

Race and Identity: Ancient relations between Africans and Mexicans

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Abstract

In this paper the issue of Blacks in ancient and modern Mexico is discussed to determine if this idea diminishes the influences of Amerindians in Mexican civilization. It presents sociological, anthropological and linguistic evidence to examine the role race and ethnicity play(s/ed) in African and Indian relations from ancient to modern times. The evidence suggests that the negro-costachicanos (Blacks of Costa Chica) may be descendants of the Olmec people who founded Mexico's Mother Civilization.

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Archaeologists have excavated hundreds of artifacts relating to the Olmec civilization that depict Black or African people (Wuthenau, 1980). The Olmec civilization is considered the “Mother Culture” of Mexico. It was from the Olmec that archaeologists claim the later Mesoamerican civilizations learned writing and much of their culture (Diehl, 2004). Diehl (2004) noted that “In this way the Olmecs became Mesoamerica’s Mother Culture(see below), creators of a world view and vision of elite culture that was well established throughout Mesoamerica by 600 BC and flourished in modified but still recognizable form until the Spanish Conquest” (p.126).

Given the discovery of numerous Olmec artifacts depicting Blacks begs a number of questions: “Were there Black or African people in ancient America? Do the African heads of the Olmec confirm an African presence in Mexico or do they show present-day Mayan people? What is the relation between contemporary Black Costa Chicas (*negrocostachicanos*) and Blacks depicted in Olmec artifacts?

The Black Mexicans live on the opposite coast of Mexico in the states of Veracruz, Oaxaca and Guerrero. Today there are an estimated 500,000 Mexicans that are visibly Black , with African features (Dellios,2005).

Even though there are hundreds of Black Mexicans, many Black Mexicans believe they are invisible in their own nation (Dellios,2005). This invisibility, according to Cuevas (2004) results from the idea of the *mestizaje*, which has made the “white” Mexican ethnic, the prototypical Mexican and erased Blacks from Mexican history between 1920-1968 (Cuevas,2004).

The idea of *mestizaje* was developed by Jose Vasconcelos. Mr. Vasconcelos became Minister of Education in 1921. During his tenure Black heroes of Mexican history were whitened as Vasconcelos pursued a policy of homogenization of Mexicans (Cuevas, 2004).

In 1946, Black Mexicans were rediscovered by Aguirre Beltran (1972) when he found the Blacks in Costa Chica. This was a rediscovery because the idea of *mestizaje* stressed the idea that there were only Mexicans, and not Amerindians, Whites or Blacks. The only problem with this idea was that Black Mexicans became associated with poverty and ignorance. These Blacks also experience much discrimination throughout Mexico, and much hostility in Costa Chica (Vaugh, 2005a, 2005b).

Before the rediscovery of the *Negrocostachicanos* on the Pacific coast of Mexico, most Mexicans knew there were *Afroveracruzanos*. The Afroveracruzanos claim descent from slaves taken to America during the slave trade and Cubans (Vaugh, 2005a, 2005b). The Black slaves lived in urban centers (Bower,1975; Seed,1982), or worked in the Central mining district of Zacatecas (Ngou Mve,1994).

Many Blacks in Veracruz ran away from the plantation and founded marron communities during slavery. The Afroveracruzanos played a significant role in the Mexican revolution, and one of them became president of Mexico. They have also contributed much to the culture and arts of Mexico (Cuevas, 2004). Some Afroveracruzanos have preserved many songs of the wars the maroons fought with the Colonial Mexicans, and the mistreatment they experienced during slavery.

The Negrocostachicanos claim that they have never been slaves and are indigenous to Guerrero and Oaxaca on the Pacific coast of Mexico. The 1990 Mexican census recorded 66,000 Negrocostachicanos. These Mexicans live in African style huts and practice rituals which may be of African origin (Vaugh,2005a).

Most researchers believe that the Negrocostachicanos are descendants of marrons or runaway slaves (Aguirre Beltran, 1972; Vaugh,2005a). But none of the Blacks of Costa Chica have songs about slavery and its hardships (Baja.com.2005).The Negrocostachicanos say “they are not they insist, the descendants of African slaves. There was never slavery here, even in ancient times” (Baja.com,2005). Bobby Vaugh (2005b) noted that he found “no consciousness of slavery among people in Costa Chica” (p.5). Another researcher, noted that “Housewives in San Jose Estancia Grande and Santiago Tapextla [in Costa Chica] say their ancestors did not come from Africa, that their families have always lived right here” (Baja.com, 2005, p.6).

The fact that the Negrocostachicanos claim that they were never slaves has troubled some researchers who believe that the only Blacks in Mexico came to the New World with the Spanish. Although this is the popular view concerning the origin of Blacks in Mexico, this view may be Eurocentric because the archaeological and historical evidence indicate that Blacks were already in Mexico when the Spanish made there way to Mexico.

The Spanish explorers were aware of Blacks in the New World. Las Casas a friend of Columbus informs us that when he stopped at the Cape Verde Islands en route to the West Indies noted these African voyages in 1498 (Thacher, 1903-4). By the time Columbus arrived at Hispaniola, Las Casa reports that Columbus heard more reports of these African merchants trading in the Caribbean with spears made of a metal called “guanin”(Thacher,1903-4). Cada Mosto noted that at the mouth of the Rio Grande they met African sailors in two boats trading along the coast (Thacher, 1903-4, p.76).

The first African to to come to the New World with the Spanish was Juan Cortes, a slave that accompanied Hernan Cortes in 1519. The Amerindians were captivated by the dark skin of Juan Cortes, and believed he was one of their gods.

Most researchers have taken the Amerindian awe of Juan Cortes simply as a result of the Indian fascination with Juan Cortes' color. Today, given our knowledge of Mexican indigenous religions we know that the Mesoamericanos did in deed worship Black gods.

Leo Wiener in the African Discovery of America (1922), provides a detailed account of the Black gods of Mexico in the third volume in this series of books. Wiener outlined that the Blacks were traveling merchants in Mexico selling cacao, feathers and other products.

The major Black gods of the Mexicans was Quetzalcoalt, and the Mayan gods L and M, Xaman and Ekchuah these gods are depicted in the Codex Troano(Wiener, 1921, [vol.3] p.258). Sahagun tells us that Ekchuah was also the god of the *Amanteca*. The Nahuatl term Amanteca, was probably the name of the Mandinka or Mandinga people who were the foundation of the Olmec people (Winters, 2005).



God M with
spear and mer-
chant's pack

Ekchuah and the Mayan God M, was the god of merchants and warriors. He is also depicted in the Codex Cortesianus and 17 times in the Madrid Codex.

Ekchuah is depicted with a long nose. Soustelle (1994) has compared this god to the Olmec Bird god of Chalcatzingo, an Olmec site on the Pacific coast.

The Olmec writing was later adopted by the Maya. The Olmec used both a hieroglyphic and syllabic script (Winters, 2005). The Olmec spoke a language similar to the Malinke-Bambara language which is spoken by the Mandinka/Mande people.

The symbol for Ekchah is made up of three characters *ta fa se* in the Olmec language (Winters,2005). In Olmec, these signs read: “a partisan of the march (who) satisfies (your needs)”. The Amanteca were probably Mande speaking Olmec. Wiener (1921, vol. 3 p.311). This view is supported by the fact that the Nahuatl word to buy *coa*, agrees with the Mande term for ‘to buy’ *sa-n*.

The traditions of Mexican Indians make it clear that the founders of civilization in Mexico, came from the East, and arrived in Mexico as a result of a shipwreck. This is interesting because Bobby Vaugh (2005b) said that the Negrocostachicanos claim they arrived in Mexico as a result of shipwrecks.

The Maya were not the first to occupy the Yucatan and Gulf regions of Mexico. It is evident from Maya traditions and the artifacts recovered from many ancient Mexican sites that a different race lived in Maya land before the Mayan speakers settled this region.

The Pacific area was early colonized by Olmec people in middle preclassic times (Morley, Brainerd & Sharer 1984). The Olmec civilization was developed along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico in the states of Tabasco and Veracruz (Pouligny 1988:34). The linguistic evidence suggest that around 1200 B.C., a new linguistic group arrived in the Gulf region of Mexico.

M. Swadesh (1953) has presented evidence that at least 3200 years ago a non- Maya speaking group wedged itself between the Huastecs and the Maya. Soustelle (1984: 29) tells us that "We cannot help but think that the people that shattered the unity of the Proto-Mayas was also the people that brought Olmec civilization to the region".

Friar Diego de Landa, in **Yucatan before and After the Conquest**, wrote that "some old men of Yucatan say that they heard from their ancestors that this country was peopled by a certain race who came from the East, whom God delivered by opening for them twelve roads through the sea". In the Popol Vuh, the famous Mayan historian Ixtlixochtl, the Olmecs came to Mexico in "**ships of barks**"(probably a reference to papyrus boats or dug-out canoes used by the Proto-Saharans) and landed in **Potonchan**,which they commenced to populate. Mexican traditions claim that these migrates from the east were led by Amoxaque or Bookmen. The term Amoxaque, is similar to the Manding phrase '**a ma n'kye**':"he (is) a teacher". These Blacks are frequently seen in Mayan writings as gods or merchants.

Traditions mentioned by Sahagun, record the settlement of Mexico by a different race from the present Amerindian population. Sahagun says that these "Eastern settlers of Mexico landed at Panotha, on the Mexican Gulf. Here they remained for a time until they moved south in search of mountains. Other migration to Mexico stories are mention in the Popol Vuh, the ancient religious and historical text compiled by the Quiche Mayan Indians.

Friar Diego de Landa (1978:8,28) , in *Yucatan Before and After the Conquest*, wrote that " a certain race who came from the East, whom God delivered by opening for them twelve roads through the sea". This tradition is most interesting because it probably refers to the twelve migrations of the Olmec people. This view is supported by the stone reliefs from Izapa, Chiapas , Mexico published by the New World Foundation. In Stela 5, from Izapa we see a group of men on a boat riding the waves (Wuthenau 1980; Smith 1984 ; Norman 1976) .

This new race may have come from Africa. Sertima (1976), and Weiner (1922) believe that some of these foreign people may have come from West Africa. Dr. Wiercinski (1972) claims that the some of the Olmecs were of African origin.

Diehl and Coe (1995, 12) of Harvard University have made it clear that until a skeleton of an African is found on an Olmec site he will not accept the art evidence that the were Africans among the Olmecs. This is rather surprising because Constance Irwin and Dr. Wiercinski (1972) have both reported that skeletal remains of Africans have been found in Mexico. Constance Irwin, in Fair Gods and Stone Faces, says that anthropologist see "distinct signs of Negroid ancestry in many a New World skull...."

Many African skeletons have been found in Mexico. Carlo Marquez (1956, pp.179-180) claimed that these skeletons indicated marked pronathousness and prominent cheek bones.

Dr. Wiercinski (1972) claims that some of the Olmecs were of African origin. He supports this claim with skeletal evidence from several Olmec sites where he found skeletons that were analogous to the West African type black. Many Olmec skulls show cranial deformations (Pailles, 1980), yet Wiercinski (1972b) was able to determine the ethnic origins of the Olmecs. Marquez (1956, 179-80) made it clear that a common trait of the African skulls found in Mexico include marked prognathousness ,prominent cheek bones are also mentioned. Fronto-occipital deformation among the Olmec is not surprising because cranial deformations was common among the Mande speaking people until fairly recently (Desplanges, 1906).

Wiercinski found African skeletons at the Olmec sites of Monte Alban, Cerro de las Mesas and Tlatilco. Morley, Brainerd and Sharer (1989) said that Monte Alban was a colonial Olmec center (p.12).

Dr. Wiercinski (1972) claims that some of the Olmecs were of African origin. He supports this claim with skeletal evidence from several Olmec sites where he found skeletons that were analogous to the West African type black. Wiercinski discovered that 13.5 percent of the skeletons from Tlatilco and 4.5 percent of the skeletons from Cerro de las Mesas were Africoid (Rensberger, 1988; Wiercinski, 1972; Wiercinski & Jairazbhoy 1975).

Diehl and Coe (1996) admitted that the inspiration of Olmec Horizon A, common to San Lorenzo's initial phase has been found at Tlatilco. Moreover, the pottery from this site is engraved with Olmec signs.

Researchers have found that some Mayan people have genetic markers, which point to African ancestors. For example: Underhill, et al noted that: " One Mayan male, previously [has been] shown to have an African Y chromosome." - Underhill, et al (1996) " A pre-Columbian Y chromosome specific transition with its implications for human evolutionary history", Proc. Natl. Acad. Science USA, Vol.93, pp.196-200.

Mestizos in Mayan or nearby areas show significant African admixture. The East Coast had extensive admixture according to a recent study by Lisker et al. ("Genetic Structure in Mesoamerica," Human Biology, June 1996). The following percentages of African ancestry were found among East coast populations: Paraiso - 21.7% ; El Carmen - 28.4% ; Veracruz - 25.6% ; Saladero - 30.2% and Tamiahua - 40.5%

Among Indian groups, the Chontal have 5% and the Cora .8% African admixture. According to Crawford et al., the mestizo population of Saltillo has 15.8% African ancestry, while Tlaxcala has 8% and Cuanalan 18.1%.

The Olmecs built their civilization in the region of the current states of Veracruz and Tabasco. Now here again are the percentages of African ancestry according to Lisker et al.: Paraiso - 21.7% ; El Carmen - 28.4% ; Veracruz - 25.6% ; Saladero - 30.2% and Tamiahua - 40.5% . Paraiso is in Tabasco and Veracruz is, of course, in the state of Veracruz. Tamiahua is in northern Veracruz. [These areas were the first places in Mexico settled by the Olmecs.] I'm not sure about Saladero and El Carmen.

The Mexican oral traditions of the Maya are supported by Stela 5, from Izapa. In Stela No. 5, we view a group of men on a boat riding the waves of an Ocean. At the right hand side of the boat we see a personage under a ceremonial umbrella. This umbrella was a symbol of princely status. Above his head is a jaguar glyph, which according to Dr. Alexander von Wuthenau indicates that he was an Olmec. This personage has an African hairdo and a writing stylus in his left hand. This Olmec scribe proves that the Olmec had writing, which was deciphered by Clyde Ahmad Winters in 1978 (Winters 1979; Wuthenau 1981).

In the center of the boat we find a large tree. This tree has seven branches and twelve roots. The seven branches probably indicates the seven major clans that formed the Olmec nation. The twelve roots of the tree which extend into the waves of the ocean from the boat, probably signifies the "twelve roads through the sea" mentioned by Friar Diego de Landa.

It is clear that Stela No.5, from Izapa not only indicates the tree of life, it also confirms the tradition recorded by Friar Diego de Landa that the Olmec people made twelve migrations to the New World. This stela also confirms the tradition recorded by the famous Mayan historian Ixtlixochitl, that the Olmec came to Mexico in "ships of barks " and landed at Pontochan, which

they commenced to populate.(Winters 1984: 16) These Blacks are frequently depicted in the Mayan books/writings carrying trade goods.



The migration traditions and Stela No.5, probably relates to a segment of the Olmec, who landed in boats in Panotla or Pantla (the Huasteca) and moved along the coast as far as Guatemala. This would correspond to the non-Maya speaking group detected by Swadesh that separated the Maya and Huasteca speakers 2000 years ago. Bernardino de Sahagun (1946) a famous authority on Mexico also supports the extra-American origin of the Olmecs when he wrote that A” Eastern settlers of Mexico landed at Panotla on the Mexican Gulf. Here they remained for a time until they moved south in search of mountains”. The reported route of the Panotla settlers recorded by Sahagun interestingly corresponds to the spread of the Olmecs in Meso-America, which extended from the Gulf of Mexico to Chalcatzingo, in the Mexican highlands along the Pacific coast (Morley, Brainerd & Sharer 1983, p.52).

Any comparison of Mayans depicted in Mayan art, and the Olmec people depicted in Olmec art especially the giant heads, indicate that these people did not look alike

<http://geocities.com/Athens/Academy/8919/heads.htm>. A cursory examination of Olmec artifacts, indicates that practically all of the Olmec figures look African (see:<http://www.geocities.com/olmec982000/olwrit.htm.htm>).

The Olmec civilization is called the Mother Culture of Mexico. The Olmec built pyramids and introduced writing to the Amerindian Mexicans (Diehl,2004; Winters 2005). The Olmec introduction of civilization and trade to Mexico may explain why they were recognized as gods by many Amerindian Mexicans.

The Olmec called themselves *Xi* and probably *Amanteca*. There were two religious traditions: the bird cult and jaguar association (Winters 2005)

The Olmec were organized into an empire ruled by Kings from LaVenta and San Lorenzo. The Olmec King was called *Tu*. The administrators of the Olmec towns were called *Ku* 'Governor'.

Alexander von Wuthenau in Unexpected Faces in Ancient America (1980) makes it clear that the Olmec civilization was a multiracial culture. Skeletal evidence and DNA make it clear that the Olmec included many Africans, and that many Mexicans have Black and African ancestors.

In Olmec civilization both Indians and Blacks were appointed as Governors. This makes it clear that the Olmec civilization was fully integrated.

In conclusion, the linguistic, anthropological and historical evidence indicate that there were Africans in Mexico before the Spanish arrived in Mexico. These Blacks influenced the history and civilization in Mexico throughout Mexican history.

Mexican traditions make it clear that a non Amerindian group came to Mexico by sea and landed at Panocha. The Stela No.5 from Izapa makes it clear that this population that arrived in

Mexico by boat was probably the ancestors of the Olmecs. The fact that Stela No.5, depicts 12 roots as part of 'the tree of life' support the Mexican tradition that the Easterners who brought civilization to Mexico came in 12 waves.

The Mexican traditions that support the spread of the Olmec from the east coast of Mexico to the west coast make it clear that the Olmec lived in Oaxaca and Guererro, in addition to Veracruz. The fact that the Olmec mention coming to America by boat may explain the *Negrocostachicano's* claim that they arrived in America as a result of a shipwreck, and never were Spanish slaves.

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