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# The visibility of Afro-Mexicans and their constitutional recognition

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**Summary:** The African roots in the cultural miscegenation of the Mexican population were historically verified by Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán in his work *The Black Population of Mexico* (1972 [1946]). Before his investigations (and sometimes, despite them), the Mexican mestizo was considered, just as in colonial times, as the descendant of Spanish and indigenous. Various investigations, as well as initiatives by organizations of Afro-descendants, made it possible for the long struggle for the constitutional recognition of the Afro-Mexican population to begin in the late 1990s, until achieving it in 2019. With the recognition of their African origins, these populations are strengthening and making their culture visible.

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## I. Introduction

In this article I will carry out a review of various aspects that have contributed to the visibility of Afro-Mexican culture and identity in Cuajinicuilapa, based on data obtained for my PhD thesis (2009) in Anthropological Sciences from the Department of Anthropology at UAM-Iztapalapa, on which my book *Afromexicanos: San Nicolás de Tolentino y Cuajinicuilapa, Guerrero is based, An interpretation of the various texts of their culture* (2017). My fieldwork I carried out during the year 1999 (and, intermittently, between the years 2000 and 2003) both in San Nicolas de Tolentino, as in Cuaji (abbreviation of the municipal head of the municipality of Cuajinicuilapa). The populations of the municipality of Cuajinicuilapa were considered by Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán as "the remnants of our colonial black population". Likewise, he observed that the Cuileños do not identify with the Africans and contrasts the concept of community that characterizes the indigenous people: "those who never call themselves Mexicans [...]". Blacks [...] consider themselves Mexicans [...]. On their songs and in their corridos they like to affirm their nationality with true pride" (Aguirre, 1985 [1958]: 30)

### **The current view, in this regard, offered by the Cuaji chronicler, is as follows:**

It is now accepted that blacks came from other places. Before that, was impossible: blacks were as or more Mexican than Indians. [...], and twenty-five years ago, when blacks were seen on television (those who accompanied the "civilized savage" named Tarzan) it was explained that they were Cuban. No idea had Africa existed. Later, a friend claims that education has deceived us because the teachers have made us believe that we are Mexicans and have instilled in us that Mexico is a country of Indians (*we are all Indians*), ignoring that we are black, omitting that Africa exists, adjusting its teaching to the plans and programs designed in the center obeying the idea of being and making a nation. One more crime was committed in the name of progress. (Añorve, 2011: 26)

The question that I will try to answer with this article is how the symbolic link with Africa has been built up to its constitutional recognition.

## II. A Little history

Several researchers (Aguirre, 1958; Moedano, 1980/1996; Good, 1998; Reynoso, 2003; Velázquez / Hoffman, 2007) have emphasized that not all Africans were slaves (there were slaves from other countries), some arrived as servants of the Conquerors, there were also free Africans and even slave owners and many, soon after, acquired their freedom. However, as Catherine Good (1998: 120) observes: "The experience of slavery has until today determined the perception of the African and his descendants in the new world."

Among the causes that Paredes and Lara (1997: 32-33) consider that they motivated the massive introduction of slaves, they mention: "The New Laws of 1542 that abolished indigenous slavery, the mortality of the original populations due to various epidemics brought by the conquerors; as well as the increase in sugar production and the need for labor of producers in the 17th century". To which must be added the psychological impact of the loss of their culture.

Undoubtedly, in Mexico, the circumstances of slavery and discrimination during the colonial era, which continued afterwards, determined that Afro-descendants preferred unions with the Indians and "softening" in their progeny until recent times, circumstances that did not allow for an identification that could integrate them as a community; which did happen in the United States due to segregation and leadership.

Through history we know the ethnocide of the slave trade, Colonial racism and the syncretism of the various cultures (indigenous, Spanish, African and others), all of which prevented the transmission of African collective memory.

In Mexico, it occurred what Roger Bastide, expresses the population of African origin in Brazil: "They did not have the conditions to rebuild the African village at the place to which they were transferred" (Bastide in Giménez, 2005: 137) which would have made it possible the transmission of their collective memory. As clearly it is expressed, from the intimate, the chronicler of Cuajji:

The blacks of the Costa Chica do not have a collective memory. The centuries of prohibition and mistreatment and humiliation, of violence and death on their heads have forced them to refuse. [...] To my friend, the dissatisfied of his condition of black - he does seem legitimate African black -, he said that we must learn to know ourselves, to see ourselves as we are and to love ourselves for being like this. Also to tell others that blacks are as valuable or weak as other men are: proud of their qualities and ashamed of vices and failures. Start by touching the thick lips, the hair cuculuste; for looking at the black skin; understand the pulse of the skin before the music, the speed of the muscle before the action, the beauty of the feeling before the love [...] Recover the memory. Have a memory again. It's that simple. (Añorve, 2011: 26-27)

Afro-descendants joined the Mexican nation in the Independent stage, which abolished slavery - as Aguirre Beltrán has pointed out.

The attributes that, in colonial times, were assigned to the African slave were related to his physical strength, he was considered a merchandise or piece of ebony, a work beast, and they were also attributed sexual power. Afromestizo women were associated with witchcraft and considered sensual, thus justifying their sexual abuse - in which Alejandra Cárdenas (1997: 117) and María Elisa Velázquez (2006) agree. This discrimination gave rise to what Erikson (1980: 263) calls "a negative identity for black."

## III. Studies on populations of African origin

Studies on people of African descent in Mexico have delved into the pioneering contributions of Aguirre Beltrán, who in *Cuijla. Ethnographic sketch of a black people* (1958) identified cultural traits of African

heritage, among them: some motor habits, such as carrying weights on the head, carrying the child astride the hip, the belief in the shadow, the darling, as survival of the polygynous African marriage, the dance and musical tradition. Or after their observations, they have been refuted as they are also common elements to the indigenous people, such as the musical funeral, the extended family, the oral tradition, communal work and even the round house with a conical thatched roof, typical of Africans, it has been contested for being also used by the original inhabitants of America as argued by Torres (1995: 32). For my part, I consider that these indications do not contradict African origin, but rather confirm the claims of some researchers that enslaved people found some conditions similar to those they knew.

Several of these observations have been expanded, such as the case of the kinship structure, where Cristina Díaz (2003) identifies the matrifocal structure that allows the remarriage of women, since the offspring become foster children of the grandmothers or from the aunts. As well as the belief in the shadow, which it is related to diseases and the "ritual of death". Another practice of this culture is the tonalismo that has been seen as an appropriation of a Mesoamerican practice. Interethnic relations also persist, where Afro-Mexicans have been seen to discriminate against the original inhabitants since, as the mestizos in the region, they consider themselves "reasonable" people. However, there are also identifications with the other groups, which can be seen in the representation of the battle of the Apaches and the Gachupines on September 16, in San Nicolás, Afro-Mexicans identify with the Apaches. And during the Santiago festival there is a spiritual closeness with the "Hispanics" and the mestizos.

Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán (1985 (1958): 12) attributed to this population a violent cultural *ethos* - that the author asserts - exists in cultures that take their origins from the ways of life that slaves devised to give meaning to their existence. Beatriz Morales Fabá in a talk (in 2007) told me that in any case it would be a type of culture of violence because the maroon had no options, with which I agree, since in the maroon, when enslaved people escaped, they tried to survive at whatever price. Furthermore, due to the years in which Aguirre Beltrán carried out his research, the agrarian reform started in the thirties was being followed up and many of its resolutions were resolved during the 1960s. During that time, as Taurino Hernández affirms (1996) a legal and armed struggle took place between the groups of "gunsmiths" from Cuajinicuilapa and San Nicolás and the Miller family, the landowners of the region. What I do consider is that there is an appropriation of that violent imaginary that is expressed in the popular song "El negro de la Costa".

There have been studies of people of African descent in the city of Mexico, Puebla and Michoacan, where he worked as domestic slaves, textile manufacturing and real mines of Michoacan, and Guanajuato; in Nuevo León, Colima, Campeche, with the sugar cane, and the encomiendas, in Yucatan, in Tabasco, Tamaulipas and Veracruz. Aguirre Beltrán had to deny the belief that in Mexico the population of African origin and their descendants could only be found on the coasts of the Atlantic and Pacific seas. However, the imaginary persists that the Afro-Mexican space is the coast, near the sea.

#### **IV. Oral, dance and musical tradition**

Diverse authors (Machuca, Motta and Motta, Ethel Correa, 1996) agree in pointing out the importance of the use of the word in the conformation of Afro-Mexican identity. Francoise Neff (1985: 110-112) believes that it was through oral tradition that the African slave made the master's language his own. In this researcher's analysis of the "Afromestiza" narrative, she finds narrative structures or sequences from other cultures, including the Nahuas and the Celtic tradition. He therefore considers that the assimilation of heterogeneous elements is part of the identity of the "Afromestizo". Other scholars such as Gabriel Moedano and Miguel Ángel Gutiérrez Ávila (1988) have studied dances and corridos.

In this region there are a series of speeches, with which Afro-Mexicans verbally face the different rites of passage of community life. However, it is not about traditional African songs, speeches or poems, as these did not survive. Both in the oral tradition and in other cultural aspects I consider that there is a resignification, in the

sense that a symbolic link with Africa has been created, which is evident in the popular lyric of recent years and in the myth of origin of the shipwreck, in which the Africans arrived in the region.

Regarding the importance of dance, it seems important to me to recover the reflection of the musician and painter, Jorge Añorve Zapata: "With dances we are assimilating being black. For example, with the dance of the devils".

## V. Appropriate dances by Afro-Mexicans

Among the appropriate dances by Afro-Mexicans we can mention the dance of La artesa and la *chilena*, which Moedano (1996) considers to have become a representative genre of the region. Also, some authors consider that the Chilean comes from the zamacueca or cueca, which is attributed an African origin, even though in the course of time they have taken Spanish dance steps. The Chileans combine music, song and verses *picarescos*, a handkerchief or bandana, predominantly red, is worn in the hand and is danced to the rhythm of tapping on the floor and occasionally, in cultural programs, about the trough. It is also an object that has been resignified as a symbol of Afro-Mexicanness.

Another significant dance is performed on November 1st and 2nd, the devils, who also demand in offerings from the altars to the dead. One of the interpretations about the dance of the devils is offered by J. Antonio Machuca and J. Arturo Motta (1993) who highlights the association between cattle and the evil metaphorized in the devil, for the original populations. Another interpretation of the dance of the devils is that of Alejandra Aidé Espinoza Vázquez (2006), who finds in this dance a parallel with the economic structure of the colonial cattle ranch.

For Beatriz Morales, the dance of the devils is a form of offering similar to that made by the *Abakuas* (Afro-Cuban priests) to their spirits or *iremis*. The dance of the devils means the concept of the shadow and spirit, although the dancers do not say it verbally, but in their body movements. [...] They, with strong tapping on the floor, print the code of the wisdom of the old Africans. Africanity is never lost, but its traditions are passed on from generation to generation (Morales, 2006: 52-53).

Personally, I agree with her, without a doubt, this magical rhythm dance is an offering for her ancestors and for the living, which are fortunate enough to witness it.

## VI. The recognition of African origins and places of memory

For some years now, Cuijleños have begun to consider their African origins, partly due to the concern of some groups of professionals and activists who adhered to the ideology of the African diaspora and gave the impetus for the creation of the Museum of Afro-mestizo Cultures "Vicente warrior" (1999) and the "Encounter of Black Peoples of Oaxaca and Guerrero" (1997), which have become "places of memory". Also these associations through competitions and meetings revitalized the dance of the devils, which has become one of the most representative of its identity, in addition to the fact that it is accompanied with the music of some musical instruments to which, recent investigations (Ruiz, 2007), they attribute an African origin such as the boat and the equine jaw. To this must be added the continued presence in this region, anthropologists, linguists, historians and researchers from various disciplines who have come (after the pioneering field work of Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, at the end of 1948 and early 1949) from the 1960s and more intensely between 1980 and 1990, until today.

In the "Encuentros de Pueblos Negros", this bridge began to be drawn between the presence of the black slave and the current Afro-mestizo population. These meetings, which began in 1997, a little over twenty years, have become a place of memory, where remembering a past that is no longer, following the definition of Pierre Nora:

There are places of memory because there are no more memory media. [...], what makes the place a place of memory is both its condition as a crossroads where different paths of memory are cut and its capacity to endure and be incessantly remodeled, resurfaced, and revisited.[...] are places, indeed, in the three senses of the word material, symbolic and functional [...] What is is a game of memory and history, an interaction of two factors that reaches its on reciprocal determination . At first there must be a will to memory. (Nora, 1984: 6,7,15, 16, 22)

Thus, the memory will expressed in the "Meeting s of Pueblos Negros" at the same time is strengthening Afro - Mexican identity and contributed to the constitutional recognition of this population. Meetings in converging and other groups have emanated afromexicanos and other events that have contributed to the visibility of the current identity d Afro - Mexican.

In these Encounters the ideology of the African diaspora is manifested, the symbolic link with Africa, the recognition of the contribution to the economy of the countries where their ancestors were enslaved. To sum up, there rate ofafricanity. The Meetings have been held since 1997, in various towns on the Costa Chica in Guerrero and Oaxaca, and have recently been held in Mexico City and Veracruz. In the course of two decades the reflections have focused on their identity and discrimination, the pain of their enslaved African ancestors is recalled; as well as promoting the development of these marginalized populations.

In 2015, after years of perseverance, the National Institute of Statistics, Geography and Informatics (INEGI) took them into account in the Intercensal Survey to have an estimate of the size of the Afro-Mexican population. It is worth noting that in their struggle they have had the support of some researchers and institutions. Currently, forums have been diversified (in universities through national and international congresses, online, festivals, meetings, etc.) that allow the exchange of ideas about the cultural diversity of these populations. A Network has been created for the constitutional recognition of the Afro-Mexican population in which more than twenty organizations participate. In addition, the Plaza de Santo Domingo, in Mexico City, has been declared a Memory of Slavery site in 2016, along with the recognition granted to Cuajinicuilapa in 2017 as a "Memory Site of slavery and Afro-descendant populations". These distinctions have been made within the framework of the International Decade for People of African Descent (2015-2024) decreed by the UN, which had previously promulgated 2011, as the International Year of People of African Descent. These acknowledgments address, in part, the need to combat discrimination and recognize the historical debt of humanity for slavery that millions of African people suffered in the past.

On June 28, 2019 the Chamber of Deputies approved a reform to article 2nd. Constitutional, in which the Afro-Mexican peoples are recognized, and on August 1, 2019 , said reform entered into force . For the 2020 census, of course, Afro-Mexican membership is taken into account.

## VII. Conclusions

In Mexico for a long time, miscegenation was seen as the symbol of equality and as the solution to the backwardness and marginalization of indigenous populations. The African component in miscegenation was not even taken into account. The same is true of Filipino and other minority cultures.

In the construction of the symbolic link with Africa, the myth of origin, of the shipwreck, appropriate dances such as the *Chilean* , the trough dance and the dance of the devils play a relevant role ; the various appropriations and resignifications in the dance , musical and popular lyric tradition of recent years; the songs that deal with the "Negro of the Guerrero Coast of Oaxaca" and his corridos that unite the oral tradition with the musical one and reflect current situations such as emigration, the resignification of some objects linked to his identity such as mask of the devils, the trough and the representation of the round, a house considered to be of African origin and still in use in the 1960s, which is reproduced in the architecture of the Museo de Culturas Afromestizas and in the veterinary school of Cuaji; but it is also used in t-shirts, calendars and crafts.

The construction of the Museum (in 1999) has reinforced the imaginary of that identity with reading about the past of slavery and the arrival of enslaved Africans to what was New Spain. The Museum and the Meetings of Black Peoples - over time, have become places of memory.

As we have seen the Afro - Mexicans are strengthening their identity, the visibility of their culture and with the passage of time has been building a symbolic link with Africa which has resulted in constitutional recognition.

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