

# Negros-Afromexicanos: Recognition and the Politics of Identity in Contemporary Mexico

by

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*Llegaremos en América, antes que en parte alguna del globo,  
a la creación de una raza hecha con el tesoro de todas las anteriores,  
a la raza final, la raza cósmica (We in America shall arrive,  
before any other part of the world, at the creation of a new race  
fashioned out of the treasures of all the previous ones:  
The final race, the cosmic race)*  
-José Vasconcelos

*¿Cuál es mi cultura, mi raza, mi destino?"  
(What is my culture, my race, my destiny?)*  
-Manuel Zapata Olivella

## Abstract

Afro-Mexican communities in the Costa Chica region have forged strategic organizations, programs, and initiatives in order to combat the historical silence and discrimination of their presence and contributions in Mexico. This paper presents a transnational communication and theorization of current events and activities with goals that range from the articulation and selection of ethno-racial terminology, to the dissemination of cultural identifiers, and the constitutional recognition of Afro-Mexicans. It also discusses projects and programs such as the *Encuentro de los Pueblos Negros* (Meeting of the Black Communities) in Oaxaca and Guerrero, and the association México Negro, A.C., in order to illustrate how community-based projects contribute to a reification of *afromexicanidad* or Afro-Mexican-ness as a dynamic and pluriversal construction of being and of blackness.

## Introduction

The relationship between *mestizaje* and *mexicanidad* (Mexican-ness) illustrates the role of identity politics in the formation of imagined community. *Mestizaje* has been utilized as a strategic identity construct in order to forge an inseparable nexus between the geo-political and the bio-political construction of *mexicanidad*. In particular, the mestizo identity has been framed as a spiritual tool with which to blur racialized color lines into a homogeneous imagined community and reconcile the cultural and social divisions within the nation. However, the bond between Mexican-ness, *mestizaje*, and blackness has reflected a different trajectory, one of “uneasy tension” and disidentification (Vaughn, 49). It is a route in which blackness has been socially and culturally delinked from the modern imagination of *mexicanidad*. Whether engaged via the signifiers of *negro*, *moreno*, or *afromexicano*, Black identity has been made invisible, residing beyond the borders of the *mestizo* nation, blurred into brown through the process of *mestizaje*, and disassociated from significant cultural contributions to the country. Yet, the *pueblos negros* (Black communities) in the Costa Chica region of southern Mexico have been organizing in order to combat this racial amnesia, and more importantly, to articulate a pluriversal construction of being and of blackness, which catapults forward the extensive cultural, social, historical, and political activity of Afro-Mexicans within the nation today.

Within this framework, this paper presents a communication of current projects that are being implemented by these Black communities in order to be counted, to be recognized, and to be agents of their own consciousness. In addition, this article also examines how these community-based projects contribute to a reification of *afromexicanidad* or Afro-Mexican-ness as an interconnected and dynamic dialogue of knowledge and being between the different Afro-descendent communities within Mexico and the Americas, thus acknowledging similarities and differences, while maintaining a collective network of identity in constant evolution.

As such, we suggest that this alternative configuration of *afromexicanidad*, and in turn of *mexicanidad* as well, reflects an examination of the contemporary politics of identity, and not identity politics in Mexico, where “the former is open to whoever wants to join, while the latter tends to be bounded by the definition of a given identity” (Mignolo, 14). This distinction is well-illustrated in the opening quotations by the Mexican José Vasconcelos and the Afro-Colombian Manuel Zapata Olivella. While Vasconcelos follows the narrative of identity politics that envisions *mexicanidad* as a single, fixed construct and as a final end point to which all the “treasures” of the previous races shall arrive, Zapata Olivella turns this vision inside out via questioning the politics of identity itself. His interrogations challenge the notion of a static identity and present a permeable formation of consciousness, existence, and being that are in constant motion.

## **The Silencing of Blackness in Mexico**

In order to understand the contemporary invisibility of Afro-descendent populations in Mexico, it is critical to examine the politics of identity within this nation’s history and, in particular, to examine the racialization and silencing of blackness as a strategic and hegemonic tool in the construction of *mexicanidad*. In order to break free of the yoke of colonialism and project a distinct nationalism based on an alternative configuration of identity, the discourse of *mestizaje* has been applied by political and intellectual elites as a means of re-imagining Mexican citizenry. Framed as a cosmic mixing of races that created a “new race fashioned out of the treasures of all the previous ones” (Vasconcelos, 40), *mestizaje* has been used as a dominant discourse with which to imagine Latin America as a unique cradle of the future of humanity. The Mexican philosopher, educator, and politician José Vasconcelos envisioned *mestizaje* as an instrument of salvation, akin to the role of modernity in liberating Mexico and all of Latin American society from colonial designs. According to Vasconcelos, *mestizaje* would serve as a tool that would distance the region from its darker colonial heritage. No longer would society be organized via a caste system that ranked its members as racialized types. Instead, this new, cosmic race would lead the way in achieving a final ethnic mission that incorporates all types into an improved and beneficial interracial mixture.

In achieving this homogenized mosaic, the *mestizo* paradigm would also permit Latin America (Mexico) to distinguish itself from the empire to the north. Setting itself apart from the stark segregation of the United States in the first half of the twentieth century, *mestizaje* would allow Latin America to escape the problem of the color line. As an amalgam of the white, black, red, and yellow lines, this modern instrument of salvation would essentially erase the problem of the color line (or color lines), by allowing them to blur together and absorb the racial types that remained as vestiges of a backwards, dark, and segregated colonial past. In turn, *mestizaje* would result in the formation of a “final race, the cosmic race” that would foment a homogenous ethno-racial national and regional identity based on this supposedly harmonious mixing of types.

However, it is within this logic of *mestizaje* that an essentialized construction of blackness and Black identity has most often been absorbed and erased, destined to a condition of continued discrimination and invisibility. According to Vasconcelos, as each race fulfilled their ethnic mission within the formation of the cosmic race, “the black, eager for sensual joy, intoxicated with dances and unbridled lust” would be uplifted, “absorbed by the superior type... (whiteness) and redeemed gradually through voluntary extinction.” (22). That is, blackness, framed as an essentialized identity construct based on skin color and linked to hypersexuality, would be improved through whitening, and eventually fade into brown. Furthermore, as Vasconcelos suggests, since there are “very few blacks,” with a “large part of them already becoming a mulatto population” (26), it would be very easy for the Black race to be integrated into the future Ibero-American race and to disappear. Thus, invisibility has become a condition of blackness in contemporary Mexico as a consequence of the strategic identity politics that has been associated with *mestizaje* where whitening the darker masses has been a central objective in the consolidation of the cosmic race and in the making of *mexicanidad*.

This absence, or rather, strategic amnesia and disappearance of blackness has permeated Mexican consciousness and the construction of the Mexican imagined community. For example, the renowned Mexican anthropologist Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán echoes this sentiment with a poignant comment in the opening of the third edition of his foundational text *La población negra de México 1519-1810*. He first writes that this work, an extensive ethnography of the Black presence in Mexico, is necessary to expose:

*la ausencia de cualquier alusión a los negros como sector de población que podría haber contribuído en la formación de la nacionalidad mexicana* (absence of any allusion to Blacks as a sector of the population that could have contributed to the formation of Mexican nationality). (9)

However, he then continues with the statement that the work is further important in order to: *cerrar el panorama total del transcurrir del negro desde sus lejanos orígenes en el África hasta su completa integración en el estado mexicano* (To close the total panorama of the existence of the Negro from his distant origins in Africa to his complete integration in the Mexican State (12).

In this prominent, ethnographic text, we see how Aguirre Beltrán posits the need to investigate and elucidate the contributions of the Black population in the history of Mexico. Yet, his clarifications regarding “closing the total panorama” of the Black presence within and its contributions to the contemporary nation-state simultaneously reveal a pathway that is closed off to a visible and dynamic construction of blackness. That is, according to Aguirre Beltrán’s framework, the Black population and its influences in Mexico are essentially relegated to the past, “completely” assimilated in the present, and thus vanished from future configurations of *mexicanidad*.

## Consequences of the Invisibility of Blacks and Blackness in Mexico

Engaging the consequences of this logic of mestizaje and this de-linking of blackness from the present and future constructions of *mexicanidad* allows us to better understand some of the current conditions and lived experiences of Blacks in Mexico. Exclusion, discrimination, lack of representation, overt racism, and unequal access to resources and opportunities are some of the numerous negative contexts within which persons of African descent find themselves in the country. For example, since there has been no completion of a formal, juridical process in which they have been recognized and thus represented in political spheres (such as the census), Afro-Mexican communities have been denied the social, economic, and political resources and benefits directed to other minority groups, namely those of Indigenous heritage, who are counted as a separate ethnic minority. And as a further consequence of not being counted, their representation in cultural settings and institutions has also been overlooked as their traditions and cultural manifestations have primarily been lumped into the category of “*cultura popular*” (popular culture). Within this classification, Afro-Mexicans are often not granted any particular representation in museums for their supposed lack of traditions and unique cultural practices and distinctions. Instead, there are very few spaces in which Afro-Mexican identity and blackness in general are represented. While most often not conceived of as an offensive icon within Mexico<sup>1</sup>, the popular comic strip character *Memín Pinguín* still serves as one of the few, albeit polemic, most visible representations of Blacks in Mexico. Moreover, numerous individuals have expressed experiences of exclusion and a lack of belonging when they have been asked to sing the national anthem in order to prove their citizenship at military checkpoints. These examples demonstrate how Mexicans of African descent must confront an identity that is disparaged and misrepresented (or not represented) within numerous social, cultural and political settings.

In addition, it is the utter denial of recognition that has not only plagued the lived experiences of these communities, but has also often shunted their own consciousness and self-awareness. For example, the lack of acknowledgment of the history of Afro-Mexicans in primary and secondary school textbooks has resulted in a fissure between an understanding of Afro-descendent identity today and its connection to its own history and that of Mexico; that is, knowing where they come from and what their role has been in Mexican history is largely absent among today’s older and younger generations. This sentiment is echoed by a young member of the Afro-Mexican community of Laguna de Chacahua in the Costa Chica region of Oaxaca:

*Nos preguntan cómo queremos llamarnos, y yo digo, sabemos de la historia de los indios, pero no sabemos nada de los negros... de dónde venimos, cómo éramos. Cuando conozcamos esa historia sabremos cómo llamarnos* (They ask us what we want to call ourselves, and I say, we know about the history of indigenous groups, but we don’t know anything about the blacks, about where we come from, who we were. When we know about that history, we will know what to call ourselves). (*Guía para la acción pública*, 21)

As articulated by this young individual, knowing where they come from and affirming a link to their past is a critical component in also being able to articulate who they are now and in the future.

## **Who are We? Negr@s-afromexicanos and the Re-thinking of the Politics of Identity**

This notion of consciousness--of knowing where one comes from, of who they are, what they will become, and of what to call themselves-- is embedded in the selection and use of specific terminology used to label Mexicans of African descent. It is a terminology that reflects the complexity of identity and identification within and beyond these groups, and it exposes the consequences of a history and existence silenced and denied.

For instance, the terms “*negro*” and “*moreno*” are commonly used by most Mexicans and, in particular, by most Afro-Mexicans themselves to reference someone of African descent. As explained by Bobby Vaughn:

*Both terms more or less denote the pigmentation of one’s skin: 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 color. (50)*

Furthermore, while the use of these two terms not only links with darker and lighter shades of skin color, they also connect with a particular context or perspective towards the person or people in general. That is, the term *negro* is more pejorative and can be used more often in a negative context, while the politeness and more positive perspective associated with the term *moreno* often results in that particular term being appropriated more often by Afro-Mexicans themselves. This strategic association and use of a particular term of identification is noted in the following statement by a primary school student from Pinotepa Nacional, Oaxaca:

*Pues es que yo no soy tan negrita como las demás chamacas, me pongo mis lindas faldas cuando voy a las fiestas y dice mi abuelita que me veo muy bien, que ni parezco de aquí, porque hay niñas que también se ponen sus buenas ropas pero nomás con que vayan a Pinotepa, ya saben que es de por acá, porque son muy negritas (Well, it’s that I am not as black as the other girls. I put on my pretty skirts when I go to parties, and my grandmother says that I look very good, that I don’t even look as if I come from here, because there are other girls that wear pretty clothes and when they go to Pinotepa, you can tell that they are from here because they are very black). (Guía para la acción pública, 24)*

Another individual from Charco Redondo, Tututepec describes a family member's opinion towards being Black, "*Esa, que es mi prima, no quiere ser negra y es tan negra como yo* (That person, who is my cousin, does not want to be black, and she is as black as me)." (Reyes Larrea, et. al, 8)

These two statements demonstrate how the term *negro* retains a more negative connotation and how individuals reject and distance themselves not only from blackness itself, but also from degrees of blackness. As noted in the first citation, to be more Black carries with it a burden of depreciatory consciousness, resulting in a dis-identification from blackness. In the second excerpt, we see disagreement among family members who share the same "grade" of blackness. As such, the terminology used by these individuals illustrates the presence of conflicting opinions within Afro-Mexican communities, and it also reveals how a social history of invisibility and marginalization have affected the construction of the self and the articulation of identity among these groups.

However, this view and use of the term *negro* is not always imbued with negativity. On the contrary, it is critical to explore how this term and others, including the term Afro-Mexican or *afromexicano*, are being appropriated and utilized by individuals, collectives, and organizations as a political project and as tools of recognition and re-investment in a multi-faceted and plural configuration of Black consciousness.

For example, community leaders, organizations and collectives in Mexico have appropriated the term *afromexicano* or Afro-Mexican as a political project and as a foundational step in gaining official, juridical, and constitutional recognition as an ethnic group. During the Primer Foro Nacional: Poblaciones Afrodescendientes en México (First National Forum: Afro-Descendent Populations in Mexico) in September 2012, a statement declared the urgent need for: *Pleno reconocimiento constitucional como Pueblo Afronmexicano. Lo que implica la armonización de toda la legislación nacional, federal, y estatal* (full constitutional recognition as Afro-Mexican people, which implies the coordination of all of national, federal, and state legislation).

The term *afromexicano* is also the desired form of nomenclature that has been chosen to appear on census documents. For community groups and those who are fighting for local and national political recognition, this term has been preferred and selected because it represents a link to global projects that aim to advance the full recognition and equal rights of Afro-descendent populations throughout the Americas. That is, it is a term that has been taken-up by many groups within Latin America and the Caribbean (*afrocolombiano, afrocubano, afroecuatoriano, afrobrasileño*, etc.), and it has also been the official term utilized by academics and institutions such as UNESCO and the UN stemming from the conference on racism in Durban. Using the term *afromexicano* signifies being a part of a larger dialogue with other populations of African descent in the diaspora. For the communities in Mexico and around the world, it is a term that affirms the:

*Origen de sus ancestros y recordar que el comercio de esclavos fue el principal acontecimiento histórico que generó la diáspora africana en el mundo, y con ello evitar que su identidad fuera definida a partir de uno solo de sus rasgos fenotípicos: el tono de piel* (origin of their ancestors and remembers that enslavement was the principle historical event that produced the African diaspora around the world, and with it, to avoid the definition of an identity solely defined by its phenotypical traits: skin color). (*Guía para la acción pública*, 25)

As such, utilizing the term *afromexicano* permits the African descendent communities in Mexico to establish and maintain social, cultural, and political links with global communities that share a history that has marked their past and present in the Americas.

A second term that is commonly used by persons of African descent in Mexico is the term *negro*. As previously demonstrated, we have seen it used within a pejorative context; however, numerous community members and organizations have imbued the idea of being *negro* with a positive vision, and as a term that incorporates multiple facets in the formation of identity. For instance, when interviewed by the *Consejo Piloto de la Población Negra de la Costa Chica* (Pilot Council of the Black Population in the Costa Chica) in collaboration with the organization *Africa, A.C.*, there was unanimous agreement among numerous local community members on using this term *negro* in regards to a choice of nomenclature in a petition for inclusion on the national census. Although, as mentioned above, the term *afromexicano* has been selected as the preferred juridical term, individuals have also favored the term *negro* because it reflects their pride in their appearance and heritage that is linked to being Black. As a woman from José María Morelos, Oaxaca explains:

*Nosotros somos negros, porque así nos consideramos. Entonces, de esa manera debemos aparecer. Nosotros nos sentimos orgullosos de ser negros, nos gusta que nos llamen negros. Para nosotros no es una afrenta que nos llamen negros* (We are blacks because that is what we consider ourselves to be. It is in this way that we should appear (on the census). We feel proud to be black, we like that they call us blacks. It is not an insult to us that they call us blacks). (Reyes Larrea, et. al., 7)

Another young man from Corralero similarly declares:

*Autoestima es lo fundamental. Aceptarse como negro. Nosotros mismos debemos identificarnos negros. Somos negros* (Self-esteem is fundamental. To accept oneself as *negro*. We should accept ourselves as *negro*. We are *negros*). (Reyes Larrea, et. al., 8)

While these individuals understand being *negro* as being linked to a construction of identity based on skin color and physical appearance (another interviewee references hair type), here we note how the term itself represents the reality of numerous Afro-Mexicans in terms of their ethno-racial distinction and how they do not align blackness and being Black with a negative and undesired acceptance of who they are. That is, unlike the voices that echo a rejection of and a disdain for being *negro*, there also exists a measurable notion within numerous local communities that links the term with pride. They are *negro* and wish to be identified as such. Whitening or blurring who they are into a *moreno*, *mulato*, or *mestizo* frame of being is not who they are.

Moreover, not only does the term *negro* denote pride and assurance in being Black, but it is also a term that is being associated with myriad projects, traditions, histories, and epistemologies that circulate within these communities. Several social action, political and cultural groups emphasize the rich diversity and history that has been and continues to be a part of the Afro-Mexican legacy and identity. For example, organizations such as México Negro and the annual Encuentro de los Pueblos Negros promote the recognition and dissemination of the culture, knowledge, history, and contributions of the Black communities in Mexico. Their construction and use of the term *negro* does not envision a negative and degrading perspective of blackness and of being Black. In contrast, this organization and this annual event utilize the term as a marker that makes visible and highlights the various facets of this identity, including the varied cultural traditions and socio-historical contributions that link together the Black towns within the Costa Chica region of Oaxaca and Guerrero.

Furthermore, the term *negro* itself is often referenced in the plural (*negros*) and, now more recently, also in the gender-neutral form (*negr@/negr@s*). This particular, strategic action is of critical importance in illustrating another important component of identity formation and of the politics of identity within these communities and by these organizations. In understanding blackness as a plural construct and as a configuration and space that acknowledges the different experiences and visions associated with being a Black male and a Black female in Mexico, the term *negr@s* presents pluri-versal construction of being Black. That is, being *negr@* is not understood as a singular and essentialized mode of being only associated with a male perspective or as an identity inherently based on skin color. Rather, it is a notion that links blackness and Black identity to a multi-layered and diverse heritage and state-of-being, where voices of different genders, sexualities, ages, and lineages are all part of the conversation on “who we are and what to call ourselves.” It is an identity rooted in collective contexts, and involves or overlaps with various group allegiances or characteristics (Larraín, 24). This is a highly significant gesture in defining the *pueblos negr@s* of Mexico, not as a single Black entity, but rather as a united network of traditions, perspectives, and experiences.

In essence this is a pluri-versal configuration of being *negr@s*-*afromexican@s* that reclaims Black consciousness and the making of identity. By acknowledging and embracing their own diversity and all of their heritages, traditions, epistemologies, and experiences, the individuals and communities of African descent in Mexico are agents of their own identity and, hopefully, of their own destiny. It is a destiny conversely constructed in comparison to the fate of blackness within the framework of *mestizaje*, which, in privileging whiteness, relegates the black type to a destiny of invisibility and denigration. On the contrary, here we see how being part of the *pueblos negr@s* is an imagined community in which one type, one voice, or one tradition is not privileged over another, in which the construction of being is not a process of essentialization, and in which types are no longer pawns that are spoken for within the politics of a hierarchically imagined identity. Perhaps this pluri-versal understanding of *pueblos negr@s* and of being *negr@s* can elucidate a thing or two about a truly diverse, multicultural, and multiethnic vision of *mexicanidad*, just as it is doing in regards to the configuration of *afromexicanidad* itself.

### **From Re-constructing Consciousness to Demanding Action: the Foundation of México Negro and the Encuentro de los Pueblos Negros**

Uncovering the past and being able to articulate who they are now and in the future are central tenets in the projects and organizations within Afro-Mexican communities in the Costa Chica. As a means of breaking the silence that has cloaked their existence in Mexico, and thus breaking the colonial designs that they and their ancestors have experienced, several organizations have taken it upon themselves to reflect upon who they are, their current situation, and the history and socio-economic conditions in which they have lived. Moreover, undertaking this process of reflection has also led to initiatives in which they search for alternative solutions to the challenges and conditions that they have encountered. They are solutions that are perhaps outside of the traditional scheme in that they depart from the extensive research by scholars who have studied their customs, music, dance, anthropology and history. Instead, they are mobilizing schemes that facilitate a proactive agenda, in committing themselves to walk together with all the communities, government agencies, and local, national and international organizations whose goal is to promote development within the Afro-Mexican communities.

This proactive approach to reflect upon their own self-consciousness and immediate and future goals as a network of Black communities was initiated in a meeting in March of 1997, in El Ciruelo, a municipality of Pinotepa Nacional, Oaxaca. It was the first Encuentro de los Pueblos Negros,<sup>3</sup> which convened under the slogan: “*Por la memoria de quienes nos legaron su historia y su color* (For the memory of those who bequeathed us their history and their color).” Joining together with several working groups formed from the various, participating towns, a special committee comprised of leading community elders proposed the following questions: What is the origin and history of your communities? What holidays are observed and how are they celebrated and organized? What is the lived experience of Black identity (dances, verses, popular sayings, and organizational schemes)? How do Blacks coexist among themselves and with mixed-race Indigenous populations?

The results of this first meeting highlighted more doubts and questions regarding the articulation, affirmation, and recognition of Black identity among these communities; however, it did plant the first seed in asserting the notion that “*me siento orgullos@ de ser negr@* (I feel proud to be black),” and it led to the creation of a highly significant organization which has served to foment pride and awareness among the Afro-Mexican population. That organization is México Negro, A.C.

Since the Afro-Mexican communities in the Costa Chica share similar needs and experience similar struggles, one of the central, initial goals of México Negro has been to take on the challenges and fulfill the needs specified by the communities. More specifically, since its inception, México Negro has identified these specific aims:

- To share the history of our people, and thus to deepen our knowledge of the history of the Black people in Mexico.
- To strengthen our unity to fight together for the progress of the Black people, celebrating our faith, our life, and our Black Identity.

With these goals in mind, the organization has undertaken a pivotal role in aiding to discover and review their roots and their history in order to deepen their knowledge not only about their ancestors but also about themselves. For example, in terms of cultural awareness, the organization has provided a space in which to promote and disseminate their culture including artistic productions, musical traditions, crafts, verse, songs, dance, modes of expression, oral traditions, and rituals related to death and dying, among others. México Negro has also recognized the urgent need to develop workshops that train local community members to facilitate this cultural awareness. For example, México Negro has created and supported workshops that aim to channel the artistic skills of people of all ages, in areas ranging from painting, wood carving, fabrication of instruments and crafts in various materials, verse composition, poetry, stories, traditional songs, dance, and gastronomy that circulate throughout the region. Several of these artistic arenas still preserve strong African influences.

In relation to their social missions, México Negro A.C. has intended to meet the proposed needs and objectives of a society with a great ethnographic diversity, and with an extreme polarization in its economy and in the socio-economic conditions faced by its inhabitants. Due to the invisibility and discrimination that Afro-Mexicans often encounter on a daily basis, a majority of the communities have confronted very limited access to opportunities within and to the services provided by public and private institutions. For example, during the most recent economic crisis, the majority of the population in the Costa Chica region, which works in agriculture, was left unprotected, with no access to government initiatives that aimed to alleviate some of the effects of the economic downturn that limited commercial production and greatly reduced income.

Moreover, the region has consistently needed to confront other challenges to the population's standard of living, which have resulted from more permanent social and ecological effects such as meteorological and seismic phenomena (earthquakes, floods, and hurricanes), as well as the consequences of the constant migration of young males, and more recently, of younger females to the United States. México Negro has recognized the need to fill in the gaps and the dearth of socio-economic resources in the region. The association has intended to aid local individuals, collectives, and businesses to search for and gather alternative financial, material, methodological, and human resources in order to promote development and to contribute timely and efficiently to solving the population's economic problems. Furthermore, it has sought to implement a support and advisory program in agricultural production, seeking alternative crops, and in forging the creation of agreements with representatives from local, national and international public and private sector agencies, that are also willing to convert these goals into reality.

Another socio-economic activity that México Negro has directed has been the implementation and support of popular savings funds (often led by mothers), which have enabled the inhabitants themselves to be custodians of their income, making loans to maintain family enterprises, and to implement scholarships, with which they have encouraged their children to remain in school and have also used to foster a culture of savings in future generations.

In addition, this association has also undertaken a central role to diagnose and meet the most urgent community needs in the sectors of health, education, and housing. For instance, in the area of education, México Negro is striving to improve the learning processes and educational opportunities for children in this region. This region has been plagued with inadequate educational facilities, equipment, and a lack of didactic resources and well-trained educators, including those who specialize in the education of children with learning disabilities. The association has identified education as one of the most pressing arenas in which to focus their attention and their resources.

And in other sectors such as nutrition, health, and housing, México Negro is attempting to also address the needs of these communities that often experience inadequate access to affordable housing, healthcare, medication, preventative screenings, and medical equipment, and a diet that promotes a healthier lifestyle. For instance, they have held a series of talks and workshops with specialists in order to address subjects, such as the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases and the occurrence of hereditary diseases (such as sickle-cell anemia and other Hemoglobinopathies). Moreover, in order to improve diet and nutrition, they have invited experts to provide advice and give follow-up instruction in the development of productive projects ranging from family gardens (such as the planting of fruits and vegetables), gardens of medicinal plants and the production of their derivatives (ointments and tonics), raising livestock (fowl, goat and pig husbandry), and the making of bread and cheese among others.

While progress may be slow, and in spite of criticism that has arisen due to the difficulty of achieving immediate results, the association has continued to work towards achieving these goals which will meet the socio-economic needs of the population.

### **On the Status of Current and Future Projects Initiated by Afro-Mexicans**

While the first Encuentro de los Pueblos Negros served as a foundational moment in fomenting the need for unity among Afro-Mexicans and expressing the importance of the articulation and recognition of their identity, the thirteen subsequent meetings have identified other important objectives in achieving greater visibility, resources, and formal recognition (for a list of all of the meetings, consult the notes section)<sup>3</sup>. For example, participants in the forum in collaboration with members of different political and social action organizations, such as México Negro, have proposed the following aims:

- To strengthen the union between the people and the communities of the Costa Chica.
- To analyze and seek greater production and development pathways for the Black population.
- To reassess elements that allow for the illumination, unification and strengthening of the identity of the Black people of the Costa Chica of Guerrero and Oaxaca, as a developmental process and from a progressive and organized approach.
- To support formal and popular education, that includes research and dissemination of the history of the Black people in Mexico.
- To recover artistic expressions.
- To share and analyze progress on issues and concerns detected in previous meetings.
- To diagnose conditions affecting the performance of projects of community development.
- To reflect on the social and cultural identity of the Black people within national and international politics and economies, and to thus determine our current place and the place that we wish to have in today's Mexico.
- To analyze and improve community work projects targeting development, in the areas of production, education, culture, organization, ecology, nutrition and health.
- To seek alternatives for community and regional development in terms of investment, growth, resource development, community organization, and regional collaboration.
- To promote connections and meetings within the larger, global Afro-descendent family in order to share the memory of the past and project ourselves towards the future development of our identity.
- To build the future together, breaking the silence of discrimination.
- To further reflect on the invisibility of Black people within the political and government-related authorities in Mexico at the federal, state, and municipal levels.

- To discuss, condense and approve activities that allow for Afro-Mexicans to meet, to make themselves be seen by the Mexican society, and to receive attention from the three levels of the government, with the purpose of ending and fighting the discrimination of the various groups and individuals on a local, regional, and national level.
- To advance with the project of Constitutional Recognition of the Black Population in Mexico.
- Together we remember, together we reflect and together we advance in the progress of the organization México Negro A.C., with the purpose of making efficient the work that takes us to strengthen our identity, our work and our presence in Mexico.

With these objectives in mind, participants in the 5<sup>th</sup> *Encuentro* formulated a document entitled “*Nuestra palabra* (Our Word).” A section of it states:

*Los fromexicanos, somos los más olvidados de todos los pueblos de México. Debemos revisar nuestra historia para reafirmar nuestra identidad... (We, Afro-Mexicans, are the most forgotten of all of the Mexican peoples. We must review our history in order to reassert our identity...).* (*Nuestra Palabra*, documento final del V Encuentro de Pueblos Negros, 2001)

This reminder, directed to the Afro-Mexican people, makes the population aware of their current status, and encourages them know their history in order to be the agents of their own place and being now and in the future of the nation. As such, the importance of being counted and officially recognized as an ethnic group in Mexico has become one of the most urgent goals among the population. This process of juridical recognition began in 2004 when the Congressman Ángel Heladio Aguirre Rivero submitted a request of formal ethnic recognition to the Federal Executive Branch of the Mexican government. However, there was no debate on the matter and no further action was taken by the Congress. Subsequently, during the 10<sup>th</sup> Encuentro de Pueblos Negros, a proposal was created in order to petition for the designation of March as Black Heritage Month in Mexico. Furthermore, in 2007, the Colectivo Cultural África and Alianza para el Fortalecimiento de las Regiones Indígenas y Comunidades Fromexicanas (African Cultural Collective and Alliance for the Empowerment of Indigenous Regions and Afro-Mexican Communities) established a forum (Foro Fromexicanos por el Reconocimiento Constitucional de los Derechos del Pueblo Negro), again petitioning for constitutional recognition of Afro-Mexicans. And, yet again, in 2012, this call for official, constitutional recognition was expressed during the Primer Foro Nacional: Poblaciones Afrodescendientes en México (First National Forum: Afro-descendent Populations in Mexico), which took place at the facilities of the Ministry of Foreign Relations with the presence of UNESCO representatives. No permanent action has yet to be taken by the Mexican federal government; however, as a means of securing the visibility of their identity, their contributions, their history, their culture, and their goals as a people, the Afro-Mexican population and its supporters are continuing to prioritize this endeavor of official, constitutional recognition.

There are several other spaces in which the Afro-Mexican communities have spear-headed projects of visibility and recognition. In addition to radio shows that disseminate cultural information and music, as well as a series of book projects that expand upon the U.N. designation of 2011 as the International Year of African Descendants (A/RES/64/169), another very significant initiative is the Museo de las Culturas Afromestizas in Cuajinicuilapa, Guerrero. This museum is dedicated to the chronicling of Afro-Mexican history and displaying artifacts related to cultural traditions and manifestations.

A final project that is being proposed by community members is also the creation of a tourism initiative that promotes the awareness of the region's biodiversity and of the communities, their heritage and traditions, and their ways of life. This project is to be classified as sector of "*turismo cultural*" (cultural tourism), which is defined by the Mexican Ministry of Tourism as tourist activity that is:

*motivado por conocer, comprender y disfrutar el conjunto de rasgos y elementos distintivos, espirituales y materiales, intelectuales y afectivos que caracterizan a una sociedad o grupo social de un destino específico* (motivated by knowing, understanding, and enjoying the ensemble of distinctive religious, material, intellectual, and affective traits and elements that characterize a society or social group within a specific destination). (SECTUR-CESTUR, Estudio Estratégico de Viabilidad de Turismo Cultural, 2002)

This initiative would allow for the communities to show-case the region and its diverse cultural sites and traditions such as patron saints and religious festivities, music, dance, gastronomy, oral traditions, stories, and verse. Tours would be facilitated and conducted by Afro-Mexicans themselves, thus also providing for further opportunities of economic development. As such, the combination of recreational activities in direct contact with nature and with local cultural expressions, would in turn promote not only the visibility of these Afro-Mexican communities on a larger scale, but it would also facilitate the commitment to learn, respect, enjoy and participate in the conservation of nature and the rich customs and heritage that circulate throughout the Costa Chica.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, we return to the introductory quotes by José Vasconcelos and Manuel Zapata Olivella. While Vasconcelos attempts to speak in plural, expressing how "we" shall arrive at the creation of a new race, he actually speaks for others, namely the marginalized masses, whose voices, agency, and being become have become drowned out in an already fixed vision of who they are and what they will become in the making of *mestizo* identity and in the construction of *mexicanidad*. On the contrary, Zapata Olivella speaks of a plurality in which each part and each voice is recognized as part of the interconnected whole.

In questioning this destiny of voice and being: Who is he? What is his destiny, his culture, his race? Zapata Olivella demonstrates that he is not satisfied with that which has been bestowed onto him, and he is not content to be spoken for. Instead, his query presents a challenge, especially to those marginalized masses, to take the initiative themselves and rise-up, “*levántate*,” “change their position and become agents of their own liberation and destiny” (Prescott, 12).

This understanding of consciousness, as an engagement of the politics of identity, is reflected in the work being done in Afro-Mexican communities today, where identity is being envisioned as an unbounded and open construction, and as a global and local network in constant transformation. For this segment of the Mexican population, identity is not an end-point without a future or a pathway of unity within diversity. Instead, it is what Aimé Césaire describes as a “universal rich with all that is particular, rich with all the particulars there are, the deepening of each particular, the coexistence of them all” (25). With the creation of organizations such as México Negro, and projects and forums such as the Encuentro de los Pueblos Negros, initiatives demanding constitutional recognition, and the development of cultural tourism, the Afro-Mexican population has been actively committing itself not only to fighting for greater visibility and official recognition, but also to be agents and authors of their own history, identity, and destiny.

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## Notes

(1.) Perspectives towards *Memín Pinguín* differ between countries, communities and generations. For example, while many in the United States bore great offense when the Mexican government issued a postage stamp in honor of this popular comic book character, the majority reaction of Mexicans and Afro-Mexicans was positive. For them, Memín does not represent a racialized and racist depiction of Blacks; instead, he represents the mischievous and comical nature of children. In addition, older generations hold the comic in close regard as it has served as a resource for literacy.

(2.) The symbol “@” is used to capture and combine references to the respective feminine and masculine forms of the term “black”: *negra* and *negro*.

(3.) A history of the Encuentro de los Pueblos Negros (Meeting of the Black Communities) in Guerrero and Oaxaca:

Encuentro de los Pueblos Negros			
#	Year	Dates	Location
I	1997	March, 13 to 14	El Ciruelo, Oaxaca.
II	1998	March, 13 to 15	San José, Estancia Grande., Oaxaca.
III	1999	March, 10 to 14	Cuajinicuilapa, Guerrero.
IV	2000	March, 22 to 25	Collantes, Pinotepa Nacional, Oaxaca.
V	2001	March, 22 to 25	Santiago Tapextla, Oaxaca.
VI	2002	March, 14 to 17	San Nicolás Tolentino., Cuajinicuilapa, Guerrero.
VII	2003	March, 20 to 23	Santo Domingo Armenta, Jamiltepec. Oaxaca.
VII I	2004	March, 12 to 14	Huehuetán, Azoyú, Guerrero.
IX	2005	March, 10 to 13	Corralero, Pinotepa Nacional, Oaxaca.
X	2006	March, 16 to 19	El Ciruelo, Oaxaca.
XI	2007	March, 15 to 18	Juchitán, Guerrero.
XII	2009	April, 11 to 14	Huehuetán, Guerrero
XII I	2011	March, 11 to 13	El Pitayo, Cuajinicuilapa, Guerrero.

*Source: Candelaria Donají Méndez Tello, founding member of México Negro A.C.*