean, and the relatively constant contact between Cuba and Veracruz since the colonial period, and more importantly, in the last half century, Veracruz has always touted a certain kinship with Cuba. Rather than offer a detailed narrative as to the circumstances under which they arrived from Cuba, most Afro-Veracruzanos understand their origins as a matter of common sense. One man, quite proud of his Afro-Veracruzano heritage, over the course of a long discussion with me remarked, “Pues, ya sabrás que los negros vienen de Cuba. [Well, I’m sure you know that the Blacks come from Cuba].” I then suggested to him that there is historical evidence of a slave trade that brought Blacks directly from Africa to Veracruz, and our discussion continued.

Why is it assumed that Black Veracruzanos come from Cuba? Why is Cuba generally associated in Mexico, as a Black country? Further ethno-historic research into 20th century Veracruz would likely show that the immigration of a large number of Cuban big band musicians might lead us to some answers. In the 1940s and 1950s a mambo craze swept Mexico, and the ambassadors of this new popular music genre were largely Black Cubans. I believe that further research into this phenomenon might suggest an emergent presence of Black musicians both in the urban ballroom
dancing scenes of Veracruz and Mexico City, as well as in the Mexican media in general. It is my tentative view that the image of Blackness in Veracruz has much more to do with the 20th Century Cuban immigration than it does with the Afro-Veracruzano slave trade. The fact that a key element of Veracruzano popular culture is the quintessentially Cuban danzón suggests this Cuban influence.

In the Costa Chica, no notion of Cuba is evoked to explain the origins of the Black presence. The Black Mexicans will invariably talk about any number of shipwrecks from which their ancestors escaped. Depending on what town they are from, the ship could have wrecked at El Faro, Puerto Miniso, or Playa Blanca. Some older people have told me that a particular not-too-distant relative of theirs came from that ship, and they say the remains of the ship can still be seen. The historical inaccuracy of these narratives notwithstanding, they raise provocative questions with which ethnographers need to struggle. There seems to be next to no consciousness of slavery among people in the Costa Chica, nor any understanding of a link to Africa. Why, then is the ship narrative so salient? Is this narrative part of a larger oral history that has yet to be gathered? In addition, there is ample historical evidence to suggest the importance of cimarrones, or runaway slave communities, in the Costa Chica. However, Black people I have interviewed do not mention such a past. How might these Black communities differ from other African Diaspora communities that clearly assert their cimarron heritage? A larger question that might serve as an important line of inquiry might ask the extent to which oral histories in slave societies allow a people to remember, as well as to forget.

ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTES: WHAT TRADITIONAL MUSIC CAN TEACH US ABOUT CULTURE AND HISTORY

While they derive from the same legacy of slavery, the Blacks in the Costa Chica and those in Veracruz should probably be seen as two distinct communities living in two different regions of Mexico. The cultural influences, ethnic milieu, geography, and economies are substantially different from one coast to the other. Rather than look solely for continuities that suggest a shared African origin, I prefer to look at the myriad differences that tease out the fluidity and creativity of culture. Very little ethno-historical work has been
undertaken that would explore possible cultural or historical linkages between the two populations. Most of the scholarship on Afro-Mexicans has tended, rather, to focus on one coast or the other, and an analysis that would treat both regions would make an important contribution. Here, I will give a brief survey of some of the cultural elements which first strike one that visits the two landscapes, paying attention primarily to musical traditions. Unfortunately, since my own research focus is the Costa Chica, I can not present a systematic comparison with Veracruz, having done less work there.

Veracruz and the Son Jarocho
Perhaps the music that best personifies the culture of Veracruz is the son jarocho.2 Jarocho is the moniker by which most Veracruzanos identify their regional identity, regardless of their race. But the word’s origins have everything to do with Blackness. In the colonial era, the word was used to refer to Blacks of mixed race (Aguirre Beltrán 1989 [1946]:169), and or to Blacks in general. The son jarocho is a musical genre that has strong African elements, as well as a lyrical structure that suggests its European heritage. It is a festive genre in which the center of attention is the pairs of male and female dancers who dance atop a wood platform. Their rhythmic stamping provides the percussion to accompany the strumming of the all-important jarana, which is a smaller cousin of the guitar.

The most curious of the instruments is one that is almost certainly of African origin: the marimbol3. The marimbol is a box with a round sound hole cut in the center of it. Across this hole, a number of metal strips are attached. These metal strips are tuned to different pitches, and are plucked to produce a deep basslike sound. The marimbol provides a driving bassline for the music. The vocals are often a series of repeating verses sung by two male or female soloists, one responding to the other. A kind of melodic shouting in falsetto creates a curious vocal timbre. The themes are generally lighthearted love longs, and are often quite comical. The popular song “La Bamba” is a traditional son jarocho. I have found historical evidence of the son jarocho being danced as early as 1816 by blacks in Veracruz, where the observer describes a large dance contest of men and women. (“Todos negros atezados y una y uno de ellos bailando un zapateado sin moverse de un lugar/ all of them darkskinned Blacks and each of them dancing a tap-dance without moving from their spot.) (Poblett Miranda and Delgado 1992:v.2, 209).”

The son jarocho is not simply a relic from the past, preserved by the older generations, however. There are countless performers throughout the central and southern parts of the state. In addition to Afro-Mexican towns, like El Coyolillo, and mestizo towns, like Tlacotalpan, the son jarocho is also performed in indigenous communities in indigenous languages. Thus, the son jarocho is an example of the confluence of cultures in Veracruz, where the son, in spite of being a product of different heritages or perhaps precisely because of this is embraced by nearly all Veracruzanos as an important part of their jarocho identity.

Diablos in the Costa Chica
In the Costa Chica, one of the regional dances that is most associated with the negro is the danza de los diablos [dance of the devils]. While the dance is performed in any number of Afro-Mexican towns in the region, the town of Collantes is most renown for its performance of it. In Collantes, the energetic dance is performed during Todos Santos [All Saints’ Day] celebrations in November, and the group of about 20 male dancers and 3 musicians wander through the streets, stopping to dance in front of homes that wish to give them a small ofrenda of money, or food. In contrast to Veracruz’s son jarocho, the danza de los diablos is not a couple’s dance, but is a performance in which all participants wear elaborate masks. The basic elements of the dance have 3 rows of dancers, all dressed alike, executing a syncopated stomping, all in unison, while the terrón, also called the diablo mayor, whips the dancers and otherwise intimidates them. In addition to the terrón, there is the dancer called la minga, who is always a male dancer dressed as a woman in a long dress. La Minga is the terrón’s wife, and flirts with the dancers in order to get them into more trouble with her husband. There is a slapstick quality to the dance, and the terrón will often go after children in the audience to further excite the laughing crowd.

The instruments used in the danza de los diablos are typically a harmonic, a jicada, or a cow’s jawbone, whose teeth are raked with a stick to keep rhythm, and a peculiar instrument called an arcusa. The arcusa is a large hollow gourd with a thin waxed stick fastened to the mouth. As the musician strokes the stick, a low grunting sound is produced. The dance’s origins appear to be in part of African origin, and it is speculated that in the colonial era it was overtly part of an African cult to the god Ruja. While no mention of Ruja or religious cults exists in the way the dance is performed today, it certainly dramatizes the more recent historical conflicts between Black workers and cruel overseers. While the son jarocho is danced by Veracruzanos irrespective of ethnic heritage, the danza de los diablos is not performed, neither in indigenous, nor in mestizo communities, but is essentially an Afro-Mexican tradition.

A Costa Chica dance that is performed by Afro-Mexicans and mestizos alike is the chilena.4 The chilena, as its name suggests, was introduced to the coast by Chilean sailors in the mid 19th century. These sailors were most likely on their way to the California coast during the gold rush, and stopped for a time in Acapulco. There, they taught their music and dance, the cueca, to the Black dockhands, who spread their interpretation of it throughout the Costa Chica. The chilena is now considered the singlemost characteristic artform of the Costa Chica.

Conclusions
What is missing in the literature, to my knowledge, is a systematic comparison of these musical forms to arrive at their origins. Clearly, their origins are complex, and involve the meshing of at least African, indigenous, and Spanish elements. While the goal of studying Afro-American communities is not simply to isolate out certain elements as “African” and others as indigenous, etc., the mysteries of these origins can supply a piece to the puzzle of understanding these communities in their totality. Another line of inquiry with respect to these cultural elements is precisely the question of whether and how certain traditions come to be seen as “black,” and others as regional, or national. How is it that certain traditions garner a cultural capital at certain historical moments? For example, why has there been a growing interest among people in Veracruz in learning the son jarocho? Why is it that in the last 5 years, dancers who dance the
The Afro-Mexican experience is varied and complex. In some ways it subverts conventional thinking about Blackness and Mexican-ness race and nationality. Further examination of the politics behind this reclaiming (rescate) of these cultural forms would be a fruitful area of research.

The majority of the academic work that has been done on Afro-Mexico has focused on colonial history and slave society. The tourdeforce in Afro-Mexican studies continues to be Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán’s pioneering colonial history and slave society. The other important historical work I will mention is Martínez Montiel’s (1994) edited volume containing studies that document the presence of Blacks throughout Mexico in the colonial era.

The Afro-Mexican experience is varied and complex. In some ways it subverts conventional thinking about Blackness and Mexican-ness race and nationality. Further research into the encounter of Afro-Mexicans with Mexico’s indigenous communities is an important part of the effort to understand this experience. Blacks in the Costa Chica and Veracruz live in varying proximity to Mixtecs, Amuzgos, and Popoluca indigenous groups. What is the character of the relations among these groups, and with the dominant mestizo majority? And how might prevailing ideas of race mixing and mestizaje—ideas that are central to Mexican nationalist thought (and politics)—be understood and transformed by Afro-Mexicans? These Blacks are increasingly migrating to the United States and encountering different racial discourses. An examination of Afro-Mexican history, contemporary culture, and these new processes of migration will lead to a greater understanding of race, ethnicity, and nationalism in the Mexican context, while presenting yet another facet of the African Diaspora.

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With respect to the ethnographic treatments of contemporary Afro-Mexicans, the only published monograph specifically on the subject is Aguirre Beltrán’s Cuijla: Esbozo etnográfico de un pueblo negro (Aguirre Beltrán 1989 [1958]). This book treats the Costa Chica town of Cuajinicuilapa as it existed in the 1950s, and treats customs, traditions, language, and violence in the region in some detail. A book by Veronique Flanet, Viviré, Si Dios Quiere (Flanet 1977) focuses primarily on indigenous communities in the Costa Chica, but offers rich information about the sometimes antagonistic relations between indígenas and Blacks. Other published ethnographic articles on the Costa Chica would include Moedano Navarro’s treatment of Afro-Mexicans verse and music (1988), Althoff’s study of language patterns among Blacks (1994), and Gutiérrez Avila’s study of Afro-Mexicans corridos and their violent content (Gutiérrez Avila 1988).

Ethnographic work on the Veracruz region is limited, but includes several published articles, and some hard to find Mexican theses and reports. Among the published articles is Cruz Carretero’s treatment of carnival in the town of Yanga (Cruz Carretero 1990), and Winfield Capitaine’s (Winfield Capitaine 1975) study of carnival in the community of El Coyolillo. El Coyolillo and questions of racial identity is the subject of another ethnographic article by Martínez Maranto (Martínez Maranto 1994). The most interesting ethnographic work on Afro-Veracruzanos is Cruz Carretero’s as yet unpublished thesis (Cruz Carretero 1989) dealing with race in the Afro-Mexican town of Mata Clara.

**RESOURCES**

**Historical Works**

Aguirre Beltrán, Gonzalo

Carroll, Patrick J.

Martínez Montiel, Luz María

Palmer, Colin A.

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Althoff, Daniel

Flanet, Veronique

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**Ethnography of Veracruz**

Cruz Carretero, Sagrario

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