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# Afro-Mexicans and the Struggle for Recognition

Kimberly Medina

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AFRO-MEXICANS AND THE STRUGGLE FOR RECOGNITION

By

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of the Requirements for  
Graduation with Honors from the  
South Carolina Honors College

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## **Thesis Summary**

Prior to the Intercensal Survey of 2015, the last official count of Africans in Mexico was in 1810, when they constituted approximately 10 percent of the population (Minority Rights Group International).

In 2015, “Afro-descendant” debuted as an ethnic category in the Intercensal Survey with the goal of locating and quantifying the Afro-Mexican population. This was a preliminary effort to capture the magnitude and quality of life of Mexico’s Afro-descendant population before the 2020 Census. While Mexico’s Afro-descendants did not have the option to identify as such prior to the 2015 Intercensal Survey, they were always included in the census, but as indigenous peoples, even though their ethnic and cultural roots are markedly different.

Recognition in the Intercensal Survey comes after a decades-long struggle that officially began in 1997 with Mexico Negro’s First Annual Meeting of Black Towns. Though censal recognition is a significant step towards equality, the federal government has been heavily criticized for its delayed and limited recognition of the nation’s Afro-descendant population.

In light of the Mexican government’s concession to include “Afro-descendant” as an ethnic category in the 2015 Intercensal Survey, this thesis project aims to: 1) understand the contributions and experience of Afro-Mexicans within Mexican society, 2) understand the importance of official recognition as an ethnic group, 3) understand why, relative to the rest of Latin America, Mexico took so long to officially recognize its Afro-descendant population, 4) analyze the Afro-Mexican movement towards recognition, paying particular attention to its composition and strategy and 5) determine

what recognition in the intercensal survey means for the future of the movement, the Afro-Mexican population and Mexican society as a whole.

## **Introduction**

On December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2015, as I was scrolling through my Facebook newsfeed as I regularly do, I came across a headline entitled, “Mexico Takes Big Step in Finally Recognizing Afro-Latinos”. Immediately intrigued, I clicked on the article and began to read, to find out that Afro-Mexicans were recognized as such in the 2015 Intercensal Survey—the first time they were recognized as such in an official count since the Mexican Revolution.

The 225-word article prompted a flood of thoughts and questions—“Afro-Mexicans? Why am I just now hearing about them? ... Federal recognition is great, but why now? Why is Mexico just now recognizing its Afro-descendant population? Why did it take so long?” And the list goes on. Without knowing it, that (albeit very brief) article led me to me thesis topic.

Though questions regarding the Afro-Mexican experience abound, my thesis will be limited to answering questions regarding the Afro-Mexican struggle for recognition (which were outlined in the section above) on behalf of governmental entities at various levels.

And finally, before beginning, I will clarify one thing. Because of the wide array of terms used to refer to Mexicans of African descent (and also for the sake of consistency), I will only use the terms “Afro-descendant” and “Afro-Mexican” and the phrase “Mexicans of African descent” to refer to Mexicans of African descent. This word choice is rooted in the popularity of the aforementioned terms in the struggle for recognition and equal treatment of Afro-descendants across the African diaspora and the

legitimacy conferred to said terms by academics and institutions, both international and domestic.

## **Afro-Mexicans**

Afro-Mexicans in the past and present are largely ignored. Prior to the Intercensal Survey of 2015 there were no official statistics that quantified or qualified the Afro-Mexican population and experience. This lack of official information reflects the exclusion and marginalization of the Afro-Mexican population that continues to persist today. Moreover, this lack of awareness of the struggle of Afro-Mexican life complicates the detection of the population's needs and the devising of solutions that would allow Afro-Mexicans to fully enjoy their rights as Mexican citizens. This invisibility (as perpetuated by both the Mexican government and Mexican society in general) allows and further exacerbates the exclusion of Mexico's Afro-descendants.

### **Who Are Afro-Mexicans?**

The term "Afro-descendant" was institutionalized at the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance at Durban in 2001. At the conference, the States of the Americas defined an "Afro-descendant" as "a person of African origin who lives in the Americas and in the region of the African Diaspora as a result of slavery, who has been denied the exercise of their fundamental rights" (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 2011). The term has been subject to localisms, giving root to the terms "Afro-Colombian", "Afro-Cuban" and the like. Mexico is no exception, and consequently adopted the term "Afro-Mexican" to define "persons of Mexican nationality who are descendants of African men and women who were separated from their communities of origin and forcefully brought to the continent during the colonial period or those that migrated to what is now Mexican territory after

the nation's Independence" (*Afrodescendencias en México Investigación e Incidencia AC*, 2016, p.1).

Definitions of Afro-descendants and Afro-Mexicans, consequently, are heavily based on a slave past, centered on a single voyage from the African continent to their present-day location. Yet, it is important to note that the Afro-descendant experience is not homogenous. The Mascogos of Coahuila, for example, are descendants of runaway slaves and free blacks who intermingled with Seminole natives in Florida. Fleeing recapture and conflict with the Creek, the Mascogos settled in Mexico (as they were granted protection from the Mexican government and land to settle in) under the condition that they would defend the border from the Lapin Apache and Comanches tribes (Martínez, 2007, pp. 15-16). Still other Afro-descendants are recent immigrants of African and Caribbean origin.

### **How many and where?**

The 2015 Intercensal Survey, conducted by the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) gathered that 1,381,853 Mexicans identify as Afro-descendants, meaning 1.2% of the nation's population identifies as Afro-Mexican. Prior estimates of the National Council for the Prevention of Discrimination (CONAPRED) thought the Afro-descendant population to be around 450,000 persons, approximately a third of the official count gathered by the 2015 Intercensal Survey. By way of the Intercensal Survey, INEGI further found that an additional 497,975 persons identify as partially Afro-Mexican, meaning 1.7% of the Mexican population identifies as Afro-Mexican or partially Afro-Mexican. Interestingly enough, another 1.4% does not know if they are Afro-descendants or not.

While Afro-Mexicans can be found in twenty-five of the nation's thirty-one states, the Afro-Mexican population, is largely concentrated in a few states, namely Guerrero, Oaxaca and Veracruz, of which 6.5%, 4.9% and 3.3% of the population, respectively, identify as Afro-Mexican. Sizable populations can also found in the states of Nuevo Leon, Baja California Sur, and Mexico, as well as Mexico City, of which Afro-Mexicans constitute approximately 1.5 to 1.9% of the respective population (see graphic below).

### Porcentaje de la población afrodescendiente por entidad federativa



Source: Consejo Nacional de Población (National Council of Population). (2016). *Infografía: Población Afrodescendiente* (Infographics: Afrodescendent Population).

The figures above are an important starting point in the quest to understand the Afro-Mexican experience. While findings of the 2015 Intercensal Survey are significant, it must be stressed that quantifying and qualifying the existence of Afro-Mexicans is very much a work in progress. Though INEGI estimates that Mexico is home to approximately 1.4 million persons of African descent, organizers, believe that the Afro-descendant population is far larger. This perceived inability of the Intercensal Survey to accurately

account for the Afro-Mexican population is largely rooted in identity politics, and consequently, the terminology used to capture the population in question (as there is a discrepancy between the terminology used to refer to Mexicans of African descent, among Afro-Mexicans and non Afro-Mexicans, alike). INEGI's sampling method in the 2015 Intercensal Survey, too, calls into question the accuracy of the survey's findings.

Before conducting the official survey, INEGI conducted a pilot survey of the Afro-descendant population in the coastal regions of Oaxaca and Guerrero with the goal of determining how the Afro-descendant population prefers to be identified. The question asked in the pilot survey was the following, "Based on your culture and history do any of the persons in this home consider themselves descendants of Black or African peoples?". Those who claimed black and/or African ancestry unanimously answered that they were of "black" ancestry as opposed to "African" ancestry. As a result, the term "black" was incorporated in the question posed in the intercensal survey that asked about African ancestry. The question varies slightly from the one presented in the field study and is as follows, "Based on your culture, history and traditions, do you consider yourself black, meaning Afro-Mexican or Afro-descendant?".

Roberto Jesús Ruiz Ramirez, director of conceptual design at INEGI explained that the concept of a "black" identity was included in the question mentioned above because "black" is the term Afro-Mexicans most frequently use to describe themselves. Though the question posed asked about an Afro-Mexican/Afro-descendant identity in reference to the more commonly used descriptor (i.e. black), in an attempt to clarify the concept of an "Afro-descendant"/ "Afro-Mexican", the word choice was problematic, as Ruiz Ramirez further elaborated that many respondents were not aware of how to identify

as Afro-descendants and some even thought the term referred to people from other countries (Sanchez, Gonzalez, & Gorge, 2016).

The tension between the terms used in the Intercensal Survey to ask about an African heritage (i.e. “black” and “Afro-descendant”/“Afro-Mexican”) and the discrepancy between the identifiers used among Afro-Mexicans themselves to denote African ancestry hint at a lack of consensus in describing Mexicans of African descent, which calls into question the 2015 Intercensal Survey’s ability to accurately capture the Afro-descendant population.

In order to avoid the confusion caused by the question posed in the 2015 Intercensal Survey and more accurately capture the Afro-Mexican population in a way that reflects how Afro-Mexicans describe and perceive themselves, the question used in the 2020 Census must be tweaked. This could mean the replacement of “Afro-descendant” and “Afro-Mexican” with descriptors more commonly used by the Afro-Mexican population itself, like “moreno”, “prieto”, “jarocho”. “Afro-descendant” and “Afro-Mexican” could be replaced altogether, or at least until the terms are more readily understood by Afro-Mexicans themselves. This could be achieved by way of an annotation in the survey itself, explaining what is meant by the terms “Afro-descendant” and “Afro-Mexican” or by external efforts aimed to help Afro-Mexicans gain a better understanding of what it means to be Afro-Mexican. The question posed in the 2020 census could also be revised to confer equal treatment to the terms “black”, “Afro-descendant” and “Afro-Mexican”. Instead of signifying an Afro- identity like it did in the 2015 Intercensal Survey, “black” could be treated as yet another way to claim African ancestry—as an independent category.

In an effort to more accurately capture the Afro-descendant population in the 2020 Census, INEGI could also tweak its sampling strategy. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) explains that 814 municipalities with vulnerable populations were surveyed, based on requests from users on the following up of priority groups. To be included in the survey, a municipality had to meet one of the following criteria: 1) home to 1300 occupied dwellings or less 2) among the 100 municipalities with the lowest HDI, 3) exhibit high degree of “social backwardness”, 4) exhibit high concentration of localities with Afro-descendant population, 5) among the 100 municipalities with higher percentage of food poverty, 6) exhibit high percentage of people in extreme poverty, 7) among the 100 municipalities with higher percentage of people lacking access to food, 8) at least 2% of its population is Afro-Mexican, 9) home to speakers of indigenous languages in danger of extinction, and/or 10) home to localities with speakers of indigenous languages of interest for the National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Towns (CDI) (International Monetary Fund, 2017).

The 814 municipalities (6.1 million dwellings) that met the criteria above served as the basis of the 2015 Intercensal Survey and informed much of what we now know about the Afro-descendant population. The possible exclusion of Afro-descendant populations in municipalities that did not meet the criteria outlined above is important to note, however.

Collectively, the confusion among respondents, the complexities of identity politics and INEGI’s sampling methods could very well support organizer contention that the Afro-descendant population is larger than the 2015 Intercensal Survey suggests. To more accurately account for the Afro-Mexican population changes must be made to the

way Afro- identity is probed for and surveyed. The importance of this is explained in the following section.

### **Afro-Mexican, Negro, Moreno or Prieto?**

A plethora of terms exist to describe the Afro-Mexican population. Terms used vary depending on degrees of Africanness, the value attributed to said degree of Africanness or Africanness in general, geographical location and the individuals/entities describing the Afro-Mexican population.

Afro identity in Mexico is complex. Among Afro-Mexicans, African ancestry is sometimes unknown—sometimes they think they are “weird indigenous people” because of their hair texture and skin color. Widespread ignorance of their African origins is largely due to the fact that the nation’s African history is untaught to Afro-Mexicans and non Afro-Mexicans alike. The little that is “known” about the history of slavery and how blacks came to live on the coast is founded on myths that have been passed down for generations, which state that the ancestors of Afro-Mexicans arrived on a slave boat filled with Cubans and Haitians, which sank off of Mexico’s Pacific Coast. These misconceptions about the origins of Mexico’s Afro-descendants partially explain why: 1) black Mexicans are generally reluctant to embrace an “Afro” identity and 2) Mexicans at-large assume black nationals hail from the Caribbean, or frankly, any other part of the African diaspora that is not Mexico (Roman, 2012, p. 12).

Though conflicting opinions surround blackness among the Afro-Mexican population, the Afro-Mexican experience has overwhelmingly been a depressing one. Many Afro-Mexicans acknowledge their African ancestry yet reject it. Weltman-Cisneros explains that this rejection of the self “reveals how a social history of invisibility and

marginalization have affected the construction of the self and the articulation of identity among these groups” (2013, p. 146).

This practice is intimately tied to the value ascribed to degrees of Africanness and Africanness in general. Darker complexions and kinkier hair denoting stronger African ancestry, for example, are undesirable, even among Afro-Mexicans. Vaughn explains, “...negro refers to the darkest skin and moreno refers to skin tones considered lighter. The use of the word negro is often—but not always—considered overly blunt and is avoided in polite conversation, (while the term moreno) is also the preferred term in polite conversation, referring to a Black person regardless of his or her skin color,” (as cited by Weltman-Cisneros, 2013, p. 145). Vaughn further explains, “...Afro-Mexicans tend to prefer light skin over dark skin. As is the case in other Latin American contexts, strategically improving the race through efforts among blacks to marry up is part of the Afro-Mexican experience as well” (2013, p. 234). Mexico’s relationship with race informs, in part, the breadth of terms used to refer to Mexicans of African descent.

While there are certainly Afro-Mexicans who internalize the negative connotations associated with Africanness and steer away from identifying as “negro”, there are others who matter-of-factly claim their African ancestry. Vaughn highlighted an exchange he had with a 62-year old farmer, “It’s pretty obvious that we’re black, isn’t it? I’m obviously not white, who’s going to believe that? And we’re not like the Indians—you know that...” (2013, p. 231). And as the Afro-Mexican movement towards recognition has gained traction, the term “negro” has increasingly enjoyed a more positive frame of reference.

Among Afro-Mexicans and Mexicans in general, the terms “moreno” and “negro” are commonly used to refer to someone of African descent. Rodriguez further adds that while the term “negro” enjoys much popularity, Afro-Mexicans don’t always use the term to refer to themselves. The pilot survey conducted by the National Autonomous University of Mexico in 31 localities between Oaxaca and Guerrero explained that the terms “mascogos” and “jarochos” are also commonly used among Afro-Mexicans to define themselves. Millán further adds that geographic location plays a role in self-identification. Afro-Mexicans in Veracruz, for example, generally identify as “mestizos” and “jarochos”, while Afro-Mexicans in Oaxaca and Guerrero prefer the terms “negros”, “morenos” and even “Afromexicanos” (2014, pp. 162-163). The term “afromestizos” has also enjoyed popularity in Guerrero, as have the terms “costeño” and “prieto”.

Though the term “afromestizo” is not popular among Afro-Mexicans themselves, the term (which was coined by Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, the father of Afro-Mexican studies) has gained wide acceptance in the literature, particularly among Mexican researchers. By contrast, foreign researchers (i.e. non-Mexican researchers) have heavily used the term “Afro-Mexican” to refer to Mexicans of African descent, mirroring the growing popularity of localisms to refer to Afro-descendants of the African diaspora.

The popularity of the term Afro-mestizo over Afro-Mexican (particularly among Mexican scholars) denotes a certain exceptionalism that characterizes Mexico and its relationship with its African origins. The preference for the term Afro-mestizo exemplifies the premise with which academic and everyday discussions of Mexicans of African descent begin—that much like the rest of the Mexican population, the nation’s

Afro-descendants are racially mixed and consequently, there are no racially “pure” blacks in Mexico, reflecting the primacy of a mestizo national identity that continually undermines the Afro-Mexican identity and experience.

As explained previously, the term “Afro-descendant” originated at the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance at Durban. Given its origins, the term and its derivatives (Afro-Mexican, Afro-Colombian, etc.) carry a certain political weight with them. Taking advantage of this, community leaders, organizations and collectives have chosen to “appropriate the term as a political project and as a foundational step in gaining official, juridical and constitutional recognition as an ethnic group”, (Weltman-Cisneros, 2013, p. 146). The political undertones of the term “Afro-descendant” and its derivatives make the term “Afro-Mexican” most appropriate in the struggle for recognition. An Afro- identity is also appealing in that it alludes to a common origin and by extension, a common struggle for equality among Afro-descendants of the African diaspora.

Afro-descendant populations across the Americas have used the original term and their respective localisms in their continued struggle for full recognition and equal rights. The adoption of an Afro identity has allowed for the forming of linkages between Afro-Mexicans and projects that aim to advance the full recognition and equal rights of Afro-descendant populations throughout the Americas. Further adding to the term’s widespread use and consequent legitimacy, the term “Afro-descendant” is preferred by academics and institutions, which have had played significant role in the struggle for equality and recognition of Afro-descendants in Mexico and the rest of the diaspora.

## **A State of Invisibility**

Mexican society at-large is unaware of the existence of the Afro-Mexican population. It is not generally taught in history textbooks that Mexico was a key port of entry for slave ships and consequently, that Mexico had a large African population during colonial times that eventually surpassed the European population. Rather, early African presence in the Americas is normally associated with the slave trade in the United States, the Caribbean, Brazil, Central America, Colombia and Peru—everywhere except Mexico, essentially.

Complicating the lack of knowledge regarding Mexico's African ancestry is the relative invisibility of the population. Relative to the rest of Latin America, the history of Afro-Mexicans is lesser known because of the population's relatively small numbers, regular intermarriage with other ethnic groups and Mexico's tradition of defining itself as a *mestizaje*, or mixing culture. Further, this "race mixture" has diluted the African presence in much of the nation, with the exception of highly concentrated areas like Veracruz and the Costa Chica region of Guerrero and Oaxaca. The 2015 Intercensal Survey reflects this, as 64.9% of the Afro-Mexican population also identified as indigenous. It was also reported that 9.3% of Afro-Mexicans speak an indigenous language.

The physical isolation of Afro-Mexican communities in rural Mexico, particularly the mountainous and coastal regions of Guerrero, Oaxaca and Veracruz, has also contributed to the population's invisibility. Such isolation is the product of fugitive slave communities established in difficult-to-reach areas to protect from recapture. This physical isolation has relegated the African experience to an obscured slave past, pushed

aside in the interest of a national identity based on a mixture of indigenous and European cultural mestizaje.

### **The Importance of Inclusion in the 2015 Intercensal Survey & Findings**

Inclusion in the 2015 Intercensal Survey brought visibility to the Afro-Mexican population and experience. The findings of 2015 Intercensal Survey shed light on the magnitude and the livelihood of the Afro-Mexican population. In deciding to include the Afro-Mexican population in the intercensal survey, the federal government recognized the existence of the Afro-Mexican people. Yet, Afro-Mexicans do not enjoy official status as they have yet to be formally recognized as one of the nation's ethnic groups in the federal constitution.

Mexico is one of only two nations in Latin American (along with Chile) that have yet to formally recognized their Afro-descendant populations. Afro-Mexicans do, however, enjoy state-level recognition, in the states of Oaxaca and Guerrero, whose constitutions were amended in 2013 and 2014, respectively, to allow for the formal recognition of their Afro-descendant populations. Afro-Mexicans are also recognized in the legislation, plans and programs of the federal government and the states of Guerrero, Oaxaca and Coahuila.

Prior to the intercensal survey, the federal government carried out a series of surveys with the goal of understanding the Afro-Mexican experience. In 2008, for example, the Mexican government released a study confirming that Afro-Mexicans suffer from institutional racism. Roman explained that, "Employers are less likely to employ blacks, and some schools prohibit access based on skin color", for example (2012, p. 12). The 2008 study was followed by national surveys on discrimination conducted by

CONAPRED and the National Council for the Prevention and Elimination of Mexico City (COPRED), in 2010 and 2013, respectively. The two surveys jointly declared Afro-Mexicans “a vulnerable population, facing exclusion, discrimination, lack of representation, racism and unequal access to resources and opportunities” (Afrodescendencias en México Investigación e Incidencia AC, 2016, p. 2).

Prior to the intercensal survey, reliable statistics concerning the Afro-Mexican population did not exist. It was known that Afro-Mexicans often live without stable plumbing and flooring in overcrowded conditions, for example, but there were no data points that captured the magnitude of the problem. Lack of official data concerning the Afro-Mexican experience precluded the government from calling attention to issues affecting the population and consequently, the redressing of such experiences. For this, the 2015 Intercensal Survey was an important starting point.

In 2015, the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) followed up on the studies mentioned above with the Special Study on the Situation of the Afro-descendant population in Mexico, conducted by way of the Intercensal Survey. Principal findings are as follows: 6.6% of Afro-descendant children do not have their births registered and 18% of Afro-descendant children are not affiliated with any health system or service. The average highest schooling among Afro-descendant adults is 8.7 years and 9.2 years, for women and men respectively. Additionally, 40% of Afro-descendants in the workforce do not have legal labor benefits, 55.8% of men and 48.9% of women do not have paid leave or disabilities and 48.3% of men and 43.2% of women are not provided medical insurance by their employers. In terms of Afro-Mexican households, 41.7% still cook

with wood or coal, almost 40% still have roofs of waste material or sheets and 15% lack piped water.

The Special Study reiterated that Mexico's Afro-descendants "continue to live in an environment of exclusion and indifference", particularly in regards to public policies. Norma Inés Aguilar, fourth visitor of CNDH explained that the objective of the survey was not only to present statistical data that would shed light on the experience and living situations of the Afro-descendant population, but also to show that "ignoring the situation, challenges and demands of the population is effectively denying them the recognition of their rights and condemn them to continue in oblivion and exclusion" (Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos, 2016b, p. 3).

The findings of the studies above expose the institutional discrimination and exclusion that has historically affected and continues to affect the Afro-Mexican population—a product of the population's invisibility, largely anchored in the lack of acknowledgement of African presence and contributions, historically and in present-day. Additionally, the studies highlight the doubly marginalized experience of the Afro-Mexican population. They are marginalized both on ethnic and socioeconomic bases, as Afro-Mexicans are only able to access social programs that support all Mexicans of low socioeconomic status, regardless of ethnicity. Federally recognized minorities, however, are eligible for aid through the CDI and social programs designed specifically for their use.

As Afro-Mexicans have yet to be formally recognized as one of the nation's many ethnic groups, Afro-Mexicans are precluded from benefitting from such forms of aid. Such exclusion is just one example of the ramifications of their invisibility and further

highlights the importance and potential impact of recognition as one of the nation's many ethnic groups.

Formal recognition, too, has the ability to improve the lived experiences of Afro-Mexicans. The historical exclusion of Mexico's Afro-descendant population has largely marked the lived experiences of Afro-Mexicans with discrimination and marginalization. While traveling outside of their areas of origin, for example, Afro-Mexicans are frequently (and arbitrarily) stopped because of their dark skin and kinky hair. They are mistaken for Honduran, Haitian and Cuban nationals (i.e. illegal immigrants) and are asked to prove their nationality. Chogo el Bandeño, an Afro-Mexican singer-songwriter, for example, explained that while on his way to Mexico City, he was stopped by a police officer who suspected him of being an illegal immigrant (Gregorius, 2016). He was asked to list the governors of five states and sing the national anthem three times. His knowledge of the national anthem and governors of the nation allowed for his release. Others have not been so lucky.

Exhibiting low levels of formal education, Afro-Mexicans often fail to convince Mexican authorities of their Mexican nationality and are consequently deported. Clemente Jesús López, director of the government office in charge of Afro-Mexicans in the state of Oaxaca detailed the story of two women from Oaxaca, one who was deported to Haiti and the other who was deported to Honduras (Gregorius, 2016). He explained that despite having documents that proved their Mexican nationality, the police that stopped them insisted that "there are no black people in Mexico". Afro-Mexicans are also frequently asked to verify their nationality when performing institutional procedures. Though anecdotal, these examples hint at the problematic nature of the invisibility and

consequent “foreignizing” of the Afro-Mexican population. These examples further suggest the importance of formally recognizing the Afro-Mexican population, consequently legitimizing their presence in Mexican society.

## **Afro-Mexicans: A Historical Presence**

Though Mexico's Afro-descendant population is small relative to that of other nations of African diaspora, the presence and contributions of the Afro-Mexican people are known and documented. Yet, they as a people remain largely invisible. This section will delve into the presence of Afro-Mexicans historically and (to a lesser degree) contemporarily and how they were erased from the collective Mexican identity, in favor of a nationalist mestizo ideology.

### **Colonial Presence & the Struggle for Independence**

It is widely accepted that African presence in what is now Mexico began with the forced migration of approximately 250,000 Africans from 1580 to 1650, primarily from what today are known as Senegal, Gambia, Guinea, Congo, Angola and Mozambique (National Institute of Anthropology and History, 2013). (Though a widely accepted ideal, it is important to note that there are those who strongly disagree, Ivan van Sertima perhaps most ardently. He argues, for example, that African presence in the Americas pre-dates Columbus's voyages to the Americas, and as such, pre-dates the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Though important to mention, I will not discuss this further as this is not the focus of this paper). By the early 1600s, Mexico's African slave population was greater than that of any other country in Latin America and by 1810 (the last time the African population was accounted for) Africans outnumbered the Spanish.

During colonial times, slaves disproportionately bore the burden of labor and as such fulfilled a wide range of economic activities. Some were domestics and personal servants, while others were laborers on sugar plantations, silver mines and textile

factories. Still others worked on cattle ranches or developed and cultivated farmland. Such work was essential to the (economic) success of the colony.

While much of the nation's African history is marked by an enslaved past, cimarrones (escaped slaves), too, are a fundamental presence in Mexico's history, so much so that Yanga (who founded the first free African township in the Americas at San Lorenzo de los Negros in Veracruz) is conceived of as a national hero (Roman, 2012, p. 10).

Afro-Mexicans were also vital to the independence efforts. It is said that the Ejército Negro (The Black Army) of Father Miguel Hidalgo initiated the independence struggles. Thousands fought in the insurgent army for Mexican independence and two of the movement's most prominent heroes, Jose Maria Morelos and General Vicente Guerrero (the nation's second president) were of African descent (and are now the face of the *Soy Afro* (I am Afro) campaign to promote self-identification among Afro-Mexicans—see image below).



Given the above, the African presence in Mexican history is varied and well documented. Still Afro-Mexicans and their contributions to the country remain largely invisible. The following section will explore how the nation's African root had no place in the imagining of a national identity.

Source: Consejo Nacional Para Prevenir la Discriminación (National Council for the Prevention of Discrimination). (2016). *Soy Afro. ¡Me reconozco y cuento!* (I am Afro. I recognize myself and I count!).

## **The Cosmic Race**

In 1810, José María Morelos, leader of the Mexican War of Independence, abolished slavery. The caste system was eliminated and replaced with an ideology that decreed that all citizens, regardless of skin color were to be treated equally and recognized as Mexicans. This shift in racial politics ideologically invoked equality and symbolically integrated the African population. This culminated in the conceptualization of a national mestizo identity that exalted Mexico's indigenous and European foundations, relegating the nation's African roots to an obscured past.

Post-independence, the re-imagining of Mexican national identity was an effort to break away from the colonial caste system that was founded on racial lines and most importantly, to convey a sense of Mexican exceptionalism (i.e. a society that was colorblind) that contrasted with the racism and segregation that pervaded the rest of the world. The newfound national identity was rooted in mestizaje, in other words, the mixing of races.

Mexican philosopher and former Secretary of Education, José Vasconcelos dubbed the product of racial mixing a cosmic race that adopted the "treasures" of each race that contributed to its production. The homogenizing of the Mexican citizenry that resulted from this ideological shift essentially blurred color lines, eliminating (in theory) the problems of race and color.

It is important to note, however, that the conceptualization of the cosmic race, however, was framed in the whitening of the darker and synonymously inferior masses. Vasconcelos described blacks as "eager for sensual joy, intoxicated with dances and unbridled lust", who would be "absorbed by the superior type and redeemed gradually

through voluntary extinction” (Weltman-Cisneros, 2013, p. 143). He further suggested that at the time of his writings the black population was small and additionally, was increasingly becoming a mulatto population. Vasconcelos argued that these initial steps towards racial mixing would make it relatively easy for the black population to be fully integrated into the cosmic race, and consequently, disappear from the collective national identity.

The cultivation and persistence of a national mestizo identity has delinked blackness from historical and modern imaginations of Mexicanidad that has negatively effected the lived experiences of Afro-Mexicans in the past, present and foreseeable future.

### **Erasure from the National Identity**

Largely attributed to the conceptualization of a national identity that excludes the nation’s African origins, Mexico’s Afro-descendant population is cut off, structurally and ideologically from the state.

Mexico is a country in which race is rarely talked about. In urban areas, residents of all phenotypes refuse to talk about race, claiming that Mexicans are all “mixed” and that Afro-Mexicans do not exist. Father Glyn Jemmot, Roman Catholic priest and co-founder of Mexico Negro explains, “They [Mexicans] are saying we are all the same and therefore there is no reason to distinguish yourself. What they are not saying is that in ordinary life in Mexico, lighter-skinned Mexicans are accepted and have first place” (Roman, 2012, p. 13). This line of thought is supported by the data and anecdotes mentioned all throughout.

Though efforts have been made to recognize and reclaim the African roots of the nation, the African presence and contributions to the nation are largely described as historical, precluding the nation's Afro-descendant population from inclusion in Mexican society today. Inclusion in the social fabric of the nation is further crippled by the physical exclusion of the population (as Afro-Mexican populations are largely concentrated in rural and historically isolated towns of the nation's coastal areas).

In light of a common experience of exclusion, efforts have been made across the African diaspora to reclaim African history, contributions and identities. International efforts (by way of grassroots organizations, academics and international organizations) have been instrumental in the struggle for recognition and equality of Afro-descendant populations of the diaspora. Mexico is no exception. Afro-Mexicans report international encounters as enjoyable and informative in terms of learning about a larger black diaspora that they identify with.

The following section will touch on the Afro-Mexican struggle for recognition, paying particular attention to efforts made by grassroots organizations and state and federal governments with the support of international organizations.

## **The Movement Towards Recognition**

Activists have long petitioned for Afro-Mexican inclusion in the national census, alongside the country's 56 other official ethnic groups. In 2015, the Mexican government finally conceded and allowed the Afro-Mexican population to identify as such in the intercensal survey. Though a significant victory for the Afro-Mexican community, Afro-Mexicans have yet to be formally recognized in the federal constitution. Afro-Mexicans and allies, alike, have vowed to continue fighting until the Afro-descendant population is afforded full recognition as one of the nation's ethnic groups and is treated as equal.

## **The Beginnings of Afro-Mobilization**

Local Afro-Mexican mobilization began the 1980s almost exclusively in the Costa Chica region of Oaxaca and Guerrero. Initially, mobilization was not politically inclined nor oriented around the reclaiming of an Afro identity, per se. An association of professionals in Cuajinicuilapa organizations, for example, was focused on the recovery and promotion of a local identity, México Negro was pushing for the generating of income for basic needs and Casa del Pueblo in Morelos and later, AFRICA (the Alliance for the Strengthening of Indigenous Regions and Afro-Mexican Communities) were focused on the expression of cultural practices like dance and music festivals, radio shows and the like.

The mobilizations of the 1980s eventually snowballed into the mobilization of Afro-Mexicans of the Costa Chica around a black identity, formalizing in *los Encuentros de Pueblos Negros*, the Meeting of Black Towns, organized by the grassroots organization, México Negro. The first meeting took place in 1997 and they continue to

this day. The three-day events showcase and celebrate the Afro-Mexican experience and provide a forum for people to contemplate solutions for the needs of black Mexicans.

In the following decade, mobilization was aimed at gaining visibility and combating lack of opportunities, falling behind and marginalization. The 1990s gave rise to a series of organizations, like EPOCA (Link of Towns, Organizations and Autonomous Communities) and Ecosta Yutucui, each engaging in cultural awareness, political recognition and ecological development in varying degrees. And finally, by the late 1990s, constitutional recognition and defense against racism and discrimination became primary concerns of the Afro-Mexican movement.

### **Characteristics and Analysis of the Movement**

The movement towards formal recognition of the Afro-descendant population as one of Mexico's ethnic groups has been decades in the works. The movement towards recognition has been a collective effort among local Afro-descendant communities, academics, international organizations, individual government officials and certain organs of the federal government. (Appendix A provides an extensive, though not exhaustive timeline of the movement towards recognition, highlighting particularly, grassroots, governmental and international efforts along the Afro-Mexican quest for recognition).

Grassroots organizations have been fundamental to the fight for recognition. They have ardently pressured the federal government to formally recognize its Afro-Mexican population, citing its failure to comply with international regimes it signed years ago, namely the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention and the UN's

recommendations. The success of these grassroots organizations is largely attributed to the support from organizations across the diaspora that have successfully petitioned for better treatment of the Afro-descendant population in their respective nations.

In light of the Afro-Mexican community's demands, the federal government has made several attempts to recognize, understand and rectify the Afro-Mexican experience in recent years. But, it has consistently fallen short. Though the Third Root program, for example, drew academic and public attention to Mexico's Afro-descendant population its initiatives were framed within the lens of a national mestizo ideology. The program's recognition of the African presence in and contribution to the nation was limited to its conceptualization of being one of the three roots that gave rise to the "national tree of a mestizo Mexico". The importance of the African root, thus, lay in its functional role as a contributor to the production of the mestizo and not in their existence as a people—as Mexicans. Rather than focusing on the exploration of the Afro-Mexican identity in its own right, the program focused on the cultural traits of Afro-Mexicans and their contributions to the national fabric. Additionally, the first national survey on discrimination commissioned by the federal government included questions on discrimination against eight different groups, but failed to mention the existence of and consequently, discrimination against Afro-Mexicans.

The federal government has also consistently failed to heed to the demands of the Afro-Mexican population. When representative Aguirre Rivero submitted a request for the recognition of the Afro-descendant population as an ethnic group to the executive branch in 2004, the matter was not debated and no formal action was taken by Congress. Additionally, the federal government ignored the push to include a question that asked

about African ancestry in the 2010 Census and as a result, Nemesio Rodríguez Mitchell, of the National Autonomous University of Mexico conducted a pilot survey of the Afro-descendant population in the Costa Chica region of Oaxaca to shed light on the Afro-descendant experience in the state of Oaxaca.

Before jumping to the following section, it is important to note, especially given the at times tumultuous relationship between Mexico's indigenous and Afro-populations, is the support the Afro-Mexican movement towards recognition has garnered from indigenous groups, particularly in the Costa Chica region.

### **Why did recognition take so long?**

Activists argue that recognition is long overdue, given the formal recognition of Afro-descendant population in virtually all of the African diaspora and most importantly, the international conventions the state has signed, by which the federal government has pledged its commitment to redressing the Afro-Mexican experience.

Largely responsible for the hardships of the Afro-Mexican movement towards recognition is the crippling effect of the primacy of a national mestizo identity. Critics of the movement have criticized the Afro-Mexicans and allies for affording greater importance to specific ethnicities, rather than the collective mestizo identity. Further compounding the difficulty of the movement is the perceived illegitimacy of an Afro-Mexican identity. Head of the Bureau for Afro-Mexican Affairs in Oaxaca, Humberto Hebert Silva Silva argues that Afro-Mexicans have yet to be recognized as a minority by the Mexican government because they do not count on certain characteristics that would distinguish them as an ethnic group, namely their own language (Gregorius, 2016). Afro-Mexicans speak Spanish like most other Mexicans. Silva explains that when Afro-

Mexicans ask for recognition as an ethnic group, they get told that they do not have an indigenous mother tongue.

The Afro-descendant population has been further criticized for “borrowing from the outside”—for appropriating an identity that is not their own. Given their rejection in their own country of origin, Afro-Mexicans have found an empowering cultural reference in the transnational Afro-descendant movement. The African roots of the nation have been forgotten, depriving Afro-Mexicans of a cultural memory of their origins. As such, the reclaiming of their own version of their cultural past is growing within the Afro-Mexican population. They have begun to recuperate and remake their history, or making a history visible that was kept hidden in their remote dwellings.

While identity politics certainly play a role in the delayed recognition of Mexico’s Afro-descendant population, others argue that Afro-Mexicans were asking for too much, too soon. Chávez argues the initiatives for constitutional recognition have been premature. Specifically, she argues that the initiatives presented by Representative Teresa Mojica Morga and Delfina in 2013 did not succeed because they were not preceded by a number of things: a campaign to generate visibility, information about or awareness of the nation’s Afro-descendant population, or statistics that quantified and qualified the existence of the nation’s Afro-descendant population (2015, p. 8).

While a number of reasons for the Mexican government’s delayed (yet limited) recognition of the nation’s Afro-descendant population can be proposed, my discussion will be limited to those I found to be the most salient, and consequently, those I mentioned above.

## **What is Next on the Afro-Mexican Agenda?**

As a means of securing the visibility of their identity, their contributions, their history, their culture and their goals as people, the Afro-Mexican population and allies are continuing to prioritize the endeavor of official, constitutional recognition.

Though the Afro-Mexican population was recognized as one of the nation's ethnic groups in the 2015 Intercensal Survey, Mexico's Afro-descendant population is still precluded from recognition as one of the nation's ethnic group in the federal constitution. Article II of the federal constitution was amended in 2002 to establish the nation as a multicultural one. The amendment states, "the nation is multicultural, originally based on its *indigenous peoples* who are those descended from populations that inhabited the country's territory at the beginning of colonization, which retain their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions". The amendment brings the nation in compliance with the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, otherwise known as C169, signed ten years prior. The amendment, however, again stresses the importance of the nation's indigenous roots, while ignoring the Afro-descendant population and its contribution to and presence within the nation.

Constitutional recognition has been a longtime battle for the Afro-Mexican population. Among the most recent of efforts was the presenting of a proposal to Senator Eviel Pérez Magaña, President of the Indigenous Commission of the Senate to amend Article II of the Mexican constitution, to include the Afro-descendant population as one of the nation's federally recognized ethnic groups at the Sixteenth Annual Encounter of Afro-Mexican Peoples by representatives of indigenous towns and communities. Lack of constitutional recognition precludes the Afro-Mexican population from accessing rights

presently afforded to other federally recognized ethnic groups, like inclusion in the development of public policies and the social, political, economic and cultural promotion and development.

Should the legislative branch continue to ignore petitions for the constitutional recognition of the nation's Afro-descendant population, Afro-Mexicans and allies have voiced the possibility of turning to the nation's other branches to gain constitutional recognition. Heladio Reyes Cruz, president of the organization Ecosta Yutu, Cuii, A.C., for example, has stated that the Afro-Mexican population will look to the highest court of the land for constitutional recognition if the legislative branch is unresponsive (Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos, 2015, p. 1).

Founder of Mexico Negro, Sergio Peñaloza Pérez expressed, “we couldn't seriously push our socioeconomic agenda when we were not even officially recognized as a group” (Varagur, 2016). Now that the Afro-Mexican population has garnered censal recognition and constitutional recognition appears to be on the horizon, the movement can now shift its focus. For some this means further inclusion of Africans and people of African descent in curriculum nation-wide, and for others this means greater visibility on the national stage (in order to redress the negative connotations associated with darkness and give Afro-Mexican youth role models to look up to).

While the Afro-Mexican population has made great strides towards gaining recognition and equal treatment, the struggle is far from over. Given the numbers, political clout, and parallel experience of the nation's indigenous population, the Afro-Mexican movement would do well to continue to continue to nourish this alliance, that has served them well thus far.

## **Conclusion**

As a result and in tandem with the mobilization of Mexico's Afro-descendant population, the efforts of a series of governmental agencies and academic institutions have begun to pave a way for constitutional recognition. These range from the production of academic materials regarding the African population and its descendants, the launching of campaigns of awareness, information and visibility, the elaboration of the first socio-demographic profile of the Afro-descendant population, the organizing of Afro-descendant cultural forums and workshops and the generating of tools necessary to gather quantitative data concerning the magnitude of the population, among other things. Though the struggle for recognition has been long and hard, given the above (particularly the inclusion of the Afro-descendant population in the 2015 Intercensal Survey), it appears as though constitutional recognition is on the horizon.

## **Appendix A: Timeline Towards Recognition**

### International Regimes

- February 1975—Mexico ratified the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD).
- September 1990—Mexico ratified the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, guaranteeing the rights of the nation’s indigenous peoples.
- 2001—World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance at Durban.
- December 2009—The United Nations declared 2011 the International Year for People of African Descent.
- 2013—The United Nations declared 2015-2024 the International Decade for People of African Descent.

### Government Efforts

- November 1989—The federal research initiative, the Third Root National Program began.
- 1992—The federal government recognized African culture as the third root of Mexican culture (alongside the Spanish and indigenous peoples) in commemoration of the 500th anniversary of Spanish arrival in the Americas.
- 2000—The federal constitution was modified to establish Mexico as a multicultural nation.
- March 2002—Mexico recognized the Committee for the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination’s (CERD) competence in receiving and examining individual complaints of violations of ICERD.

- June 2003—The first Federal Law for the Prevention and Elimination of Discrimination was signed into law, officially creating the first federal organ dedicated to combat discrimination, CONAPRED. The law did not explicitly mention the Afro-Mexican population, but was designed to deal with discrimination of all forms.
- 2005—The first national survey on discrimination was commissioned by the federal government.
- 2008—The Mexican government conducted a study confirming that Afro-Mexicans suffer from institutional racism.
- 2009—INEGI made the first official attempt at quantifying the Afro-descendant population in promoting the inclusion of a question that asked about an Afro-identity in the 2010 census.
- 2011—The Law for the Prevention and Elimination of Discrimination in the Federal District was promulgated, creating the federal district's equivalent of CONAPRED, COPRED.
- May 2011—CDI began the Inquiry for the Identification of Afro-descendant Communities.
- 2012- CERD Working Group was created to comply with the UN's recommendations for the elimination of racial discrimination to Mexico.
- 2012—CDI traveled around the country searching for and issuing certificates of recognition to communities that identified as Afro-Mexican.

- June 2013—COPRED conducted a survey regarding discrimination against Afro-descendants in Mexico City, declaring the Afro-descendant population a vulnerable one.
- 2015—CNDH proposed to decree October 19th the “Afro-descendant People and People’s Day”, in light of the International Decade for the Afro-descendants; The fourth CNDH general visitor, Norma Inés Aguilar urged legislators to include in the Federation’s Expenditure Budget of 2017 “a specific item labeled for the attention of people and peoples of African descent and that the necessary normative changes be made for the constitutional and legal recognition of persons and Afro-descendant peoples from listening and addressing the proposals that directly formulate themselves”.
- 2015—Special Study on the Situation of the Afro-descendant population in Mexico was conducted by way of the Intercensal Survey of 2015.

#### Grassroots Efforts

- 1998—Law of Indigenous Towns and Communities was promulgated in the state of Oaxaca, recognizing the existence of Afro-Mexican communities.
- July 2004—Then representative of Guerrero, Ángel Heladio Aguirre Rivero submitted a request for the recognition of the Afro-descendant population as an ethnic group to the executive branch.
- 2007—A petition was created for the designation of March as Black Heritage Month at the 10th Encounter of Black Towns.

- 2007—The African Cultural Collective and the Alliance for the Empowerment of Indigenous Regions and Afro-Mexican Communities established a forum petitioning for constitutional recognition.
- 2010—Then representative, Cesar Flores Maldonado of Guerrero presented an initiative that would grant Afro-descendants the same status as federally recognized ethnic groups, which would allow them to receive resources from social programs and/or from CDI.
- 2012—Another call for constitutional recognition was made at the First National Forum on Afro-descendant Populations in Mexico.
- October 2013—Representative Teresa de Jesús Mojica Morga of Oaxaca presented an initiative to reform articles 2, 27, 28 and 115 of the federal constitution to recognize Afro-descendant peoples and communities.
- 2013—Leaders from 26 indigenous communities in Oaxaca pushed for constitutional reform to address the rights of indigenous people and Afro-Mexicans.
- 2013—Afro-descendant communities officially recognized in the state constitution of Guerrero.
- 2014—Senator Rene Juarez Cisneros presented an initiative to reform the law of the CDI and the Federal Law of the Parastatal Entities to grant legal recognition to the Afro-descendant population as a member of the Mexican nation.
- 2014— Afro-descendant communities officially recognized in the state constitution of Guerrero.

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