

**Africans and Afro-descendants in Mexico and Central America:
overview and challenges of studies of their past and present**

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Introduction

Recognition of the economic, social and cultural participation and contributions of the thousands of Africans brought by force to Mexico and Central America during the colonial period, and those who came to Central American countries as workers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, has been promoted for some time, particularly by academics and civil society organizations. Pioneering studies began to be undertaken in the mid-twentieth century, and since the 1990s, due to different social, political and economic circumstances,¹ there has been significant growth in research groups and social movements keen to raise awareness and appreciation of the experiences, struggles and contributions of women, men and children of African origin in the formation of our societies.

This article aims to offer an overview of the historical and anthropological studies of the subject that have been carried out in Mexico and some Central American countries, indicating progress made and areas remaining to be explored. A general description is given of the sources used for research into slavery and the presence and participation of Africans and their descendants in this region, mainly since the period of the Viceroyalty, together with some thoughts on concepts and terms that have been discussed in this field. The article also aims to raise awareness of certain research, education and dissemination activities and actions in our countries and others that need to be strengthened in order for the participation of Africans and their descendants in the past and present of our societies to be recognized and valued, but above all, for Afro-descendant communities to fully benefit from the rights to which they are entitled.

It is worth clarifying that this text is not intended to be an exhaustive review of the subject but rather a source of general information, data and reflection. There are already a number of exhaustive bibliographic bibliographies, to which I will refer, and which may be consulted by those wishing to find out more about each topic, country or region.

¹ In each country, there are specific circumstances that have inspired the work of researchers and social organizations interested in the subject of populations of African origin. Influences have certainly included indigenous movements, the deterioration in economic conditions experienced by most of those communities in our countries and the development of academic ideas around cultural diversity and combatting racism and discrimination.

Before starting, it is important to stress why it is necessary to continue research that reveals the characteristics of slavery, particularly that endured as a result of the transatlantic trade of people from Africa. Firstly, because, as is well known, slavery was a form of subjugation that undermined the basic rights of human beings and is unfortunately not a matter of the past as slavery and subjugation persist in many societies, particularly to the detriment of women and children. Moreover, researching and disseminating information about the harmful effects of slavery, and the contribution of the millions of persons enslaved worldwide to the construction of our societies, is an essential step in promoting mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence between cultures, and fighting prejudice, discrimination and racism. In this respect, it is important to note that Afro-descendants in Mexico, primarily those currently living in the Costa Chica regions of Oaxaca and Guerrero, the Garifuna people of Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Belize, and the Afro-descendants of Costa Rica and Panama, among others, are fighting for recognition of their history and the unique characteristics of their communities, resulting from historical events linked precisely to the colonial period and the slave trade. Therefore, slavery and its consequences are not only a matter of the past but also have an impact on the present.

State of the question

Although significant contributions have been made to Mexican and Central American historiography about Afro-descendants, the subject still receives scant attention in academia and is often perceived as being of secondary importance. It is significant that, for example, in recent editions of books addressing general topics of Mexican history, particularly the colonial era,² or in the recent celebrations to mark the bicentenaries of the independence of Mexico and various other countries of Central America, the enslavement of Africans, their experiences and contributions, and details of the lives of their descendants, continue to be largely overlooked in historiographic analysis and official histories.

Mexico and most countries of Central America have a significant body of research on this subject. Although certain periods, situations, processes or events have been researched in greater detail in some countries than in others, most studies have given an important place to the characteristics of slavery during the colonial period and processes related to it, such as resistance movements, ways of achieving freedom, economic and social mobility, and the experiences of free

² A series of books was recently published on daily life in Mexico during the colonial period, coordinated by the historian Pilar Gonzalbo. While the series covers various topics, the experiences of Africans are not considered in any of the volumes. See: Pilar Gonzalbo (ed.) *Historia de la vida cotidiana en México*, Mexico, Fondo de Cultura Económica/El Colegio de México, 2005 (three volumes).

Afro-descendant populations.³ In Central America, studies have been conducted of Afro-descendant groups such as the Creoles and Garifunas, emphasizing the historical and political processes and social movements that have characterized them.

Much has also been written about the African workers who arrived during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and diversified the cultural composition of Afro-descendants in Central America. Until a few years ago, it was considered that Africans had played no part in the history of El Salvador, but accounts demonstrating the important place of Africans from the colonial period have now been found. Recently, in July 2011, the Salvadoran Academy of History organized the first round table on Africans and Afro-descendants in El Salvador.⁴

³ There is an extensive body of work on Mexico. Some of the pioneering and most representative studies are: Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra en México*, Mexico, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1946; Luz María Martínez Montiel (ed.), *La presencia africana en México*, Mexico, Conaculta, 1994; Adriana Naveda, *Esclavos negros en las haciendas azucareras de Córdoba, Veracruz. 1690-1830*, Xalapa, 1987; María Elisa Velázquez, *Mujeres de origen africano en la capital novohispana, siglos XVII y XVIII*, Mexico, INAH-UNAM, 2006 (Serie Africanías No. 1). There are also several key works for Central American countries, including: Carlos Meléndez and Quince Duncan, *El negro en Costa Rica*, San José, Editorial Costa Rica, 1974; Rina Cáceres, *Negros, mulatos y libertos en la Costa Rica del siglo XVII*, San José, Pan-American Institute of Geography and History, 2000; Lowell Gudmundson, *Mestizaje y población de procedencia africana en la Costa Rica colonial*, San José, UNA, 1981; Paul Lokken, "Presencia africana en siete comunidades salvadoreñas 1671-1711: Evidencia del Archivo Eclesiástico Guatemalteco", in *Repositorio Organo de divulgación del Archivo General de la Nación*, El Salvador, III Epoca, No. 2; Lowell Gudmundson and Justin Wolfe (eds.) *Between Race and Place: Blacks and Blackness in Central America*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2010; Beatriz Palomo, "Perfil de la población Africana en el reino de Guatemala 1723-1773", in Rina Cáceres, *Rutas de la esclavitud en África y América Latina*, San José, Editorial Universidad de Costa Rica and Asociación Pro-historia Centroamericana, 2001; Rafael Leiva Vivas, *Tráfico de esclavos negros en Honduras*, Tegucigalpa, Editorial Guaymuras, 1982; Germán Romero Vargas, *Las sociedades del Atlántico en Nicaragua en los siglos XVII y XVIII*, Managua, Fondo de Promoción Cultural, Banic, 1995; Roberto de la Guardia, *Los negros del Istmo de Panamá*, Panama, Instituto Nacional de Cultura, 1977.

⁴ The round table was organized as part of a series of conferences called *Dialogues on the Bicentenary*. Of the few historians who have explored this subject, Pedro Antonio Escalante published an article in 1998 entitled *Presencia negra en El Salvador* and Carlos Loucel has begun archival research of the subject.

In Mexico, detailed historiographic and bibliographic reviews have been undertaken of the subjects that have been researched, the methodologies used and the characteristics of the sources. Among them, it is worth mentioning the works of Emma Pérez and Gabriel Moedano, Juan Manuel de la Serna, Odile Hoffmann, María Elisa Velázquez and Ben Vinson III.⁵ For Central America, important works and extensive historiographic reviews have been carried out by historians such as Lowell Gudmundson, Rina Cáceres, Paul Lokken and Dario Euraque, among others.⁶ Lowell Gudmundson recently published a comprehensive article on the subject⁷ and, as part of the outcome of the international AFRODESC and EURESCL project, a working document was prepared by Carlos Agudelo and Nahayeilli Juárez, including a bibliographic compilation and a selection of texts on Afro-descendant populations in Central America.⁸

Thanks to the information produced by those studies over a period of nearly 60 years, beginning with the pioneering works of Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán for Mexico⁹ and Carlos Meléndez and Quince Duncan for Costa Rica,¹⁰ we know, for example, that around 250,000 African men and women were forcibly brought to Mexico during the period of the Viceroyalty, mainly between 1580 and 1650; we also know that they performed a variety of activities in nearly all the regions of New Spain, which encompassed a large part of Central America at that time. It has been ascertained that many of them came from West, Central and South Africa, that is, from the broad regions of Senegambia, Guinea, the Congo, Angola and Mozambique.

⁵ See, among others: Emma Pérez and Gabriel Moedano, *Aportaciones a la investigación de archivos del México colonial y a la bibliohemerografía afromexicanista*, Mexico, INAH, 1992; Serna, Juan Manuel de la, "La esclavitud africana en la Nueva España. Un balance historiográfico comparativo", in Juan Manuel de la Serna, (ed.), *Iglesia y sociedad en América Latina colonial. Interpretaciones y proposiciones*, Mexico, UNAM, 1998; María Elisa Velázquez and Ethel Correa (eds.) *Poblaciones y culturas de origen africano en México*, Mexico, INAH, 2005 (Serie Africanías No. 1); Cristina Díaz, *Queridato, matrifocalidad y crianza entre los afromestizos de la Costa Chica*, Mexico, Conaculta, 2003. Hoffmann, Odile, "Negros y afromestizos en México: viejas y nuevas lecturas de un mundo olvidado", in *Revista Mexicana de Sociología*, 2006, No. 68/1, pp. 103-135; Ben Vinson III and Bobby Vaughn, *Afroméxico. El pulso de la población negra en México: una historia recordada, olvidada y vuelta a recordar*, Mexico, CIDE-Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2004; María Elisa Velázquez and Odile Hoffmann, "Investigaciones sobre africanos y afrodescendientes en México: acuerdos y consideraciones desde la historia y la antropología", in *Diario de Campo, Boletín de Investigadores del INAH*, Mexico, No. 91, March-April 2007.

⁶ Rina Cáceres, *Negros, mulatos, esclavos y libertos en la Costa Rica del siglo XVII*, op.cit.; Paul, Lokken, "From Black to Ladino: People of African Descent, Mestizaje and Racial Hierarchy in Rural Colonial Guatemala, 1600-1730", doctoral thesis, University of Florida, 2000; Lowell Gudmundson and Justin Wolfe (eds.), *Between Race and Place: Blacks and Blackness in Central America*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2009; Dario Euraque, *Conversaciones históricas con el mestizaje y su identidad nacional en Honduras*, San Pedro Sula, Honduras, Centro Editorial, 2004.

⁷ Lowell Gudmundson, "De categorías suprimidas y clasificaciones anacrónicas: fuentes y estrategias recientes para el estudio de la historia afrocentroamericana", in María Elisa Velázquez (ed.), *Debates históricos contemporáneos: africanos y afrodescendientes en México y Centroamérica*, Mexico, INAH/CEMCA/UNAM-CIALC/IRD, 2011 (Serie Africanías No. 7).

⁸ Carlos Agudelo and Nahayeilli Juárez (eds.), *Poblaciones negras en América Central. Compilación bibliográfica y selección de textos*, Guatemala, AFRODESC and EURESCL International Projects, Working Document No. 10, May 2011. This working document can also be consulted on the website: <http://www.ird.fr/afrodesc/>

⁹ Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, (1946) *La población negra en México*, op.cit.,

¹⁰ Carlos Meléndez and Quince Duncan, *El negro en Costa Rica*, Editorial Costa Rica, ECR, San José, 1989.

Research based on documentary sources such as contracts of sale, inquisitorial proceedings, wills, valuations, marriage records, release documents or contracts shows that Africans and their descendants were not a homogeneous group. While it is true that most arrived as slaves, many managed to gain freedom and achieve better living conditions for themselves and their descendants. Evidence has been found of them working on farms, in sugar mills, mines and obrayes (woollen textile mills), as well as also organizing into unions, taking part in militias, working as well-known architects, painters or singers and leading resistance movements such as that of Yanga in Veracruz, which culminated in the “maroons” being granted freedom and San Lorenzo de los Negros being recognized as a free town in 1609. The experiences of women as family heads have also been studied. Women fought for their rights and the rights of their children, led movements calling for justice and better living conditions (such as in Omoa, Honduras, in the eighteenth century),¹¹ and performed countless other activities, particularly in domestic service.¹² Through monographs and studies of rural areas and cities, the differences between plantation and domestic slavery have been documented and new perspectives have been offered on the complex family, social and cultural relationships that evolved during that period.

A number of studies have also explored subjects such as the trading of slaves, the colonial economy and work and resistance movements – not only marronage and rebellions, but also cultural practices and actions against domination and subjugation in daily life. Studies have also addressed the situation of Afro-descendants in the nineteenth century, their participation in insurgency movements and their contributions to nation-building projects.

Research has been carried out into immigration to Central America of Africans who initially established communities and towns with indigenous peoples in the region and later reached Jamaica and other regions of the Antilles, especially Belize, Costa Rica, Nicaragua and Panama. Such research reveals the working conditions and the economic and social difficulties that those migrants faced in their efforts to integrate into the new societies. Several studies have documented the characteristics of the populations referred to by scholars as “Creole” in the area around the Panama Canal as well as along the Caribbean coast as far as the north of Belize and in Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras and Guatemala. Excellent studies have been conducted in anthropology, linguistics and ethnomusicology, exploring the characteristics of Creole languages among groups of Afro-descendants, including the Garifuna (also known as “Black Caribs”) on the Caribbean coasts

¹¹ Rina Cáceres, “Omoa: cruce de identidades” *Yaxkin*, Honduras, Vol. XXIV, No. 1, 2008.

¹² See, among others: María Elisa Velázquez, *Mujeres de origen africano en la capital novohispana, siglos XVII y XVIII*, Mexico, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia/Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2006 (Serie Africanías No. 1.)

of the isthmus, aspects of traditional medicine, the particularities of Creole musical expressions and the social and political demands of their movements, among other topics.¹³

Regarding the Afro-descendant communities of the Costa Chica of Oaxaca and Guerrero in Mexico, topics have been explored relating to identity, history, cultural manifestations and expressions, as well as the characteristics of social movements calling for their recognition as black and Afro-descendant peoples. It is important to note that the racism suffered by people of African descent and their economic and social marginalization have also been addressed by many writers, social scientists and civil society organizations. In countries like Panama, Belize, Costa Rica and Honduras this subject has been explored extensively,¹⁴ while Mexico is just starting to work on recognizing its Afro-descendant communities, the circumstances of discrimination and public policy strategies in favour of these groups.¹⁵

Significant historiographical debates and new areas of research

Research has demonstrated that the context of each period and region determined the social and cultural experiences of Africans and their descendants throughout the colonial era and during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Studies, especially historical research in Mexico and Central American countries like Costa Rica and Honduras, have stressed the importance of distinguishing particularities in the different periods of the Viceroyalty and the characteristics of the documentary sources. In the early sixteenth century, for example, although what some have referred to as “socio-racial” relations did exist, they did not play the decisive role that they came to have in later periods, when skin colour, physical features and economic position became closely linked, imposing barriers and heavily codified relationships of domination. These differences over time make it possible to

¹³ Francisco Lizcano, “La población negra en el istmo centroamericano”, in *Presencia africana en Centroamérica*, Mexico, Conaculta, 1993; Joseph Palacio, “The multifaceted Garifuna: juggling cultural spaces in the 21st century”, in Joseph Palacio (ed.), *The Garifuna, a nation across borders: Essays in Social Anthropology*, Belize, Editorial Cubola, 2005.

¹⁴ Quince Duncan, *Contra el silencio. Afrodescendientes y racismo en el Caribe Continental Hispánico*, San José, EUNED, 2001; Diana Senior Angulo, “Pluralidad de lo afrocaribeño en Costa Rica: aproximación a la naturaleza de sus organizaciones sociales” in Victorien Lavou Zoungbo and Marlène Marty (eds.) *Imaginaire racial et projections identitaires*, Perpignan, Presses Universitaires de Perpignan; Alfonso Arrivillaga and Alfredo Gómez, “Antecedentes históricos, movilizaciones sociales y reivindicaciones étnicas en la costa atlántica de Guatemala”, in *Estudios Sociales Centroamericanos*, San José, Costa Rica, 1988; Nancy Martínez, “La historia como discurso de identidad, la dominación y el arte de la resistencia entre los garífunas de Guatemala”, in *Revista Pueblos y Fronteras*, Vol. 5, No. 8.; Mark Anderson, *Black and indigenous: Garifuna activism and consumer culture in Honduras*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2001; Gurdian Galio, Charles Hale and Edmund T. Gordon, “Derechos, recursos y memoria social de lucha: reflexiones sobre un estudio acerca de los derechos territoriales de las comunidades indígenas y negras en la Costa Caribe de Nicaragua”, in *Revista del Caribe Nicaragüense*, Wani, No. 29; George Priestley and Alberto Barrow, “El movimiento negro en Panamá: una interpretación histórica y política”, in Odile Hoffmann (ed.) *Política e identidad. Afrodescendientes en México y América Central*, Mexico, INAH/UNAM/CEMCA/IRD, 2010 (Serie Africanías No. 4).

¹⁵ In May 2011, a consultation of Afro-descendant communities was organized by the National Commission for Indigenous Development, which is due to be completed in 2012. The consultation aims to identify the communities in order to establish public policies and affirmative actions that favour their recognition and full integration into society.

glimpse other possible cultural configurations that were stifled by the imposition of the racial model of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but which sowed the seeds of other realities, such as that of a specific mestizaje (mixing of races) which will be discussed below.

Moreover, studies in Mexico and Central America have underlined the diversity and heterogeneity of Africans and their descendants in the society of New Spain. The complex relationships between different cultural groups and the population of African origin have been documented; sometimes they were marked by cooperation and solidarity, sometimes by rivalry and antagonism. In Central America, studies have been carried out of the African presence during the colonial era and the subsequent migrations of Afro-descendants, which gave rise to specific social dynamics.

In the studies conducted to date, academic trends can be distinguished based on the influence of economic, regional, demographic, social and cultural historiography, as well as trends resulting from the debates and contributions of years of research and reflection on the subject. For example, the importance of incorporating anthropological, cultural-historical and gender perspectives into analyses has been demonstrated, while contributions from other domains such as artistic manifestations, oral tradition and literary works have also been highlighted.

Recent works have proposed interesting new lines of analysis for historical studies. Research into the confraternities of “blacks and mulattoes” during the period of the Viceroyalty has opened up new lines of thought with substantive data about that group, among others, such as identity ties between cultural groups, the participation of women as overseers, problems of power and alliances.¹⁶

Another important research area is that of enslaved and free children of African origin. The study of childhood can provide information about family dynamics as well as about the conditions and characteristics of slave and free child labour, and about other domestic communities.¹⁷ In addition, the use of pictorial images as sources of analysis has increased; this is important for historical periods about which documentary information is unavailable, such as the nineteenth century.

Registers of inhabitants and censuses of people of African origin have also been studied. Despite the limitations and imprecisions of such sources, their data can provide information about the social and demographic composition of Africans and their descendants in Mexico and Central American countries during the Viceroyalty era and the nineteenth century.

¹⁶ Nicole Von Germeten, *Black Blood Brothers. Confraternities and Social Mobility for Afro-Mexicans*, University Press Florida, 2006.

¹⁷ Cristina Masferrer, a young historian, was the first person to research the childhood of slaves in Mexico City. See: *Familia, niñez e identidad social entre los esclavos de origen africano de la ciudad de México en la primera mitad del siglo XVII*, bachelor's degree dissertation, Mexico, Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2009.

Anthropological, ethnographic and sociological research into the characteristics, situation and problems of Afro-descendant communities in Mexico and Central America has also increased. As was mentioned for the case of Mexico, various studies have been conducted about the Costa Chica of Guerrero and Oaxaca, looking at kinship networks, social organization, cultural manifestations and musical expressions. Notable works have also been undertaken that explore issues related to identity, migration and childhood in this region.¹⁸ However, more comprehensive ethnographic studies are needed that analyse the material conditions of the area, relations with other groups, in particular indigenous groups, and the social and cultural forms that characterize the communities in question, such as traditional medicine, the role of women and problems of racism and discrimination. In addition, research into Afro-descendant communities like the Mascogo in Coahuila and other groups in States like Morelos, Guanajuato, Michoacán, Tabasco and Campeche is needed.

It has already been mentioned that significant works have been carried out on Afro-descendant populations in Central America; for example, in recent years, studies have been conducted of the situation of women in Nicaraguan communities, highlighting their importance in the economy, and also stressing the vulnerability of their position and the difficulties they face as heads of households. Similarly, countries like Panama, Costa Rica and Honduras already have a significant body of studies denouncing the racism and discrimination suffered by people of African descent. However, other countries like Mexico and Guatemala still require diagnoses and research that identify more specific characteristics and problems in regions with Afro-descendant populations, with the aim of establishing public strategies and policies that favour their full integration into society and combat racism and discrimination.

Characteristics of research sources

The main source for researching the slave trade, slavery and, more generally, the participation of Africans and their descendants in Mexico and countries of Central America consists of accounts from the colonial period held in various archives. Many regions do not have documentary archives and the archives of others are disorganized and poorly maintained. Consequently, efforts are needed to raise the awareness of governments and educational and cultural institutions about the importance of keeping that documentary evidence in good condition.

The Viceroyalty era encompasses several periods and the characteristics of sources vary depending on the epoch and the region, so that sources from the sixteenth, seventeenth or eighteenth

¹⁸ Citlali Quecha, *Cuando los hijos se van*, Mexico, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, doctoral thesis, 2011.

centuries vary in style, and, as I will analyse below, or their context and purpose. Sources from the period of the Viceroyalty can be found in various public and private collections. Some of the most important are described below.

In Mexico, the National General Archive centralizes much of the administrative and historical documentation for the whole country. It has a section specializing in the period of the Viceroyalty, including witness accounts about what was then the Viceroyalty of New Spain. Documents from various other Central American countries can also be consulted there. It is worth looking a little more closely at the characteristics of the documentation in this archive, as it is useful for exploring the history of Africans and their descendants in various countries of Central America. Specific branches on marriages, inquisitorial proceedings, general registration, land, national property, edicts, by-laws, tributes, the historical archive of the public treasury, royal decrees, civilians and Jesuits, provide valuable information for studying the population of African origin in Mexico. For example, the marriages branch contains details of documents requesting weddings held in the Sagrario Metropolitano and in the parishes of Santa Catalina Mártir and Santa Veracruz, mainly during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Those documents record information about age, origin, legal or civil status and occupation. Meanwhile, the inquisition branch contains valuable information about the personal lives of a high percentage of Africans and Afro-descendants, with details not only of defendants but also of witnesses in the proceedings. As well as information such as origin, civil or legal status (and in some cases physical and emotional descriptions), these documents reflect the social and moral dynamics of the society of New Spain and have been extremely useful for studying the role of Africans and their descendants, both free and enslaved, in social and gender relations. These sources also provide information about their trades, how they were treated by their owners and cases of solidarity or conflict with other members of society during the Viceroyalty.

The national property branch, meanwhile, contains a large number of documents on a variety of subjects. Some deal with charges and proceedings in disputes about the sale of slaves, donations or lawsuits concerning inheritances; others deal with charges of common-law cohabitation and there are also valuable testamentary references. Many of these documents reflect the day-to-day, legal and economic worlds of people of African origin in the religious institutions associated with slavery and the social dimensions thereof. Other branches, such as edicts, by-laws, general registration and royal decrees, contain information about legislation for the granting of licences, payment of tributes or regulation of the work activities and social conduct of Africans in New Spain.

Nearly all the countries of Central America have national, provincial (State) and municipal archives which usually hold administrative and legal information about each entity or region. State and

municipal archives hold town council records which include details of professional unions, taxes, duties, tariffs, prices, public services, licences, regulations, by-laws, festivities, and other documents.

Significant amounts of important information and data about the characteristics of slavery can be found in notarial archives. Forms, deeds, wills, agreements for the purchase and sale of chattel or slaves, instruments for mortgage-backed loans, powers of attorney, and so on, provide information about the subject. Parish and convent archives describe the institutional life of the Church, offer insights into the social and cultural life of the populations, and provide details of genealogies and demographics.

In addition there are archives and collections in universities and other public and private institutions, which can also contribute to reconstructing the social and economic history of Africans and their descendants in the societies in question. Of course, archives such as the General Archive of the Indies in Seville, which has an online catalogue, and those of other agencies in Spain, the United Kingdom, Paris and Germany, and various institutions in the United States, also have private archives and collections of documentary sources that offer valuable information on the subject.

These holdings, some well-organized and catalogued in databases and lists, others completely disorganized and largely neglected, are made up of a wide variety of documents of different types. Chronicles, geographical accounts, visits, edicts, by-laws, legal documents, formal complaints, wills, records of purchases and donations, various types of litigation, censuses, registers of inhabitants and even Christmas carols or forbidden songs and dances contribute to the wealth of information contained in sources from the period of the Viceroyalty.

Pictures, paintings and photographs have also become a valuable research source. It is important to note that, when studying such sources, it is essential to apply a rigorous methodology that takes into account the contexts in which the pictures were made, their authors and their purposes. Rather than completely faithful depictions of the moment, pictures reflect the ideas of the society of New Spain, influenced by “ideal” values, and the social realities expressed by the painters of the time.

For research into the nineteenth century, the characteristics of the documentary sources change. In countries like Mexico, distinctions based on caste and ‘qualities’ stopped being used, making it more difficult for historians to identify Afro-descendants. However, other accounts, such as travel chronicles, journals, periodicals, gazettes and some censuses which, despite the restrictions, continued using racial designations, contain important information for studying the population of African origin. In the late nineteenth century and the twentieth century, photographs are an invaluable means of identifying Afro-descendant populations. In Central America, significant

advances have been made in research covering these periods, in which it is more difficult to identify Afro-descendants. Lowell Gudmundson points out three strategic areas that have guided this progress: (a) taking advantage of the few cases in which census officials did record “racial” categories; (b) the in-depth study of communities which are obviously of African origin; and (c) the critical re-articulation of genealogical studies and pictures promoting heroic nationalism.¹⁹ Migration records can also help reconstruct the characteristics of the Afro-descendant population in Mexico and Central America during that period. In addition, the relevance of ethnohistorical studies that bring together history and anthropology should also be considered.

Although I will not go into the details of the ethnographic and sociological data that is obtained for studies of contemporary Afro-descendant communities, it is important to note certain particularities of the research carried out and the characteristics of information that can be found about the subject with which we are concerned. As well as monographs and regional histories, a wealth of information is offered by life histories and carefully gathered ethnographic data about the social organization, economy, rituals, traditional medicine, family and kinship networks, cultural expressions, etc., of the communities in question. This research forms the basis of the cultural heritage of Afro-descendant communities and their historical memory.

Concepts and terminology

The question of the use of certain names, concepts and terms has been analysed and reflected upon at length in studies of Africans and their descendants in Mexico and Central America.

Perhaps those that have given rise to most debate are the names used to identify people of African descent, the use of certain concepts to refer to the historical process related to slavery and the transatlantic slave trade, and interpretation of the social organization during the colonial period linked to processes of cohabitation and exchange, known the region as *mestizaje*.

The colonization and conquest of territories in Asia, Africa and the Americas resulted in groups from different cultural backgrounds being lumped together under the same classification. In Mexico, Nahuas, Nãñus and Mayas were initially referred to indiscriminately as *indios* (indians); the same occurred with other distinct groups from Central and South America. The Mandinka, Wolof, Berbers, Fangs and Bantus, as well as settlers from the Orient and the Indian Ocean, with African features, were classified as blacks and in some cases *chinos* (of mixed African and Amerindian descent). Gradually, the presence of missionaries and scholars, keen to understand the

¹⁹ Lowell Gudmundson, “De categorías suprimidas y clasificaciones anacrónicas: fuentes y estrategias recientes para el estudio de la historia aforcentroamericana”, in María Elisa Velázquez (ed.), *Debates históricos contemporáneos: africanos y afrodescendientes en México y Centroamérica*, Mexico, INAH/CEMCA/UNAM-CIALC/IRD, 2011 (Serie Africanías No. 7).

new lands and their inhabitants, encouraged the study and differentiation of the groups that made up those peoples.

However, use of the terms “negro” (black), “mulato” (mulatto), “pardo” (of mixed African and European descent) and sometimes “chino” to refer to the population of African and Oriental origin was widespread and continues to prevail in historical studies today. I consider that these names obstruct research as they fail to account for senses of belonging, origin and, in short, the uniqueness of the individuals who made up the populations of our societies; moreover, they hamper analysis and understanding of the diverse cultural phenomena of the period. While one might not agree with this approach, in my opinion it is important to define and create concepts that facilitate understanding of the historical subjects being studied and the processes in which they were immersed. I also consider terms such as “negritud” (Negritude), “tercera raíz” (third root) or “culturas negras” (black cultures) to be ambiguous concepts which, although they may have been representative in certain periods, do not always help understand what the data and new research reveal. For example, how can one refer to the “third root” in ports such as Veracruz or Acapulco in Mexico, which were predominantly settled and built by Africans?

Terms such as “calidad” (quality), “raza” (race), “nación” (nation) and “mestizaje” (miscegenation) have also been the subject of controversy and analysis. In this article, I will briefly outline what I consider to be the most noteworthy reflections, beginning with the role and meanings of the names and categories used in colonial times. “Nation” was synonymous with cultural origin, as indicated in the dictionaries of the period, or with the place of birth of the inhabitants of a province.²⁰ Thus, in many documentary sources, slaves are referred to as being of the “Congo nation” or the “Angola nation”. Meanwhile, the term “caste” was closely linked to the idea of *mestizaje*. “The castes” was a name that was frequently used to denote the various descendants of New Spain, particularly “mulato”, “moreno” (dark-skinned) or “pardo”, “mestizo”, “lobo” (of mixed African and Amerindian descent), “coyote” (of mixed mulatto and Amerindian parentage) or “zambo” (of mixed African and Amerindian descent), depending on the region. It is interesting to note that in the Covarrubias Dictionary of 1610, the word “caste” denotes a person of noble and pure lineage, who is of good ancestry and descent; thus, the category was not derogatory, at least formally. Later, in the *Diccionario de Autoridades* of 1737, the term “caste” also has the meaning: generation and lineage from known parents; to breed, procreate and have children. This also recalls the intention and purpose of the famous pictorial works known as “cuadros de castas” (caste paintings) or “cuadros de mestizajes” (*mestizaje* paintings).

²⁰ *Diccionario de Covarrubias* (1610), Tesoro de la Lengua Castellana o Española, Madrid, Ediciones Turner (facsimile) and *Diccionario de Autoridades* (1737), Real Academia Española (facsimile).

As can be seen, the use of this category in New Spain was very different to its use in other cultures, such as that of India, where there was strict and near-absolute separation between different groups, in terms of the law, work, living arrangements and kinship. Finally, the category “race” was also used in New Spain, though less frequently, from the sixteenth century. At that time, its meaning was very different to the meaning that had been acquired by the middle of the eighteenth century. Until then, “race” had connotations of lineage, origin or nation. It is worth noting that the seventeenth-century dictionary does not contain this word and the dictionary from the first half of the eighteenth century refers to “race” as caste or quality of origin or lineage. As we will see below, the category “race” acquired new connotations as a result of the “pseudo-scientific” discourse of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when it became common currency.

Authors like Banton and Mörner have highlighted differences in the meaning of “race” between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. For instance, according to Mörner, before the sixteenth century, the differential valuation of human ‘races’ was not a significant phenomenon.²¹ However, various historians, most of them from the United States, claim that racism began to make itself felt in New Spain from the time of the Spanish conquest. For example, it is claimed that racism was expressed through the formula known as “limpieza de sangre” (cleanliness of blood), which involved proving to the metropolitan authorities and authorities of the Viceroyalty that persons aspiring to positions of “honour” did not have Jewish or Muslim family or kinship links. This rule was mainly a legacy of politico-religious questions inherited from the long war of reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula that only ended in 1492. Mörner points out that paganism also provided a useful excuse for conquest and enslavement. The cleanliness of blood argument was often used in relation to mulattoes, but there were also “illegal” ways of ‘whitening’ or correcting one’s background.²²

Finally, the term “calidad” (quality), which has been analysed by historians of the colonial era, seems to shed more light on the complexity of identification and naming. Pilar Gonzalbo and Robert McCaa have highlighted the importance of family status, social recognition, categories assigned to professions or occupations and personal prestige as essential elements to understand social distinctions. Thus, at the time, the term “quality” was used as a concept that encompassed considerations of race, money, occupation and individual or family respectability.²³

²¹ Magnus Mörner, *La macla de razas en la historia de América Latina*, Buenos Aires, Paidós, 1969.

²² That happened to the father of the famous Baroque painter Juan Correa. When he submitted his application for the position and title of barber-surgeon, an objection was made because he “was the colour of the mulattoes”. Apparently, that objection did not have any consequences, as the doctor continued working in that role. María Elisa Velázquez, *Juan Correa, mulato libre, maestro de pintor*, Mexico, Conaculta, 1998.

²³ Pilar Gonzalbo, *Familia y orden colonial*, op.cit., pp. 13-14; Robert McCaa, “Calidad, clase y matrimonio en el México colonial: el caso de Parral, 1788-1790”, in Pilar Gonzalbo (ed.) *Historia de la familia*, Mexico, Instituto Mora/UAM, 1993.

In short, these variables help explain that, at least until the mid-eighteenth century, an individual's value seems to have depended more on their economic position and social recognition than on open discrimination or segregation related to skin colour. Although it is true that slavery was linked to a servile and disdained condition associated with the African population, at least during those centuries it did not constitute an insurmountable barrier to cohabitation, exchange and certain economic opportunities. While it cannot be denied that racial distinctions played a part in the society of New Spain, they were much less complex and much easier to manipulate than in other societies and in subsequent periods.

The concept of *mestizaje* has also caused controversy in Mexico and Central America. As a cultural process of exchange between various groups, giving rise to new and complex forms of coexistence, our societies have been characterized by *mestizaje*. However, it is also true that it has served, possibly since the colonial period, but more decisively in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as an ideology that denies the participation of groups such as those of African origin in the construction of nation-States. The ideology of *mestizaje* exalted the union of "Spaniard and indigenous" as homogeneous cultures, denying or disdaining the economic, social and cultural contributions of other groups, including those of Africans and Afro-descendants. In this respect, it is important to distinguish between *mestizaje* as a historical cultural process and as an ideology of the political and intellectual nation-building projects undertaken from the nineteenth century.

What remains to be researched?

Despite progress made, many subjects remain to be researched. We need to explore new archives and discover new sources for regions that have not yet been studied, like the north of Mexico. Further research is also needed into regions that are fundamental for understanding the African presence in Mexico, such as the Costa Chica of Guerrero and Oaxaca; although this work has started, we still do not have a well-documented history of Africans and their descendants in that region and it is striking that, for instance, the past of Africans in the port of Acapulco, Costa Grande of Guerrero and the so-called *China* route, which went all the way to Mexico City, has yet to be studied. Anthropologists, who are so interested in this region, are missing crucial pieces of the puzzle that will help understand the cultural processes of these communities.

Further research is needed into historical contexts and processes in Guatemala, Nicaragua and El Salvador. While progress has been made, additional data is needed to explain the economic, social and cultural participation of Africans and Afro-descendants and their invisibility in societies like that of El Salvador. More studies are also needed to explore the use of terms such as "ladino" in

different contexts of Central America and discover registers of inhabitants and censuses with more accurate demographic data.

Despite the limitations of the sources, it is important to use more creative criteria to study historic periods like the nineteenth century. The use of artistic sources, chronicles and censuses has demonstrated that this era can be studied from other perspectives that make it possible to identify Afro-descendant groups. In addition, we need to reflect on the ideology of liberalism and the political changes that influenced how *mestizaje* was used as a symbol of nationalism and how that affected Afro-descendants.

Although the regions and cultures from which the Africans in the region originated have been identified, much work remains to be done in this area. We need to know more about the characteristics of their cultures, social and family relationships, world views, religions and customs. How can we analyse and distinguish practices of African origin without having studied those cultures? As Colin Palmer pointed out several years ago: it is necessary to have a grasp of the complexity of African history and cultures in order to demonstrate how that background influenced the way Africans coped with and organized life in New Spain.²⁴ Similarly, we need to identify other regions of origin that have been overlooked, such as those of East Africa, via the South Sea and the Pacific. With that information, we will be able to understand the richness of the cultural exchanges, the historical processes of *mestizaje* and, finally, the composition of the (forced or free) global circulation of Africans, framed in terms of power relationships. That circuit was, in a way, the first expression of the globalization that today has taken on unprecedented dimensions and intensity and is analysed through the concept of diaspora.

Although there has been an ongoing dialogue between historians and anthropologists for many years, joint reflection on data and forms of interpretation needs to be stepped up. Likewise, it is important to increase dialogue and reflection with other disciplines and researchers from Central and South America, as well as with specialists who have studied other cultural groups and can contribute experience and focuses that enrich our research. As has been pointed out, each context determines and limits the potential for comparison; but, at the same time, it expands and feeds that process of comparison with similarities, contradictions and differences. Comparison makes it possible to identify points of divergence and convergence in time, space and processes, thus explaining factors behind individual or shared dynamics.

Moreover, although our work has been published and disseminated, a great deal remains to be done in this respect. Innovative undergraduate and postgraduate dissertations seek to explore little-

²⁴ Colin Palmer, "México y la diáspora africana: algunas consideraciones metodológicas", in María Elisa Velázquez (ed.) *Poblaciones y culturas de origen africano en México*, Mexico, INAH, 2005 (Serie Africanías No. 1).

known situations. It is interesting and worrying though that those studies often do not lead to doctoral theses; in any event, it is necessary to encourage more publications and create dissemination mechanisms that are accessible to society at large.

Finally, studies and research are needed on discrimination and the problem of historical and contemporary racism in countries like Mexico and Guatemala. While this subject has already been explored for indigenous peoples, very few studies have addressed the experience of Afro-descendants in those regions. In this respect, it is necessary to create spaces of exchange between Mexico and countries of Central America for sharing and exchanging research experiences. Surveys of discrimination, such as those conducted in Mexico by CONAPRED (National Council for the Prevention of Discrimination), reveal a need for information and reflection about the part played by Afro-descendants in the formation of Mexico.²⁵ It is also necessary to encourage research and studies about places of memory of slavery, resistance, processes of obtaining freedom and, in general, the cultural heritage of people of African descendant in Mexico and countries of Central America through websites, books, national and international recognition, archive catalogues, and a host of other tools.

In short, the amount of research on this subject in Mexico and countries of Central America has increased significantly. However, further studies based on careful analysis of documentary sources are needed, to explore new archives, themes, interpretations and periods. Ethnographic and sociological research of Afro-descendant communities should also be promoted in countries like Mexico, as should diagnoses that take into account the material conditions of the groups under study, their cultural heritage and the difficulties they face.

Academic spaces and civil society organizations

Over the last decade, academic spaces dedicated to the study of the slavery of persons of African origin in Mexico and Central America have increased and diversified. For example, in the 1990s, the programme *Nuestra Tercera Raíz* (Our Third Root) was set up by the General Directorate of Popular Cultures of the National Council for Culture and the Arts, national and international symposia were organized, and valuable publications were produced on the subject, including a compilation of articles on Central America.

A few years later, in 1997, a permanent seminar entitled “Populations of African origin in Mexico”, attached to the Department of Ethnology and Social Anthropology of the National Institute of Anthropology and History, was established. Since then, it has been holding working

²⁵ Discrimination Survey 2010, CONAPRED, Mexico.

sessions for the presentation of research projects and results on the subject, as well as international congresses, conferences, courses, exhibitions and publications with a series called Africanías, which has seven volumes to date. In 2008, the seminar joined an international research project called AFRODESC, with the participation of researchers from various institutions in France, Colombia and Mexico. In conjunction with this project, exchanges were also organized with academics from Senegal, the United States and the Caribbean. The most notable results of this project, which ended in December 2011, include the holding of an international congress entitled “Diaspora, nation and difference: Populations of African origin in Mexico and Central America”, with the participation of 150 speakers, in Veracruz. In addition, four volumes of papers by Mexican, French, United States, Costa Rican, Honduran, Nicaraguan and Belizean researchers have been published exploring various historical and contemporary topics relating to African and Afro-descendant populations in Mexico and Central America.²⁶

Some researchers have focused on teaching students interested in this subject. In Mexico, the National School of Anthropology and History’s postgraduate course in history and ethnohistory has a research module and its bachelor’s degree course offers a module on this subject. In Costa Rica, a human resources course offers a module specializing in this subject, although there are still insufficient educational spaces, especially in relation to the history of African countries, to understand many factors and processes related to this continent.

Similarly, institutions such as the National Autonomous University of Mexico, through the Mexico Multicultural Nation programme, and the Research Centre for Latin America and the Caribbean, have carried out various academic and dissemination activities on the subject and have helped civil society organizations from the Costa Chica organize meetings and symposia. Furthermore, the Centre for Research and Higher Studies in Social Anthropology and universities like those of Guanajuato, Veracruz, Mexico State, Yucatán and Guerrero, among others, have carried out important projects on this subject. Civil society and human rights organizations, as well as women’s networks, have been working, especially in Central American countries, to encourage research, reflection and dissemination of the history of Africans and the problems facing Afro-descendant communities today.²⁷

²⁶ Odile Hoffman (ed.), *Política e identidad. Afrodescendientes en México y América Central*, Mexico, INAH/UNAM/CEMCA/IRD, 2011 (Serie Africanía No. 4); Elisabeth Cunin (ed.), *Mestizaje, diferencia y nación. Lo “negro” en América Central y el Caribe*, Mexico, INAH/CEMCA/IRD/UNAM, 2011 (Serie Africanía No. 5); Juan Manuel de la Serna (ed.) *De la abolición y la libertad. Africanos y afrodescendientes en México e Iberoamérica*, Mexico, INAH/CEMCA/UNAM/IRD/AFRODESC, 2011 (Serie Africanía No. 6); María Elisa Velázquez, (ed.), *Debates históricos contemporáneos. Africanos y afrodescendientes en México e Iberoamérica*, Mexico, INAH/CEMCA/UNAM/IRD/AFRODESC, 2011 (Serie Africanías No. 7).

²⁷ There are various organizations in different countries, including, in Panama, the National Federation of Panamanian Black Organizations, made up of social and cultural groups, societies, civic associations and community organizations; in Mexico, movements in the Afro-descendant communities of the Costa Chica of

Museums, education, dissemination and government action

Advances in research about slavery, the slave trade and the contributions of the millions of Africans to the formation of the societies of Mexico and Central America have begun to reach the fields of education and broadcasting. However, much remains to be done to raise awareness of the importance of this group in the past and present of Mexican and Central American societies.

To date, there are no museums specializing in the subject. In some countries, temporary exhibitions have been held about the slave trade, slavery and the contributions of Afro-descendants to the formation of our societies, with visual materials or collections that have travelled to various States of Mexico and the United States of America. Also in Mexico, in 1995, the Museum of Afro-Mestizo Cultures was opened in Cuajinicuilapa, Guerrero, in the Costa Chica region, with the support of the General Directorate of Popular Cultures of the National Council for Culture and the Arts, the municipal government and local communities. However, as it did not have a fixed budget and lacks the support of the current governments, the Museum is facing serious financial difficulties. Furthermore, a number of photography exhibitions about Afro-descendant populations in Mexico have been held in Mexico City, Acapulco, Veracruz, Guanajuato and elsewhere. The most recent, and perhaps the one that has had the greatest social impact, opened in August 2011 within the framework of the International Year for People of African Descent, on one of the main streets of Mexico City (Paseo de la Reforma), with the title *Abriendo los Ojos* (Opening Our Eyes). The exhibition consists of 30 large-format photographs of Afro-descendant communities in Oaxaca, Guerrero and Veracruz, taken by three artists.²⁸

In order to raise awareness of the characteristics of the slave trade, the slaves' experiences, and their contributions to the formation of the societies of Mexico and the countries of Central America, it is necessary to include in museums of history, anthropology, ethnography and popular culture exhibits about slavery, resistance movements and, in general, the important role played by Africans and Afro-descendants and their economic, social and cultural contribution. It is also necessary to consider setting up permanent museums that explain and raise awareness about the history of the thousands of Africans and their descendants in our societies, through collection objects, pictures, videos and other museographic materials.

Oaxaca and Guerrero, such as México Negro, A.C., Africa A.C., Epoca, Ecosta, etc.; in Honduras, the Organization for the Ethnic Development of Afro-descendant Communities; in Costa Rica, the Afro-Costa Rican Women's Centre; in Nicaragua, the Afro-Caribbean, Afro-Latin American and Diaspora Women's Network, and many others.

²⁸ *Abriendo los Ojos*, temporary photography exhibition by Paulina García Hubard, Franck Courtel and Manuel García. Texts by Marcia Zepeda and María Elisa Velázquez, Mexico City, Mexico City Government, National Council for the Prevention of Discrimination, National Institute of Anthropology and History, Fomento Cultural Banamex, Kodak, August-November 2011.

Education is, without a doubt, a central aspect of building democratic societies that respect cultural diversity and difference. Costa Rica and Honduras have made considerable efforts to train teachers and distribute books on the history and rights of people of African descent through a project promoted by the historian Rina Cáceres.²⁹ A diagnosis of coverage of the subject in the curricula of teaching syllabuses has also been carried out in Central America and it shows that while some countries have tried to increase the visibility of this history, a great deal remains to be done. In Mexico, the subject of the participation of Africans and their descendants in the country's history is only addressed in the year three textbook; the textbook only covers the subject at a very general level and is marred by factual errors. Mexican society is completely unaware of the history of Africans in Mexico and the existence and situation of Afro-descendant communities today. Consequently, it should come as no surprise that racism persists within families, schools, workplaces and the mass media.

From this year, thanks to 2011 being proclaimed International Year for People of African Descent, the concerns of academics and civil society organizations are starting to be heard. Some government institutions have shown an interest in supporting and learning from research into the subject and carrying out analyses, meetings and consultations to implement constitutional reforms that recognize Afro-descendant populations and develop public policies to improve their living conditions. In August of this year, the Summit of People of African Descent was held in Ceiba, Honduras, with nearly 800 participants. Organizations from Costa Rica, Panama, Honduras, Nicaragua and Guatemala have worked consistently to raise awareness of the characteristics of Afro-descendant populations and the various economic problems and problems of discrimination or racism suffered by many of them.

Meanwhile, for at least four years, CONAPRED in Mexico has been carrying out diagnoses and actions to address the racism and discrimination suffered by people of African descent. In September 2011, at the Meeting on Discrimination and Racism Ten Years after the Durban Declaration, a Guide for public action in favour of the Afro-descendant population in Mexico was presented; it will be circulated to government agencies and the general public, free of charge.³⁰ Also in Mexico, the government of the State of Oaxaca, which recognized the Afro-descendant population in the 1985 Constitution, set up a department dedicated to people of African descent in the Secretariat of Indigenous Affairs. Rina Cáceres and Quince Duncan have held workshops and training courses for schoolteachers from Costa Rica, Honduras and El Salvador, with the aim of

²⁹ Rina Cáceres (ed.), *Del olvido a la memoria: africanos y afroestizos en la historia colonial de Centroamérica*, San José, UNESCO, 2008, volume 1; *Del olvido a la memoria: esclavitud, resistencia y cultura*, San José, 2008, volume 2; *Del olvido a la memoria: África en tiempos de la esclavitud*, San José, UNESCO, 2008, volume 3.

³⁰ *Guía para la Acción Pública. Población Afrodescendiente en México*, Mexico, National Council for the Prevention of Discrimination, 2011.

raising awareness of the history of Africans and their descendants among children and young people at various levels of education.

In short, significant advances have been made in the research and dissemination of the subject in recent years. However, a great deal remains to be done in order for the history of Africans and their descendants in Mexico and countries of Central America to occupy its rightful place and for the Afro-descendant communities and the societies of our countries to feel proud of their African and Afro-descendant past.

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