

## The diverse roots in the cultural *mestizaje* of the province of Zacatula (current Costa Grande de Guerrero), Mexico

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**Summary:** *In our America the cultural mestizaje of diverse roots is evident. Native populations, when they were drastically decimated, mixed with Europeans and African enslaved people who arrived during the colonial era. In addition, the so-called “Chinese Indians” arrived in New Spain, in the territory of the province of Zacatula (present-day Costa Grande de Guerrero) on the Manila Galleon. In addition to this, there were also African, Asian and European migrations after Mexican independence. Despite this, in Mexico it was not until the 1940s that Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán began his studies on the black population and with his work The black population of Mexico (1946) historically confirmed the African roots in the cultural mestizaje of the Mexican population. Previously (and even later), the Mexican mestizo was considered the same as in colonial times, as the descendant of Spanish and indigenous. As for the studies on Asian migration, they are more recent and need to be more widely disseminated.*

**Keywords:** *cultural mestizaje in Our America, Zacatula province (current Costa Grande de Guerrero), “Chinese Indians”, African roots, Afromexicans.*

### I. Introduction

The systematic studies of the African roots of Mexico, started from the founding work of Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán. Following in his footsteps, Guillermo Bonfil Batalla promoted, in 1974, the “Afroamérica” project that began with a comparative ethnology seminar at the then Higher Research Center of the National Institute of Anthropology and History (Martínez Montiel, 2006); Luz María Martínez Montiel was part of the Bonfil work team and was in charge of the UNESCO “Slave Route” project and the coordination of the “Keys of Latin America” collection. In “Our Third Root,” researchers and historians (between 1993 and 1995), published various books on the African presence in Central America, South America, the Caribbean, and Mexico. Thus, studies of the colonial states of Puebla, Guanajuato, Colima, Nuevo León, Campeche, Tabasco, Tamaulipas, Veracruz and Michoacán were released. It is worth mentioning that part of the Costa Grande of the current state of Guerrero belonged to the province of Zacatula, which was part of the Bishopric of Michoacán.

Currently, due to the need to combat racism and to make the African heritage visible in Latin American and Caribbean cultures, various revisions have been carried out recognizing this heritage. As Pablo Del Valle (2013) remarks, the time between 1990 and 2012 is characterized by a fundamental change in the relationship with *the other* in Latin America: “States adopt multicultural policies that institutionally recognize the heterogeneity of their population and citizenship, and the richness of its different historical and cultural contributions” (Del Valle: 10).

In addition to this, the UN decreed the year 2011 as the International Year for People of African Descent and 2015-2024 as the International Decade for People of African Descent. Consequently, the Mexican authorities committed to making the presence of Afro-descendants visible. Furthermore, Afro-Mexican organizations have fought and finally achieved their constitutional recognition in 2019.

All of this has been very necessary, since if we stick to the figure calculated by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) we have approximately 150 million people of African descent in the region, which represents close to 30% of the population of Latin America (Del Valle, 2013, p.10). In Mexico,

according to data from the 2015 Intercensal Survey, there are 1,391,853 Afro-descendants, representing 1.2% of the national population.

## II. African and Asian roots

Some populations of the Costa Chica de Guerrero, located to the southeast of Acapulco, have taken a central role in terms of constitutional recognition of Afro-Mexicans, by building a symbolic link with Africa that allowed them to advance their struggle (Solís, 2017). As for the Asian roots, unlike what happened with the Afro-Mexicans, there is no town of the coastal region of Guerrero that claimed that origin. However, in intangible culture (in gastronomy, for example), in the cultivation of the coconut palm and the sap (*tuba*) obtained from it, as well as in some words and in the physical features of many of its inhabitants, the genetic heritage of Asian cultures is evident.

### Colonial documents and research on African and “Indian-Chinese” enslaved people in Acapulco and the province of Zacatula

A presentation I co-authored with Maricruz Piza López (Piza and Solís, 2019) reviews documents and research on the colonial era that prove the African presence in the province of Zacatula (current Costa Grande de Guerrero), a scarcely studied region, regarding the ethnic presence of African and Filipino or Asian origins, although inhabitants of this region have not participated in the struggle for constitutional recognition of the Afro-Mexican population. I draw on parts of that text for this section.

Among the causes that led to the arrival of enslaved people of African origin to New Spain, as has been documented by various authors, is the extermination of the indigenous population due to the epidemics brought by the conquerors, the forced labor to which they were subjected, the cattle that destroyed their crops, as well as the psychological impact of the loss of their culture.

The first wave of blacks and mulattos brought to the shores of Zacatula occurred during the 16th century, under the power of Spanish *encomenderos* who tried their luck with cocoa. The second was from the first years of the trans-Pacific trade, aboard the Manila Galleon, when, in addition to free individuals from the Philippine archipelago, there are records of enslaved persons from the east coast of Africa, the *Indian State* of Portugal and the rest of Southeast Asia.

Through the Nao de China, in addition to the so-called “Chinese Indians”, enslaved Africans arrived. Hence, they not only arrived in New Spain by the Atlantic route - as Deborah Oropeza points out:

The entry of black slaves via the Pacific increased at the end of the 17th century, probably due to the prohibition of the slavery of “Chinese” ordered in New Spain in the years 1672-1673. Even the assentists of blacks began to demand before the authorities the entry of these slaves into the China ship, the Crown resolved in 1687 that “all the blacks who come to the Philippine ships and enter New Spain are bad entrance, and that they can be commissioned” the assentist. The concern was also expressed that many of these slaves professed “the Mahometan sect” (Oropeza, 2007: 70)

Oropeza affirms that “in the port of Acapulco they worked as domestic slaves in the royal institutions [...] in the various royal works of the port, including the manufacture and dressing of the ships. [...] Asian slaves also worked in the cocoa and coconut palm farms of the Acapulco mayor's office”, as well as in Zacatula (Oropeza, 2011: 37).

Another very valuable contribution is the doctoral thesis of Beatriz Palazuelos Mazars (2012), who studied the port of Acapulco in the seventeenth century, supporting the existence of an African and Asian population in the port:

Slaves also arrived by galleon from Manila to New Spain..., those who arrived from the Pacific came from what was called the *India of Portugal* which included various territories from Sofala in the Mozambique Channel to Java and the Moluccas or the islands Specification [1]. From *India from Portugal*, the Portuguese ships arrived in Manila with slaves, men and women, who, according to Pedro Chirinos... *were black and white, young and old*

children; Don Antonio de Morga describes them soberly as: *blacks and kaffirs*. The slaves kidnapped from these territories could be black ... or *Chinese Indians*. The place of origin of the slaves was rarely specified in the reports of Royal Officials of Acapulco: they generally registered them with numbers, and only occasionally, they wrote India, Bengal, Macao, Java, Japan and Cebu. [21] (Palazuelos, 2012: 188)

Following the information of these authors, many of the “Chinese Indians” (so called to distinguish them from the Indians of New Spain and because the Philippines was a Spanish territory) settled on the coasts of the southern Pacific coast, between the provinces of Colima, Motines, Zacatula, Acapulco and Iqualapa, as well as in Mexico City.

Alejandra Cárdenas (1997) studies women of African origin in Acapulco in the seventeenth century, who were persecuted by the Inquisition for being accused of being sorceresses who had a pact with the devil, knowledge of love, and the ability to use hexes to harm others:

I later worked another inquisitorial process [...], which is the case of a fortune teller. They take her away because they say she went to the mountains to conspire there; she made a conspiracy with the other women and then she began to speak like a man and the others asked her if her lovers were already coming in the naos de la china and she told them “women are glad that two naos are coming, one large and one small” and it turns out that for this fact they are arrested because they say how he made a man's voice, for sure they made a coven (Cárdenas, 2007: 187).

Likewise, among the documentation of the General Archive of the Nation (AGN) from the Coyuca farms, cocoa producers, there are records of “black Chinese” slaves, during various periods of the 17th century. Also, the registers of *Parties and lists of the bishopric of Michoacán (1680-1685)*, by Alberto Carrillo Cázares, inform us of the demographic distribution of the “*Chinese Indians*,” “blacks” and “mulattos” in the provinces of Acapulco and Zacatula. “The register was that individual relation of parishioners who had fulfilled in that year with the annual commandments of confession and communion. Normally, it comprised all of the residents older than seven years” (Carrillo, 1996: 14).

### **III. The Costa Grande of Guerrero and its original population**

The coastline that goes from Acapulco to the state of Michoacán is called Costa Grande, bordering to the north with the Tierra Caliente region and Michoacán, to the east with the central region and Acapulco, including a large part of the Sierra Madre del Sur. The Costa Grande region includes the municipalities of Coyuca de Benítez, Benito Juárez (where San Jerónimo is located), Tecpan, Petatlán, Zihuatanejo, Coahuayutla and La Unión, and also includes Atoyac and its mountains, where it borders Heliodoro Castillo, whose municipal seat is Tlacotepec.

In the colonial period, what would become this region belonged to the province of Zacatula located “on the coast of the South Sea [...] it was one of the oldest and most important parties of the bishopric of Michoacán despite the distance from the episcopal headquarters” (Carrillo, 1996: 333).

In the aforementioned *parties and registers*, the drastic decrease of the indigenous population in the province and town of Zacatula is noted: “This town, forty leagues between the mouth of the Balsas and the bay of Zihuatanejo, was depopulated since the first third of the XVII century ... , it is called Cuaguayutla, it is a benefit of clergymen, and Alonso Rodríguez Galván is benefited.”

In the 1631 report the population has recovered slightly: there are 170 Indians of confession and 5 Spanish neighbors” (Carrillo, 333).

As for the nearby town of Petatlán, located at a distance of “7 leagues east of Zihuatanejo, a parish attended by clergymen ... [together] with the town of Zacatula and Tecpan, it formed the mayor's office and province of los Motines de Zacatula. In 1550 its population numbered 15,400 inhabitants. In the second decade of the seventeenth century, Bishop Covarrubias described that party with just over 230 families” (Carrillo, 334).

In the year 1681, in the population's chart, cultural diversity is noted among the inhabitants of Petatlan. Among individuals married, widowed and single, there are 46 Indians, 60 Spanish, 38 mestizos, 3 free

blacks, 35 black slaves, 66 free mulattoes, 22 mulattoe slaves, 13 free Chinese, 25 Chinese slaves, being 308 people of confession, and a total of 400 inhabitants (Carrillo, 1996: 334).

#### IV. The Cuitlatecos

In pre-Hispanic times, according to various documents, these lands were inhabited by the Cuitlatecos, which is why it was also known as Cuitlatecapan. In 1498 it was conquered by the Aztecs, speakers of Nahuatl, who established the tributary province of Cihuatlán according to records contained in the Mendoza Codex and the Tax Registration Number.

Regarding indigenous languages, in the province of Zacatula, Cuitlateco was spoken and following the information of the municipal chronicler of Atoyac (Cardona, 2010), even in 1911, there were some families speaking the Cuitlateca language in Atoyac; while in Tierra Caliente, they stopped speaking it around 1940, the year in which the last Cuitlateco elderly died.

According to Hendrichs, the Cuitlatecos were strong and intelligent, opulent and haughty in bearing. He considers that their extinction "was probably due to their bad luck of having their seats in a territory disputed for many years by two great enemy nations: the Aztecs and the Tarascans. They lived exactly in the zone that constituted the scene for the bloody fights between two powerful armies, and thus they were forced to become mercenary soldiers of one or the other side" (Hendrichs, 1939: 333).

Atoyac is considered as "the main town in the jurisdiction, all on the South Sea Coast (Costa Grande, between Zihuatanejo and Acapulco). [in the register of] 1683... there are 1,235 people of confession (about 1,603 inhabitants) including Indians, Spaniards, mulattoes and Chinese from the towns of Tecpan and Atoyac, and from their ranches" (Carrillo, 1996: 335).

Not only the illnesses and mistreatment of the Spaniards decimated the Cuitlatecos, the revolutionary movements also contributed to it:

It must be remembered that in our region every 25 years there is an armed movement. After the War of Independence, in the first decades of independent Mexico came the caste war, then the internal lawsuits between the regional chiefs and the struggle between liberals and conservatives. In all these conflicts the Indians were cannon fodder and in many cases they suffered humiliation. The indigenous people ended up being exterminated during the Mexican Revolution (Interview, Cardona, 2020)

In Atoyac, Mixtec and Tlapaneco are spoken by families that have arrived in recent migrations. Nahuatl-speaking peons who came from the outskirts of Chilapa during the coffee harvest (between the months of November to February) were called "chantes." From that time, there were also Nahua families who stayed to live in the region, and some of them were disappeared during the years of state terrorism.

#### V. The cultural *mestizaje* of the Costa Grande region

Around the middle of the 20th century, in Tecpan de Galeana there were those who considered themselves descendants of Spaniards and looked down on the "Indians" or the "blacks," but inter-ethnic relations on the Costa Grande are well defined. So it is understandable that there are no populations that recognize themselves as Afro-Mexicans (even less with roots of Asian cultures), with the exception of Zihuatanejo, where it is considered that there is an Afro-descendant population (others are Acapulco and Chilpancingo). However, their number does not reach 10% of the total population (INEGI, 2017). I venture –as a hypothesis– that due, in part, to the proximity to Acapulco and to a more intense process of cultural *mestizaje* than in the Costa Chica and, unlike this region, no researchers interested in studying the Afro-Mexican population have arrived, neither have inhabitants of the Costa Grande been interested in its origins, nor – so far – has its population built a symbolic link with Africa, as has occurred in the Costa Chica municipality of Cuajinicuilapa.

The consumption and cultivation of rice and coconut has remained from the Asian culture. In Tenexpa oral history, pertaining to the population belonging to the municipality of Tecpan, it is said that women during the harvest of rice kept the *metate* and replaced tortillas with rice. Certainly, in this region the consumption of boiled white rice (also called *morisqueta*) is equivalent to the consumption of the tortilla, since the rice accompanies a great diversity of dishes replacing the tortilla. In Atoyac, San Jerónimo and Tecpan, many

families eat white rice for dinner every day, which is usually served with beans, cheese, and pickled chili peppers.

From the province of Zacatula, Álvaro Ochoa (1997: 28) brings up the current town of San Jerónimo, where there was a population of African origin: "In 1836, the "Statistical Register of the Towns that make up the District of Acapulco is taken ... ," where the regional chief or prefect is accountable to the superiority. The aforementioned document mentions the life and passion of Saint Jerome, a town and its annexes with 2,500 souls, four fifths 'of African origin.'" Ochoa mentions that as part of their economic activities the cultivation of cotton, cattle ranching, and horsemanship were practiced. We can note this coincidence with the Afro-descendants of the Costa Chica.

### Conclusions

In these territories the process of *mestizaje* was more intense due to the extermination of native populations. However, in the diversity of physiognomies of the coastal people of the Costa Grande, traits of indigenous, Afro-descendant, European and Asian populations can be observed.

No population on the Costa Grande has built a symbolic link with Africa, as has happened in the municipality of Cuajinicuilapa.

Despite this, there remains evidence of immaterial culture. For example, in the case of the "Chinese Indians," their knowledge about the cultivation and consumption of rice and the coconut palm from which the sap is extracted remains, to which a Philippine origin is attributed.

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