

Mexico - Afro-Mexicans

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Profile

There have been no official figures on the numbers of Mexicans of African descent since 1810, when a census found that black people made up 10 per cent of the total population. Most estimates now place their numbers at between 474,000 and 4.7 million. Although Veracruz is thought to have the largest black population in Mexico due its history as an important slave port, this is no longer the case. The majority of Mexico's contemporary African descendant population lives in the Costa Chica region, which includes the Caribbean coastal regions of the southern states of Oaxaca and Guerrero.

Historical context

During the three centuries of Spanish conquest and rule, Spanish authorities were responsible for the forced migration of an estimated 200,000 or more enslaved Africans. Many died en route in the ships' holds, while many others perished in the dire conditions of slave labour. By the early 1600s Mexico had a larger African slave population than any other country in the Americas. In Mexico, Africans outnumbered the Spanish population throughout the colonial period until 1810, the last year data was collected on the African descendant population. Although there was a general decline in the number of slaves Mexico imported starting in the eighteenth century, Spanish authorities continued to import slaves from Cuba throughout much of the colonial period. Mexico's slave population was distributed and worked in a number of industries throughout the country and thus many people of African descent mixed with the Spanish and indigenous populations.

Since the beginning of colonization, enslaved Africans resisted captivity by establishing palenques or escaped slave communities in the mountains and other remote locations in Mexico. The most important of these communities was established in the state of Veracruz in 1570 by former slave Gaspar Yanga and withstood almost 40 years of existence without

Spanish invasion. This community, originally known as San Lorenzo de los Negros, was renamed in honour of Yanga in 1932. Afro-Mexican soldiers also helped overthrow Spanish rule in the War of Independence. The Ejército Moreno (Dark Army) of Father Hidalgo is said to have initiated the independence struggle. One of these black revolutionaries, General Vicente Guerrero, became the country's second president after independence.

People of African descent were also vital to the early economic growth of Mexico, working in urban professions, developing and cultivating farmland, providing skilled labour in the silver mines, and working on cattle ranches and sugar plantations. African influence in Mexico can also be seen in the many cultural traditions of that country. The syncopation of much of the traditional Mexican music has been attributed to a mixture of the country's Spanish, indigenous and African elements. Mexico's well-known Jarocho music, made famous through the song 'La Bamba', is African in origin.

Current issues

Still, despite documentation on the African roots of many aspects of Mexican culture and Yanga's official recognition as a national hero, Afro-Mexicans and their contributions largely remain invisible. As in Argentina, African descendants in Mexico are not conceived of or included in the contemporary nation or politics. As Afro-Mexicans increasingly migrate from the Costa Chica, where they are highly concentrated, to other parts of Mexico, they are often mistaken for immigrants from Belize or Cuba. In 2005, the Mexican government commissioned the first ever national survey on discrimination in Mexico, which included questions on discrimination against eight different groups. This study failed to mention the existence of or discrimination against Afro-Mexicans. Similarly, where government initiatives have acknowledged the African influence in the country, it has been through a historical lens, which has made invisible the contemporary situation of people of African descent.

Most Afro-Mexicans still live in poverty, often in isolated rural communities with negligible sanitation, health or education services. The lack of roads in Costa Chica continues to hinder much of the economic activity of the region. This lack of infrastructure paired with the declaring of the Pinotepa region a national reserve, and thus banning logging, has made it difficult for Afro-Mexicans to sustain themselves economically or even build their own shelter. Today, their primary sources of income are fishing, agriculture (mostly for their own consumption) and domestic work. Because the majority of Afro-Mexicans live in the poorest regions of Mexico, they lack adequate primary and secondary education and are largely absent from institutions of higher education.

The African presence in Mexico is often denied or trivialized, and where popular culture depicts black people they tend to be caricatured and ridiculed. Mexico produces a large percentage of Spanish-language television programmes in the Americas, which continue to present limiting and one-dimensional stereotypical and sexualized images of black women. In 2005, the release of the commemorative stamps of the central character of the 1940s Mexican

comic book Memín Pinguín incited criticism by various civil rights groups in the US. The character is a stereotypical black image with exaggerated 'black' facial features resembling some of racist sambo images once popular in the US.

Responding to this controversy, the Mexican government, including the president of the newly formed National Council to Prevent Discrimination (CONAPRED), argued that North Americans had simply misunderstood Mexican culture and that Memín Pinguín was an important part of that culture. In the international coverage of this issue, there was little reference to Mexico's own black populations along the Pacific coast. In Mexico, however, the media used interviews with Afro-Mexicans to show that the caricature and stamp was not offensive. Also in 2005, the population of African descent in Mexico received unexpected attention when Mexican President Vicente Fox remarked that 'Mexican immigrants (to the United States) take jobs that blacks don't even want', reflecting a deep prejudice about people of African descent.

Nevertheless, Mexico's African heritage is slowly emerging as an important issue. In 2003, the federal government of Mexico initiated the Third Root Program, which developed educational television programs and promoted scholarship on the African heritage of Mexico. Moreover, an important anti-discrimination law approved in 2005, although it does not acknowledge Afro-Mexicans explicitly, was designed also to deal with discrimination against that group. The state of Oaxaca subsequently became the only government entity officially to recognize Afro-Mexicans as an ethnic group.

Several organizations have also emerged to reclaim Afro-Mexican traditions, for example the annual Encounter of Black Populations, which started over ten years ago, and Black Mexico, an organization dedicated to fighting for the cultural and political rights of people of African descent in Mexico. These organizations have been in increased dialogue with other Afro-Latin Americans throughout the region. Since 2004, there have been a number of photography exhibits, film series and forums on Afro-Mexicans throughout the US. In Veracruz there has been a resurgence of African-influenced Son Jarocho music, which has also helped to bring visibility to these issues. Although in many parts of Mexico, many people of African ancestry still do not identify themselves as such, the increased migration of Afro-Mexicans to other parts of the country and to the US has significantly impacted on this population's consciousness of its African roots.