

Afro Mexicans in Guerrero: The Costa Chica Region

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The Costa Chica (translated as the "small coast") is a region along the Pacific coast encompassing the Mexican states of Oaxaca and Guerrero. Almost 400 kilometers in length, this region extends from just east of Acapulco in the state of Guerrero, to Huatulco in the state of Oaxaca. The geography of the region ranges from a series of planes, coastal flatlands, and hills, which have contributed to extensive fishing communities and those dedicated to raising livestock and agricultural products such as bananas, corn, and mango.

One of the most notable characteristic of the Costa Chica is its diverse populations, especially those of African descent. In the pre-Columbian era, the area was home to numerous Indigenous communities, primarily the Mixtec and Amuzgo, as well as smaller Tlapanec and Chitano communities. Today, the Amuzgo primarily reside in Guerrero and the Mixtec in Oaxaca.

In addition to these indigenous communities, it is also the well-documented and sizable presence of Afro-Mexicans that distinguishes the Costa Chica. In contrast to Afro-descendant communities along the Gulf coast in the state of Veracruz, these communities along the Pacific coast have experienced greater geographic isolation. This has resulted in them being the more common object of ethnographic study by national and international scholars who have attempted to reconstruct specific cultural elements that are particular to an African heritage in Mexico. There is extensive documentation of the incorporation of elements and practices such as carrying objects on top of one's head, using round thatch-roofed houses called *redondos*, as well as of religious traditions and social organization that link these communities to their African roots.

The African presence in the Costa Chica is a result of colonial expansion in the area and the need for a larger labor force following the destruction and migration of the local Indigenous communities and the seizure of their lands. African slaves were transported to the region in order to work on large plantations, such as that of Mariscal de Castilla, who held control of extensive property and people from the 16 century until the Revolution in 1910. In addition to the slave trade, other narratives related to the history of the African presence in the Costa Chica have circulated throughout the region. For example, an oral tradition claims that the communities are also descendants of African maroons who escaped the shipwreck of the *Puerta de Oro* along the Pacific coast. Some of the current Afro-Mexican inhabitants are said to be the descendants of these maroons.

Despite their social, cultural, political and economic contributions to the region and to the nation, the majority of the Afro-Mexican communities in the Costa Chica often confront conditions of poverty, lack of government investment and infrastructure, and

discrimination. Unlike the Indigenous communities, there is no current constitutional recognition of Afro-Mexicans, a critical situation as this group has been left out of government and institutional programs that aid in funding and officially recognize their particular cultural identity and their contributions to the nation.

“Round Houses” found in the Costa Chica Region are constructed like African huts.

However, through increased individual, community, and organizational activism now and in the past decade, there has been greater attention to the contributions, rights, and goals of the Afro-descendent communities of the Costa Chica. For example, the *Museo de las Culturas Afromestizas* in Cuajinicuilapa, Guerrero is dedicated to teaching about the African presence in Mexico. The museum displays information and items related to this history including the slave trade, political and military contributions during the War of Independence and the Revolution, and artifacts used in cultural dances and celebrations. Moreover, civic organizations such as México Negro A.C. along with other community groups and local activists and scholars have convened an annual conference, the *Encuentro de Pueblos Negros* (Meeting of the Black Towns and Peoples), in order to foster awareness of the history and traditions of these communities, and to increase attention to their social, political, and economic needs. This conference is held annually in March, the month designated by these communities themselves as Black Heritage Month.

As a result of their voices and efforts, in 2011 the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs announced that they would be creating a Department of Afro-Mexican Community Affairs in Oaxaca. The legal recognition of these communities is a crucial step in achieving not only state, but more importantly, federal recognition of Afro-Mexicans. Even though they were denied being counted as a separate ethnic group on the 2010 census by the National Institute of Statistics and Geography, they continue to fight to be recognized as a specific ethnicity. This recognition will afford them all the constitutional rights and support that is given to the accredited Indigenous groups. On their pathways to freedom, the voices and activism of the Afro-Mexican communities in the Costa Chica continue to rescue and promote their cultural traditions, and to fight for a greater visibility that matches the extensive contributions that they have made throughout Mexican history.

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