

## *Special Symposium*

# **YANGA AND THE BLACK ORIGINS OF MEXICO**

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This article is dedicated to the black origins of Mexico and the story of one of its most famous black heroes: Yanga. I will also discuss the present situation of this community of blacks, descendants of the group of slaves who founded the first free black township on the American continent.

Our country is outstanding for acknowledging our indigenous and European roots, which are well noted in historical and anthropological documents. Although the population is principally mestizo (mixed race), only the indigenous roots are normally highlighted and the European portion is widely recognized. However, our third root, our African heritage is completely ignored; which is to say the cultural legacy that comes from the African population brought to American territory is neglected.<sup>1</sup> This heritage can also be found in a wide array of cultural elements such as traditional parties, religious beliefs, rites, myths, diverse musical roots, names of cities and towns, architecture, and cuisine.

Our ebony ancestors first arrived during the conquest, and then came in greater numbers during the colonial period (1519–1810). The vast majority was principally brought from Africa, though some came from the South Pacific. Regulations were enacted to ensure that the proportions of slaves on a slave ship would be one-third women and two-thirds men. This condition proved favorable to the mixing of races, as the scarcity of black women encouraged relationships with indigenous women.

The first site authorized for the importation of slaves was the Port of Vera Cruz. Later on Tuxpan and Campeche along the Gulf of Mexico were opened and subsequently Acapulco on the Pacific Costa. These became the distribution centers for sending slaves throughout New Spain.

Slaves were forced not only into agricultural activities such as sugar cane cultivation, but also into all aspects of economic and social life in New Spain. During the colonial period there were very few activities in which blacks were not employed. In protest, they continually resisted this unjust system of slavery. Throughout the colonial period this included the formation of fugitive slave settlements, attempts at taking power, and armed insurrections. These forms of

active collective resistance were perceptual manifestations of rejection the system. All of these were treated as serious crimes and punished accordingly.

### YANGA INSURRECTION

Our area of study will focus upon the central region of the state Veracruz. This part of Mexico is most representative our black population. Since the colonial period, large quantities of laborers were needed to work the sugar haciendas. This included both indigenous and Africa slaves. Spanish conquerors brought black slaves with them before the conquest in the sixteenth century. They used slaves on the Iberian Peninsula for domestic chores and farming rural lands.

The first sugar *haciendas* of Veracruz were established during the sixteenth century in the Orizaba area, located in the middle coast of the Gulf of Mexico. At this time, indigenous labor was forbidden on sugar haciendas because of their decreasing population due to illness and war. The Spaniards needed more slaves, so the Spanish Crown authorized slave trafficking companies to import large numbers of slaves. These slaves were sent to the most tropical areas because the incidences of death were higher among the indigenous population in this zone than in other parts of New Spain. Also the Spaniards thought blacks had a special and “natural” adaptation to tropical weather. As the needs of the *haciendas* grew, so too the number slaves grew.

Slaves manifested their resistance to this oppressive system by running away and engaging in rebellions. Running away was a costly act. Fugitive slaves became known as maroons (*cimarrones*). The slave now became a thief accused of stealing property—himself or herself—belonging to the slave owner and punishable by Catholic law. Maroons crated for themselves mythical images of ferocity, savagery, and unmanageability (Aguirre Beltran 1988).

Runaway slaves built up refuges called *palenques*, which were safe houses for maroons. *Palenques* functioned as defense bases, stock, resisting places, pints of meeting and an attraction for other maroons. Some *palenques* were considered “magical” or enchanted places (Garcia Bustamante 1988). The location of *palenques* had to be strategic. They surprised, attacked, and robbed Spaniards, applying guerrilla strategies of camouflage, quickly disappearing to avoid counterattack and persecution.<sup>2</sup>

Maroon activity persisted throughout the colonial period only ending with the abolition of slavery in 1810. The mountains of Orizaba, located in the central part of the State of Veracruz, proved to be the perfect refuge for maroons from the sixteenth century. The Spaniards answered rebellions with cruel military force and imposed religious beliefs. The Spanish Crown sent the army

to “pacify” the zone in 1609, when the Spanish Crown decided to put an end to these actions, and assigned the Royal Army to fight against the fugitive slaves.<sup>3</sup>

The maroons of the Orizaba Mountains were commanded by Yanga. He was an elderly man who had been a fugitive for 30 years, and who said that if he were in Africa he would not be a slave but a king.<sup>4</sup> As mentioned before, Yanga and his group of maroons survived by robbing carriages and raiding nearby *haciendas*. Subsistence farming and the raising of chicken and cattle augmented their income.

The military campaign against Yanga was hard for the Spaniards. The maroons made several attacks on the Spaniard troops. Finally after losing many soldiers the Spaniards surrendered. The maroons demanded that the Spanish Crown establish a free town to be exclusively inhabited by black people who were fugitives before 1608. The Crown finally accepted the maroon’s conditions and in 1630, “The Free Township of San Lorenzo de los Negros” was founded near Cordoba.

In San Lorenzo during the colonial period, Spanish and indigenous populations coexisted and mixed with blacks, but this was a change because at the beginning of the seventeenth century, this was forbidden. Today San Lorenzo has changed its name to Yanga, Veracruz. Its black population has assimilated, although it is not difficult to identify African features in the physical appearance of the population.

### CARNIVAL IN YANGA

Carnival is one of the most important events today in the town of Yanga; it is the celebration of Yanga’s victory over the Spaniards and the foundation of “the first free township in America”. The town’s people reproduce the events that occurred nearly four centuries ago. They memorialize them in a festival that takes place in the month of August, a celebration separate from the better known carnivals such as Shrovetide carnival on the days leading up to Saint Lawrence’s Day, the town’s patron saint, August 10th.<sup>5</sup>

Activities fill the week from celebrations of Carnival to the Saint Lawrence the Martyr Day. The events include bullfights with young bulls, the dance of the queen’s coronation, the Ugly King, fireworks, the procession of the people in fancy dress, the floats, and the dance in the main square. These are all part of the week’s festivities that culminate in a mass and procession in honor of the patron saint on whose day no other “pagan” activity is performed. Between the sacred and profane, there is a moment of apparent disequilibrium before daily order is restored.

Today Carnival has taken on a new meaning; it is a celebration dedicated to black culture. Almost all of the floats and fancy dress allude to either the environment in which Yanga was supposed to have lived or characters representing the African fugitives. The latter were the original inhabitants of the town once known as San Lorenzo de los Negros.

The elements that are distinctive from Mexico's Hispanic-Indigenous tradition come back to life in this carnival. For example: to revive the black skin that no longer exists in many parts of the town of Yanga, the actors paint their skin and put on masks. Yanga the black slave, the man who headed the first historically significant anti-colonial rebellion in the Americas and the founder of the town, appears as the main character. Symbolically they represent the black hero although their knowledge of him is somewhat diffused. As a result, the importance of Yanga seems to reside in his being a symbol of the black man who was the catalyst for liberty in the Americas.

Two extremes of Carnival, the sacred and the profane, form a historical point of view in the very foundation of San Lorenzo de los Negros. It represents the results of a struggle for better conditions for the African slaves who worked the haciendas and above all recognition of the fact that they were human beings and free men. But it is also derived from claims more related to the sacred world such as the petition made by the fugitives for a Catholic ministry and the demand that it be attended exclusively by Franciscan friars.

Between the reverence in which Yanga is portrayed in a sculpture just outside the small town and the Carnival atmosphere and burlesque with mask and disguises, there appears to be a contradiction. But the homage rendered to Yanga represented by the sculpture and the satirical treatment of him with mask and disguises are reconcilable, becoming one and the same, since they express one person in two different ways.

The representation, the remembering and the enacting of past events permit the spectator and the participant to learn from Carnival. Moreover the carrying out of these festivities brings together people from other communities. There is even at least for the duration of the festival solidarity, a narrowing of the gap between Indo-Hispanic heritage and black heritage.

In 1988, relations were established between the embassy of the Ivory Coast and the mayor of Yanga.<sup>6</sup> As special guests, the dignitaries were asked to crown the queen of succeeding carnivals. Their presence has given a new impetus to the celebration, incorporating new elements that people recognize as "African" that they have adopted as their own reinforcing their identity as "blacks".

In this way, the participants in the carnival demonstrate pride in being part of a town originally founded by fugitive black slaves, one which the inhabitants call "The first free black township in America." It is to be hoped that the carnival in Yanga may make a contribution to the revitalization of black culture, a

step that would be decisive in the recognition of the right to racial and cultural difference and to improve sometimes very tense relationships between communities in the region.

## NOTES

1. The Third Root Program began in 1989 under the leadership of Guillermo Bonfil-Batalla, an outstanding Mexican anthropologist who was the president of the General Direction of Popular Cultures, an institution dedicated to preserve and recognize the culture minorities in Mexico. The anthropologist Luz María Martínez Montiel was the coordinator of the Third Root Program. The project was to support research related to Mexico's black history and contemporary black population as part of the activities for celebrating the fifth century of the "Discovery of the Americas" in 1992. Blacks were considered the third root after the indigenous population and Spaniards.

2. Palenques (fugitive slave settlements) were established in almost all the slavery areas in the American continent. Richard Price's book, *Maroon Societies*, presents a series of examples of runaway slave settlements in Spanish, Portuguese, British and German Colonies in the Americas.

3. The original letter of Juan Florencio Laurencio has disappeared. Laurencio was the priest who accompanied the Royal Army and described the military campaign against the maroons. Andes Pérez de Rivas (1645) and Francisco Javier Alegre (1746), both Jesuit historians, reproduced Laurencio's letter in a document of the General Mexican Archive (Archivo General de la Nación Ramo Historia 3148) (Aguirre Beltrán 1988:131).

4. Yanga's birthplace is unknown. Archival documents mention that he belonged to the "Nation Bran," known as well as Bores or Brong of Atabubu. This ethnic group arrived to New Spain during the sixteenth century from the northern area where Ghana is located today (Aguirre Beltrán, 1984:128,236).

5. Known as Shrove Tuesday, Martes de Carnaval is the day before Ash Wednesday of the first day of Lent, the forty days' fast prescribed by the Catholic Church before Holy Week. It is important to distinguish between Shrovetide carnival and other carnivals organized apart of this date known by scholars as "feverish carnivals" (carnavales de calenture). These carnivals are celebrated during patronal festivities throughout Mexico and many are of recent organization, especially for the purpose of attracting tourists.

6. Yanga city has a center of agronomic investigation and development of sugar species called "Instituto para el Mejoramiento de la Producción de Azúcar" (IMP). The ambassador of the Ivory Coast, Jeannot Zoro Bi Bah, initiated a cultural and scientific exchange between his country and the Yanga Township. In 1989, the ambassadors of other African nations also were invited as special guests of the Carnival of Yanga.