Capítulo 8

Afromexicans: the forgotten people

Magdaleno Manzanárez
Julieta Altamirano Crosby
Laurence Armand French

https://doi.org/10.61728/AE24002400

Introduction

Two hundred years ago Mexicans of African descent were erased from their country's history. It was the result of immediate political decisions and the continuation of deep-rooted sociocultural beliefs that fostered and developed an ideology for the building of the Mexican nation.

Right after winning its independence, Mexico achieved a milestone by proscribing the twin evils of colonial rule: the caste system and slavery. These social stratifications were part of New Spain's three hundred years rule, but once the emerging nation gained its independence it set out to build a more egalitarian society. However, while trying to attain a just society it failed to recognize the presence and contributions of a third group. The Mexican nation was not, is not, the result of a *mestizaje* composed only of two broad groups: the Indigenous and the Spanish. In fact, the Afromexican people were an integral part of the nation-building.

The purpose of this research is to analyze the reasons why Mexico's Afrodescendants were excluded from the public discourse about nation-building. Secondly, by taking a broad view of Mexican historical development this paper will show how the Afromexican erasure from the country's past resulted in the erroneous view the bulk of Mexicans have about the constituent parts their *mestizo* nation. The present analysis will also discuss present-day Afromexicans and the challenges they face.

Slavery and the Caste System

In Mexico City's old Tlatelolco neighborhood there is a plaque commemorating the fusion of cultures which brought into existence the present-day Mexico. The 1964 inscription located in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas—the Three Cultures Square—reads: "On August 13, 1521, heroically defended by Cuauhtémoc, Tlatelolco falls to Hernán Cortez. It was not a defeat nor a victory, but the painful birth of the *mestizo* people

that is Mexico today." The caption enshrined the thinking that pervaded in Mexico since its independence, the new country was a *mestizo* nation.

Although the *Plaza* marks the date the last of the Mexicas (Aztecs) rulers was captured by the conquering Spanish and their Tlaxcalan allies, the prevailing idea was and continues to be that the encounter between the Europeans and Native Americans are the sole groups of people accounting for the foundation of independent Mexico. Arguably, the new nation forged from the mixing of races needed to fuse all native cultures under the broad umbrella of *Indians*, *Indigenous*, or more currently *Pueblos Originarios* (original people) as a broad demographic group and then with the conquering Spanish to form the new nation. In the process of doing just that, another relevant and distinct group was left out.

From the start of the Spanish adventure Africans accompanied Hernan Cortez's troops. Some of his commanders brought with them Black servants (slaves) from the Antilles (Aguirre Beltrán, 1972). By the end of the first decade, after the fall of Tenochtitlan, another Spanish explorer Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca who wandered for eight years in what is now Texas and part of the American southwest had with him Estevanico, a Black slave (Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, 1542, 2019). Thus, the African presence was there from the beginning of the Indigenous-Spanish encounter in what became New Spain. But as millions of the original inhabitants began to die due to diseases introduced by the conquerors and by the exhausting labor conditions, it became crucial to export slaves from Africa to supplement the supply of laborers.

The complex relationship of the Indigenous inhabitants and Africans in the diaspora with the Spanish conquerors and settlers, at its simplest level, was that of a conqueror-conquered or master-slave, respectively. It took Spain fully sixteen years after the fall of the Mexicas to acknowledge the original settlers of the Americas as human beings. The Sublimis Deus Papal bull proclaimed by Pope Paul III in June 1537 granted the Indigenous people a degree of humanity and in theory protected them from mistreatment and enslavement. The first waves of conquerors and settlers nodded in the affirmative, but in practice they disobeyed the Papal Bull. The catholic missionaries who came in the era of the conquest were at times at odds with each other; such was the contentious debate between

two prominent clerics Friar Toribio de Benavente, also known as Motolinia—and Friar Bartolome de las Casas. The dispute between these prelates centered on their approaches to conversion of natives to the Catholic religion. In 1555, Friar Toribio de Benavente complained to the King of Spain Charles V about how Friar de las Casas played fast and loose with the conversion of Indians. The latter was accused of performing mass conversions, therefore diluting the essence of conversions (Benavente de Motolinia, 2022).

Aside from the differences about the applicability of conversion methods in matters of religion, the two priests had contrasting views about the treatment of the Indigenous population. While Friar Toribio de Benavente was inclined to support the European settlers' labor needs by exploiting the native population, Friar Bartolomé de las Casas repudiated the conquerors' mistreatment of Native people (Vinson III and Vaugh, 2004). He became their ardent defender and eventually Friar Bartolomé de las Casas became known as the protector of the Indians (de la Casas, 1552, 2024). The debate about the decline of the Indigenous population and its impact on the slave trade was not without basis. The original population in central Mexico declined by nearly 96 percent between 1518 and 1605 (Cook & Borah, 1979), (Vinson III & Vaugh, 2004). The clear need for labor became a pressing matter for the conquerors and their descendants shortly after the fall of the ruling Aztecs. Since the native population in the Spanish possessions in the Americas was exposed to such brutal treatment, Friar Bartolome de las Casas, a former *encomendero* himself, initially favored African slaves. However, he later turned against the enslavement of Africans as the source of labor to replace the dying original population of Mexico (Orique, 2017).

Royal approval to import African slaves to the newly discovered lands was issued early in the XVI century. In 1501, settlers of the island of Hispaniola—present-day Dominican Republic and Haiti—requested King Ferdinand II to send Christianized African slaves, but the petition was not successful. By 1505 the rapid decline of the Caribbean island's native people made it imperative for the Spanish settlers to forgo the importation of Christianized slaves. That year, 17 Black slaves arrived on the island to work in the mines. Shortly thereafter it was concluded that to keep a ready

supply of labor in the Antilles the introduction of a greater number of African slaves was necessary. In 1513 the Crown authorized the shipping of at least 4,000 slaves from the western coast of Africa. It was no longer required to send the slaves first to Spain to be Christianized and then to the Indies (Aguirre Beltrán, 1972).

In New Spain, coinciding with the precipitous decline of the native population the rise of the African population increased. During the first century after the conquest "Africans outnumbered Europeans in colonial Mexico" and by 1646 there were 151,000 African and African descendants in the colony (Cohen, 2020). The obvious impact of the African population on the colony's demographic makeup cannot be exaggerated. However, the caste system with its multiple variations during the three hundred years of colonial rule kept the dark-complexion individuals at the bottom of the classification. The convoluted separation of people by race produced a catalogue of more than a dozen major groups. In discussing the mixing of races Vinson III (2018) describes how quickly miscegenation occurred in great measure due to the few Spanish women who migrated to the colonies. From 1509 to 1539 they "represented just between 5 and 6 percent of all white migrants to the Spanish Indies" (p. 5). Thirty years later only one third of the White migrants were female (Vinson III, 2018).

For about the same reason interracial cohabitation between Black men and Indian women also occurred at the outset of the colonial period. The few African women who were brought to the colonies also engaged in miscegenation by force with their White masters. Between 1521 and 1639 approximately 100,000 to 155,000 African slaves were brought legally to New Spain. The White population was about 125,000 in 1646 (Vinson III, 2018).

Undoubtedly, the mixing of the original groups: European, Indigenous, and African during the first century of the conquest set the basis for the *mestizaje* that evolved from the colonial period to the present. Even though efforts were made to keep the races separated in the form of a caste system, the solution to maintain a "purity of blood"—*limpieza de sangre*, through this social structure did not work. Pigmentation was a powerful determinant for the classification of individuals, although the social-economic condition of an individual was also a crucial factor to literally buy

a "pass" up to the next level in the caste classification (Aguirre Beltran, 1972).

In what Vinson III (2018) calls "*casta* extremes" he analyzes the complicated classifications that emerged from the caste system. Looking at data from sales of slaves during the XVII century, Black people were divided into seventeen distinct categories. Since the Spaniards were determined to maintain racial lines that would identify *la gente de razón* –people of reason—that is, the "civilized" Europeans, from the rest of the "uncivilized" Indigenous, Mestizos, and Black people they adopted such intricate racial scheme. The overall approach had only limited success since climbing up to the next "best" caste was a matter of skin color and or of a sympathetic priest who would turn a blind eye either for monetary incentives or for truly knowing someone's background when at the baptismal font. For unknown reasons for example, in the church records one of the most revered heroes of Mexican independence was classified as a Spaniard even thought he was a *mulato pardo*; therefore, José María Morelos y Pavón, the child of a Black male and an Indigenous female "climbed" to the top of the caste taxonomy.

Although racism was prevalent during the colonial period, free Afro-*mestizos* could aspire to jobs that were viewed as potential for conferring a degree of acceptability among the non-Black population. Afrodescendants were allowed to join the Black militias early in the colonial era.

> Free-colored militiamen first appeared in Mexico after the 1540 decree and were a result of military necessity. In areas where whites were few or where strategic circumstances demanded a large number of defenders, Blacks were called to duty. The summons was made reluctantly (Vinson III, pp. 14-15).

Colonists saw free African descendants with skepticism and laws were passed to prohibit them from owning a sword or a dagger. Losing control of free Black people was not hypothetical, in 1523 a few African slaves runaways ended up in Zapotec [Oaxaca] communities (Vinson III, 2001).

Thus, by the XVIII century the descendants of slaves were quite visible in the composition of the militias throughout New Spain. By the time the war of independence began Afromestizos made 10 percent of

New Spain's population (Simms, 2008). Undoubtedly, their presence in the makeup of the nation was established by their numerical level. What happened next was the dismantling of their existence in the establishment of the Mexican nation.

The Mestizaje Ideology and the Erasure of Afromexicans

The idea of *mestizaje* is a concept that through its applicability in sociopolitical discourse tends to blur the lines among the different ethnic and racial groups in a given society. In the United States for example, the American conceptualization of a harmonic society resided in the ideology of the *melting pot* which guided the belief that distinct groups would eventually melt in the figurative pot. However, as long as new groups continue to arrive and those who have been in the American territory before and since the European appearance in the shores of this continent do not give up their culture, the melting pot will continue to be just an idea where only certain elements will melt.

In the early 1970s scholar Felipe de Ortego y Gasca noted how the emerging Chicano intellectuals began to refer to Hispanics in the United States as the "invisible minority," the "forgotten people," and "strangers in their homeland" (de Ortego y Gasca, 1973). In Mexico, for varied reasons the *mestizaje* in the form of miscegenation did occur from the outset of the colonial period. From a legal standpoint, in the United States it was universally allowed only recently, since the late 1960s. However, the voices of Chicanos vis-à-vis the mainstream society in the United States have parallel meaning with the Afromexican experience in terms of their visibility—or even existence—in the social consciousness of the Mexicans.

While the hybridization of somatic elements in the colonial period constituted a clear revocation of the legal caste system, the immediate post-colonial experience evidenced the continuation of a highly differentiated society. The caste system gave way to a society of marked social classes. The integration of the Black population was nonetheless achieved after the triumph of the independence movement, with the contradictory caveat that even though caste and slavery were abolished the discriminatory elements inherited from the long colonial era persisted under the

new socioeconomic makeup of the nation. The racial prejudice and the change from caste to class persisted maintaining the economic, political, and social marginalization of the Indigenous and Afromestizo populations (Martínez Montiel, 1993), (Aguilar Rangel, 2022)

The calls for an end to slavery and the caste system were heard from the start of the independence movement. In 1810 at the beginning of the war Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla issued a decree abolishing such practices (Hidalgo y Costilla, 1810). His handpicked successor José María Morelos y Pavón who took the torch of the movement after Hidalgo's death in 1811, renewed the call for the abolition of slavery. The Chilpancingo Congress headed by Morelos met in 1813 and formally declared enslavement of any human being illegal (Morelos y Pavón, 2013; 1813). These frequent pronouncements during the actual period of the war were difficult to enforce. Other key historical moments after formalization of the war's end did not address slavery directly. The Iguala Plan which created the Army of the Three Guarantees, a unified front between the viceregal and the insurgent armies, did not address the issue of slavery (de Iturbide, 1821). Likewise, the Constitution of 1824, the first of the newly independent nation, did not declare slavery illegal (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2017).

It was not until 1829, during the presidency of Vicente Guerrero that through a decree the Mexican government affirmed the end of slavery in all its forms (Soberanes Fernández, 2015), (Guerrero, 1829). It is not coincidence that the first Afromexican president finally put an end to the practice. General Vicente Guerrero joined the liberating army under another *pardo*—offspring of a Black man and an Indigenous woman—priest José María Morelos y Pavón and both made strong statements against slavery during their time as leaders of the insurgent army. Eight years after independence, President Guerrero was able to accomplish that promise, but not without enraging other members of the political and economic elites, including those in the then Mexican state of Texas (Meyer, William, & Deeds, 2014). The Texan settlers were originally from the southern region of the United States. The bulk of the original three hundred families that came under the empresario family headed by Moses Austin and then upon his death continued by his children Stephen Fuller Austin and

James Brown Austin were granted land in 1821. "It was the slaveholding population of Missouri, Louisiana, Tennessee, Kentucky, Arkansas, and Mississippi that had shown the greatest interest in his settlement, and it was from the slave states of the American Union that he expected future support in his enterprise" (Bugbee, 1898, p. 392).

Although two of the most prominent and revered heroes of the Mexican independence movement were Afrodescendants, their racial background is rarely mentioned in the Mexican political or cultural discourses. Neither the composition of the troops where the Afrodescendants, in both sides of civil war, were present is widely acknowledged. The followers of Hermenegildo Galeana, an hacienda owner from the coastal region of the state of Guerrero who joined Morelos y Pavón, were Indigenous, *mestizos* and Afrodescendants (Bartra, 2000). Recognizing the contributions of Afromexicans for their role in the war of independence has been a glaring omission by the Mexican education system; until very recently it had been silent in this regard. Although children learn in school about the background of the founding father of Mexican independence described as a *criollo* (white) and a Jesuit priest, Vicente Guerrero, or José María Morelos y Pavón racial background is never mentioned (Hass Paciuc, 2019). For example, Ballesteros Páez (2011) elaborates on the representations made of Vicent Guerrero in paintings and in writings. In the first, artists portrayed Guerrero as somewhat less Black with straight hair and nose to whiten him. The general had to appear as how leaders should look like: less Indigenous or Black and more *Mestizo* or Criollo-European. The classist/racist social structures were deeply entrenched in New Spain or for that matter in the emerging Mexico. In the second, representations of Vicente Guerrero by prominent and influential public intellectuals' writings the ugly head of their racist attitudes appeared scattered in their works.

Citing Pérez Vejo (2009) Ballesteros explains why this Mexican hero did not fit the right physical profile since "the conceptual schemes of the old Mexican elites defined Mexico and themselves as a nation of [individuals] of the White race, Latin, and Spaniard in physical appearance, and in moral, social, and cultural norms" (Ballesteros Páez, 2011, p. 25) Initially, Carlos María Bustamante a distinguished journalist, historian, statesman, and hero of the independence movement had high praises for

General Vicente Guerrero. Bustamante was signatory of the document that enshrined José María Morelos y Pavón's vision for the country. The document written during the Chilpancingo Congress, known also as the *Anáhuac Congress*, which met in the city of Chilpancingo in southern Mexico, whose official proclamation, *Sentimientos de la Nación*—Sentiments of the Nation—contained Hidalgo's ideas, including the abolition of slavery. However, when Guerrero was chosen to run for the presidency of Mexico supported by the York Mason rite, Bustamente changed his tune. The Scottish rite—who were advocates of centralized government—opposed the group headed by Guerrero which backed a more decentralized federal system. As supporter of the Scottish rite, Bustamante wrote repeatedly about Guerrero's racial makeup and the moral and intellectual inferiority associated with Afromexican people; therefore, the erstwhile hero of the independence was not fit, in the eyes of Bustamante, to become president of Mexico (Ballesteros Páez, 2011).

Guerrero came from a very humble background and although he could read and write, a rare accomplishment for people of his racial/social standing, he rose to become an excellent leader and was immensely popular among the Afromestizos and Indigenous people of the region. At around this time Mexico had approximately 4.8 million inhabitants, but only thirty thousand were literate; in other words, 99.4 percent of the population was illiterate (Vilar, 2010). Additionally, Vicente Guerrero spoke the languages of the region's original people (Vincent, 2001). Even though he was a prominent figure in the fight for independence and Mexico's president, Guerrero could not escape the classist and racist attacks and commentaries from political foes and friends alike (Ballesteros Páez, 2011). If independent Mexico was supposed to embark in the journey of equality, the start did not augur well for the new nation.

The glaring gap between the elite that inherited New Spain and the vast number of those who had little or no access to education or economic prosperity was huge. The disparities remained throughout the XIX century, and they became intolerable by the closing of the century. Meanwhile the acknowledgement of the existence of Afromexicans was becoming a nebulous thought. About 78 percent of the Mexican population could not read and write at the start of the XX century, if access to education was

not universal it stands to reason that very few Mexicans would learn about their shared history, let alone of groups such as the Afromexicans which were excluded on purpose from the national discourse.

The views of influential public intellectuals at the beginning of the XIX century such as Fray Servando Teresa de Mier, Lorenzo Zavala, Carlos María Bustamante, and Lucas Alamán touched on the Afromexican population in general terms (Ballesteros Páez, 2017) such as their condition as slaves during the colonial period or their role in the war or independence. But these were only the rare acknowledgements, in most cases, of troops composed of Negros, Mulattos, and Pardos, without making references to specific leaders. Only Teresa de Mier alluded to Guerrero's Afromestizo race in positive terms when the general refused to accept the Cadiz Constitution—a document drafted by the Spanish during Joseph Napoleon's occupation of Spain—because it did not protect the rights of Afrodescendants, people of the same ancestry as his (Ballesteros Páez, 2017).

The other prominent intellectuals, although they made comments laudatory of General Guerrero's achievements in the battlefield, at the end their classist comments were laden with racist description of his physical appearance. Calor María Bustamante portrayed Vicente Guerrero as having the looks of a pig and a pike fish, with blood the color of blood sausage (Ballesteros Páez, 2011). Lucas Alaman's physical description of one the Guerrero's close battlefield commanders is not at all complimentary calling Coronel Juan del Carmen a "horrible looking Black man from the coast," even though Alamán manages at the same time to praise the Coronel's valor (Ballesteros Páez, 2017).

These influential scholars, public servants, and statesmen who performed distinct roles during Mexico's foundational years as a nation-state helped configured the project of a country whose ethnic/racial makeup considered only the *mestizaje* between Indigenous and European populations. It is no wonder current views of nationhood held by Mexicans have taken deep roots, those ideas date back to the start of independent Mexico when the role of Afrodescendants was minimized and gradually erased from public discourse. The state's official history has yet to catch up with the reality of Mexico as a true multicultural mestizo nation. In the minds

of most Mexicans, Black people lived in this country a long time ago—during a hazy colonial time—and current Afromexicans, the notion goes, are recent arrivals from the Caribbean or Central America. The empty historical periods which official Mexican history has formed regarding its Afrodescendants contributes to the people's ignorance of their mestizaje's third root.

It is not that Afromexicans' presence was entirely unacknowledged in post-independence XIX century Mexico, but rather that the emerging nation-state did not come to grips with a political project conducive to a formal or official amalgamation of the African influence in the life of the nation. The intestine conflicts between the two major visions on how to govern the country and the ever-present external threats kept the country in turmoil until mid-century. For the leading figures of the new nation, the *mestizaje* between the Indigenous and European populations was a fait accompli; therefore, the remnants of the African presence and influence were relegated to specific geographical areas of the country which were not worthy of study or official recognition. The 'legitimate" *mestizaje* based on a binary racial configuration had won the battle of the minds and hearts of the Mexican population.

Discussions about Afrodescendants appeared in the Mexican press for years after independence as noted by Delgadillo Núñez (2019) in his analysis of the press between 1840 and 1860. The press items however were not about their inclusion in the country's *mestizaje* but in the context of the "political uses the writers made of [some]…themes and their role in construction of identities and historic narratives that continue to have influence in the contemporary world." (Delgadillo Núñez, pp.744-745). Likewise, the migration from the Caribbean to the United States, specifically to Louisiana, and then to Veracruz, Mexico was noted by the Mexican press of the mid-XIX century. The expectation was that free Afrodescendants from these regions would enhance their new homeland since these migrants were bringing with them knowledge of advanced agricultural practices and capital. As time went by though references to their presence in Veracruz died out (Lemelle, 2013). Although XIX century press accounts describe Afrodescendants' presence in the country, their contributions to the building of the country have yet to be given their due credit.

Repairing the Past, Fixing the Present

The Mexican Revolution jolted Mexico. Different political and socioeconomic forces sought to force out the regime that had kept Porfirio Díaz, the dictator of almost three decades, in power. As with social revolutions, this one was also headed initially by leaders from the same economic and political elites. The "apostle"—as he is known in Mexico—of the armed movement was Francisco I. Madero, a pro-democracy wealthy *hacendado* from the northern part of the country. After nearly ten years of war the victorious factions were represented by an elite of generals and intellectuals who continued to promote with intensity a mestizo nation.

About a century had passed since the War of Independence of 1810, but not much had changed in terms economic progress for the Indigenous people. In the liberal constitution of 1917, the emerging cohort of revolutionaries emphasized the rights of all Mexicans. Special consideration was given to land tenure; after all the revolutionary troops were composed of poor people and most Mexicans lived in rural communities. It was in these non-urban settings where the bulk of the Indigenous people could be found. The attention paid to the plight of the poor and the Indigenous people was appropriate, but nothing was purposely done to include other demographic groups. The Afrodescendants were non-existent in the national dialogue.

In fact, the prominent Mexican anthropologist Manuel Gamio in his discussion of the "ethnic heterogeneity" of Mexico identified only three broad groups, "…each one which is clearly defined by its ethnic, social, and cultural characteristics." These groups were the Indigenous, *Mestizos*, and those "who are immediate or far-flung descendants of foreigners established in the country whose blood has mixed with the middle class, but not at all with the Indigenous" (Gamio, 1916). The author made no mention of the Afrodescendants. Paradoxically, in the early 1940s he suggested to Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán to study Mexico's Black population.

The post-revolutionary period opened new possibilities for the arts, education, land redistribution, workers' rights, and overall cultural reawakening by digging back to the pre-Columbian past and new public policies for the advancement of Indigenous people. In the multicultural banner of

the state Afromexicans continued to be absent. The *mestizo* ideology—Indigenous-Spanish—was pretty much entrenched by then. The myth was couched in the idea that, without being open about it, the *mestizo* leadership supported by the Indigenous and the rest of the peasants and poor urban workers had defeated the dictatorship. To the extent that the leadership of Francisco Villa in northern Mexico and Emiliano Zapata in the southern part exemplified the participation of the disposed masses in the revolutionary war, at the end of the day they, as the rest of the main generals, were riddled by bullets. However, their ideals were enshrined in the Constitution of 1917, but not without surrendering to the ultimate victors of the armed conflict led by the old hacendado from Coahuila Venustiano Carranza and the middle-class farmer from Sonora Álvaro Obregón.

With the killing of Emiliano Zapata in 1919 and the defeat of Fracisco Villa with his eventual killing in 1923, the struggle for the soul of the revolution and the implementation of the 1917 constitution ensued. On the one hand, the ideas of Jose Vasconcelos, a prominent intellectual who became secretary of education in 1920 gained prominence. With his overall expansion of literacy throughout Mexico, the funding for the arts, particularly muralism, with its strong depictions of the main tenets of the Mexican Revolution promoting the Indigenous and working-class history and struggles energized the Mexican nation as it were. On the other hand, Vasconcelos' book penned after he left office in 1924 both charted a hopeful course for racial harmony in what he called the *raza cósmica*—the cosmic race—but it has been criticized as a work of eugenics. This criticism centers of the idea that the *mestizaje* promoted by Vasconcelos tended to favor the physical improvement (beauty) of people but based on the whitening of non-white people (Hernández Cuevas, 2004); thus, the emergence of a fifth race—the new mestizo, the "cosmic race."

In the debate about the Revolution's direction, there were efforts by promoters of a more inclusive *mestizaje* than that limited to the Spanish-Indigenous hybrid model. The inclusion of Afromexicans is noted in works of art, such as films, paintings, and during the 1940s in academic works. For a brief historical moment around the time of World War II Mexico was viewed by African Americans and other scholars, activists, and intellectuals from Latin America, as shining beacon for the develop-

ment of African studies in the Americas. The racial equality rhetoric of post-revolutionary Mexico and the positive assessments of such scholars as W. E. B. DuBois and poet Langston Hughes, among others positioned Mexico at the center of a short-lived period where there were high hopes for the development of the International Institute of Afro-American Institute (Cohen, 2020).

Cohen (2020) goes on to state the African American and Mexican "… shared political sensibilities about cultural race forged during the Second World War, when Mexico briefly sat at the center for Afro diaspora research in the Western Hemisphere crumbled without the specter of fascism hovering over Europe and Asia" (p. 223). While in the 1940s Mexico was seen as a center for the study of the African diaspora, this efflorescence collapsed also due to the lack of funding and the overall dearth of interest by the government to reevaluate or evaluate the role of Afromexicans in the life of the country. By the 1970s Mexico had fallen behind other countries of the Americas in the study of its Black population. The works of Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán and others collected dust. Aguirre Beltrán commented about the sad situation in his criticism of the *Historia de México*'s—History of Mexico—thirteen volumes. "It is inconceivable that *Historia de Mexico*…edited by Miguel León Portilla, an illustrious professional, does not mention Black people, or slavery of Black people, a single time in one of the 3,100 pages..." He goes on to say that this omission was perhaps due to the lack of inclusion in this voluminous work of a "social scientist specialized in African studies [Africanist]" (Aguirre Beltrán, 2005, p. 355).

In the early 1990s Mexican academic researchers began to reconsider study of the Afromexican. The pioneering work of Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán and other isolated works from the decades that followed set the stage for a new impetus. The concept of *nuestra tercera raíz*—Our Third Root—discussed by Martinez Montiel and others cemented the current sequence of research that continues to our days (UNAM, 2016) , (Martínez Montiel, 1993), (Cohen, 2020). At the same time, the emergence of activists in civil society was fundamental to pressure decision-makers at the end of the XX century to rescue Afromexican historical past and acknowledge its current presence in the country's landscape. The relatively quick evolution for the

recognition of the Afromexican in the last thirty years is consequence of a convergence of factors from within the country and from external opportunities. Both the academic world and activists exercised intense pressure on Mexican institutions to finally grant Afromexicans their due recognition.

In 2019 a constitutional amendment was adopted to formally include Afromestizos as part of the Mexican reality. This de jure recognition has yet to be acknowledged by the bulk of the national population. However, this was a landmark step in the direction of achieving the goal of inclusion to broaden the narrow understanding of the prevailing definition of *mestizo* in the country.

> "This Constitution recognizes the Afromexican people and communities, whatever their self-identification, as part of the pluricultural composition of the Nation. They are granted the rights defined…in this article…to guarantee their self-determination, autonomy, development, and social inclusion" (Diputados, 2024).

The constitutional amendment was followed by the insertion of a question about self-identification in the 2020 national census. Previously the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) had conducted a survey to find out conditions and size of the Afromexican population.

While the total national population increased by 5 percent during five years, the Afromexican population saw a growth of 46 percent as shown by the numbers in Graphs I and II respectively. The question is why the Afromexican population grew 41percentage points above the national average during the same five years is worth pondering.

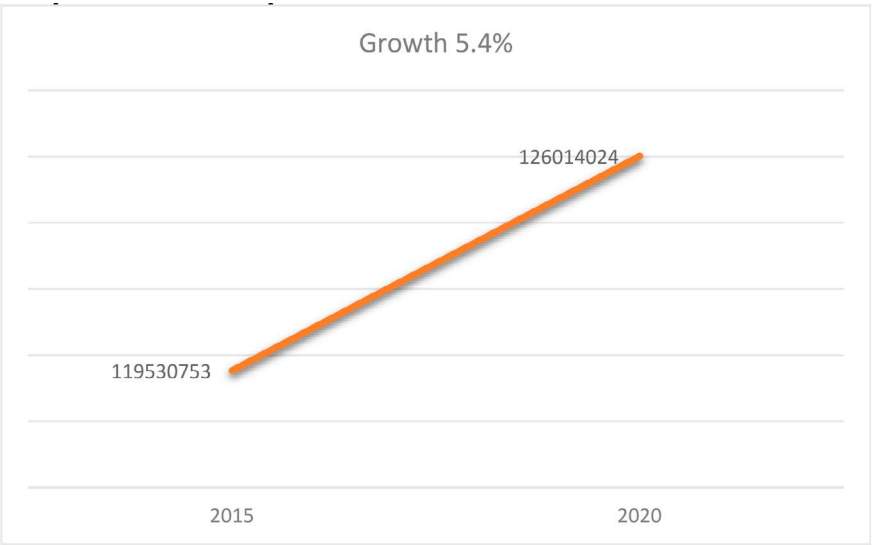
Among the variables that informed the results of the 2015 households survey, and the 2020 census could have been how the question was asked. In 2015 the interviewee was asked: "In accordance with your culture, history, and traditions, […] do you consider yourself Black, Afromexican or Afro descendant? Answers: Yes; Yes, partially; No; Don't know."

The question was readjusted for clarity in the 2020 Census. In the 2020 update she or he was asked: "In accordance with your ancestry and your customs and traditions, […] do you consider yourself Afromexican, Black or Afro descendant? Answers: Yes, No." (CDMX, 2021). The less cum-

bersome choice of answers in 2020 lent the question more clarity than in the 2015 survey.

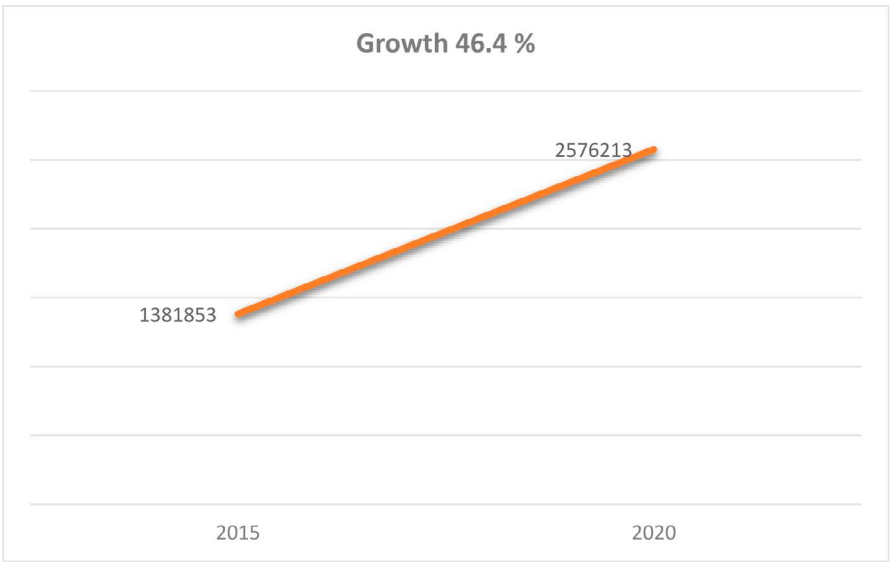
Also, the awareness campaign by the government in the years leading to the 2020 Census encouraging Afromexicans to be counted in the upcoming national count undoubtedly contributed to proclaim their self-identification by answering positively to the question.

Graph 1
Mexico's Population Increase



(INEGI, 2015), (INEGI, 2020)

Graph 2
Graph II. Afromexican Population Increase



(INEGI, 2015), (INEGI, 2022)

Considering that historically Black people and their descendants were viewed as belonging at the bottom of the social/racial stratification is not a small wonder that the count almost doubled during the first major survey and the national census count. It is conceivable that an increasing number of Mexican will continue to identify as descendants of the African diaspora or as belonging to the diaspora. Their invisibility is no longer possible.

Conclusion

The huge strides done in the last three decades to bring recognition, and a degree of justice to a group of people who helped build Mexico since its inception as both a colonial holding and as an independent nation should be noted. The road ahead is not an easy one.

Social pressure, academic research, and government willingness to unveil a population that was erased from the annals of history for two hundred years makes it a daunting challenge to truly arrive at a Mexico which will broaden the ideology of *mestizaje*. Nation-building in Mexico promo-

ted from the onset the idea of a binary encounter between two people, the European represented by the Spaniards and the Indigenous represented by a multitude of different original inhabitants of New Spain. During the second push for the consolidation of the *mestizo* nation, after the Mexican Revolution of 1910, the collective public policies in education proposed the homogenization of the nation by calling for the abandonment of Indigenous cultural expressions including their languages. The intention was to bring them into the *mestizo* nation more fully. Such were the ideas of the post-revolution minister of public education José Vasconcelos. In his controversial but widely cited book *La raza cósmica*, Vasconcelos advocated for the enhancement of the Mexican *mestizo*, in the latest version she or he would look less Indigenous and Whiter.

The idea of passing from Indigenous or Black to a "better" social or racial category was well entrenched by the end of the colonial period. One hundred years after the declaration of independence under the rhetoric of revolutionary leaders who became the political elite of Mexico *mestizaje* continued its ascendency in the Mexican consciousness. There was no room to admit any other group. The vestiges of colonial and post-colonial social arrangements were still almost intact. Social economic classes replaced the caste system at the bottom the Indigenous and Afromexican people continued to survive. The brief attempt to broaden the *mestizaje* by "rediscovering" the Black population of Mexico in 1940s was not successful. The ideology that erased Afromexicans from history early on during the XIX century was very much alive (Jerry A. R., 2023).

Although recognition in the XXI century of the Afro descendant diaspora in Mexico, vestiges of the long-standing social structures persist.

> Interestingly, the literature on colour discrimination in Mexico demonstrates that even while the official rhetoric of the mestizo excludes blackness, blackness continues to be imagined as a baseline for colour prejudice, as the darker one's skin (as well as corresponding phenotypical attributes such as hair texture and facial features) the less mestizo one is considered to be. Colour, and by extension Blackness continue to be at the heart of racial and ethnic boundary making in Mexico (Jerry A. R., 2021, pp. 2440-2441).

In the 2022 National Discrimination Survey 45.1 percent of Afromexicans felt discriminated against by the non-Afromestizo population. In areas of public life Afrodescendants perceived discrimination such in access to health or while visiting stores or restaurants, 51.4 percent, and 52.2 percent, respectively. While looking for jobs 40.4 percent felt discrimination (INEGI, 2022).

In terms of structural racism, the self-perceptions of discrimination are corroborated by results from the 2020 Census where we see that 66.5 percent of Afrodescendants have access to tap water while 74.1 percent general population have access to it (Aguilar Rangel, 2022). Access to better jobs, schools, and other socioeconomic benefits that non-Afromexicans receive are more difficult for the Afrodescendants to achieve. The lighter the color of the skin the more opportunities one enjoys. The data from the National Discrimination Survey makes it obvious for all to see.

When asked about whether the respondent will rent to an Afromexican, 22.6 percent stated they would not. To the question about what the main problem Afrodescendants face, 29.7 percent of them said discrimination because of their physical appearance (INEGI, 2022).

Both the 2020 census and the National Discrimination Survey data allow us to see in what conditions Afromexicans live in contemporary Mexico. It has been a long journey since the start of the XIX century when Afrodescendants disappeared from the official history of the new country. Briefly, during the mid XX century their presence was acknowledged in academic works, only to be submerged by the post-revolutionary rhetoric of a modern, energetic, and *mestizo* nation with its accepted binary composition consisting of Spanish and Indigenous roots.

The work of individuals and groups will undoubtedly continue pushing the envelope to translate the acknowledgement of the Afro presence in Mexico into concrete public policies to benefit this population.

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