

**“Here We Are, Here We’ve Been, Here We’ll Be!”: Global Politics, the Mexican State, and the Afro-Mexican Struggle for Ethno-Racial Rights, 1990-2020**

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This dissertation examines how the Mexican government transitioned from largely ignoring its Afro-Mexican population to recognizing them as a distinct ethnic group integral to the nation. The dissertation argues that Mexico’s recognition of its Black population resulted from a confluence of local, national, and international dynamics that prioritized Afrodescendants’ rights. It focuses on Afro-Mexican mobilization efforts in Mexico’s Costa Chica region, spanning coastal Guerrero and Oaxaca, from the late 1990s to 2020. Using oral histories, audio-visual sources, participant-observations, organizational and personal social media archives, and secondary sources, I trace the movement’s origins, evolution and the strategies activists employed to make demands on the state. Additionally, I analyze archival sources from international institutions, like the United Nations, to reveal how these bodies, alongside international conventions and campaigns, compelled Mexican public institutions to recognize Afro-Mexicans as a distinct group. By collecting and analyzing government and institutional documents, my dissertation reveals how the convergence of Black mobilizing, pressures from international organizations, and support from Mexico’s state institutions encouraged Congress to amend the nation’s Constitution to recognize Afro-Mexicans as a distinct ethnic group with specific ethno-racial rights.

The dissertation also examines Mexico’s policy shift in relation to other Latin American nations that underwent similar transformations. By using Mexico as a case study, my research offers valuable insights into the complexities of the relationship between Latin American

governments and their Black populations. Moreover, it elucidates the processes through which Afro-Latin Americans constructed ethno-racial identities and the diverse motives that propelled Black social movements in the hemisphere.

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## 1.0 Introduction: Mexico's Black Movement for Ethno-Racial Rights

In 2020, Afro-Mexican singer Alejandra Robles charismatically sang “Tan, tan. ¿Quiénes? Soy el censo 2020. ¿Qué, vienen a preguntarme si soy afrodescendiente?” Later in the chorus she declared, “Somos afro-mexicanos, sí, sí, sí, por supuesto que sí!” The song, “Afroméxico Sí,” was part of the AfroCensoMx awareness campaign to encourage Mexico’s Afrodescendant population to identify as Black, Afro-Mexican, or Afrodescendant in the 2020 national census. The campaign’s team employed various mediums to reach Afro-Mexicans. They established social media accounts across multiple platforms and introduced #AfroCensoMx to foster engagement among users. They installed billboards in areas with significant Afrodescendant populations, featuring images of Afro-Mexicans in urban and rural settings to underscore their diversity. Additionally, the team created and distributed infographic pamphlets that summarized the existence of the Afro-Mexican movement, emphasized the importance of censuses, and encouraged Afro-Mexican readers to reply “¡Pero por supuesto que sí! Soy Negr@, Afromexican@, Afrodescendiente,” when census takers inquired about their ethnic identity.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> AfroCensoMx, “Video de la Campaña AfroCenso Mx,” Song “Afroméxico Sí” performed by Alejandra Robles and La Sonora Santanera de Carlos Colorado, February 19, 2020, 4:25,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2xjXMAyb1no>. Translated lyrics: “Knock, knock. Who’s there? I’m the 2020 census. What, you come to ask if I’m Afrodescendant?” “We are Afro-Mexicans, yes, yes, yes, of course, yes!”

Translation for “¡Pero por supuesto que sí! Soy Negr@, Afromexican@, Afrodescendiente!”: “Of course, yes! I am Black, Afro-Mexican, Afrodescendant!” For the campaign and its social media see *¡Pero por supuesto que Sí!*

(Ciudad de México: Afro-Censo MX, 2020), for X (formerly known as Twitter) see

[https://twitter.com/AfroCensoMX?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw](https://twitter.com/AfroCensoMX?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw); for Instagram see

The 2020 census represented a historic milestone for Afro-Mexicans and their allies. The event marked the first time ever in the nation's history that Afro-Mexicans were given an opportunity to self-identify as an Afrodescendant ethnic group in the national census. By 25 January 2021, the Mexican newspaper *El Financiero* ran a headline declaring that “2,576,213 people self-identified as Afro-Mexican, according to the INEGI Census.”<sup>2</sup> Those figures indicated that Afro-Mexicans comprised two percent of the Mexican population, a significant increase from a previous estimate claiming they constituted less than one percent. In fact, Afro-Mexicans represented one of Mexico’s largest ethnic groups and in certain municipalities in Guerrero and Oaxaca, they constituted over 75 percent and 90 percent, respectively, of the population.<sup>3</sup>

The inclusion of Blacks in the national census was the result of more than twenty years of Afro-Mexican organizing for recognition, which entailed forging networks with various actors at the national and international levels. That interplay is exemplified in the production of “Afroméxico Sí.” The US-based Kellogg Foundation financed the project, which was overseen

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<https://www.instagram.com/afrocensomx/?hl=en>; for FaceBook see <https://www.facebook.com/afrocensomx>; and for YouTube see <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCaBLpTq8ODEmSjJBpeaxnFg>. The dissertation title “Here We Are, Here We’ve Been, Here We’ll Be!” is borrowed from the AfroCensoMx campaign. See *¡Pero por supuesto que SÍ!* (Ciudad de México: Afro-Censo MX, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Meli Vera, “2 millones 576 mil 213 personas se autorreconocen como afromexicanas, revela Censo del Inegi,” *El Financiero*, 25 January 2021, <https://www.elfinanciero.com.mx/nacional/2-millones-576-mil-213-personas-se-autorreconocen-como-afromexicanas-revela-censo-del-inegi/> (Last accessed 12 January 2024). Note: INEGI is the

<sup>3</sup> INEGI, “Presentación de resultados: población afromexicana o afrodescendiente,” INEGI-Censo 2020 (2021), 25-26.



by the organizations Colectivo Para Eliminar el Racismo (COPERA) and 11.11 Cambio Social, two NGOs in Mexico City. Federal Senator Susana Harp and lawyer-activist José Manuel Aguilar co-wrote the theme song. Local activist Rosa María Castro Salinas introduced Alejandra Robles to the project, who then recorded the song with La Sonora Santanera de Carlos Colorado. Through the collaboration of all those actors, “Afroméxico Sí” was created, recorded, and released for the campaign. And many more actors were involved in the AfroCensoMx campaign, including twenty-three grassroots organizations, six political and public institutions, as well as national and international organizations and academic institutions.

This dissertation delves into the interplay among these local, national, and international spheres. In so doing, it is an effort to unravel the processes that drove policy transformations in Mexico concerning its Afrodescendant population. At its core, it revolves around elucidating the mechanisms that shifted Afro-Mexicans’ social invisibility to visibility within the purview of the Mexican state. How and when did the struggle to visibilize Mexico’s Black population emerge? Who were the stakeholders involved in that effort, and how did Mexican institutions and state actors respond? How does Mexico’s shift compare to other Latin American nations that underwent similar transformations?

In an attempt to answer those questions, this dissertation examines how national and international factors shaped the emergence, strategies, and outcomes of the Afro-Mexican movement. This project carefully addresses the roles of international organizations, national public institutions, and local Afro-Mexican activism in raising awareness about the existence of Afro-Mexicans in a nation that once denied their presence. This dissertation argues that recognition and inclusion emerged from interwoven circumstances, events, and efforts prioritizing the rights of Afrodescendants spanning from the local to the international. Moreover,

it situates Mexico's transformation as part of a broader Latin American multicultural shift that generated inclusionary policies with Afrodescendants in mind. Moreover, it reinforces arguments from other scholars that Afro-Mexicans used a framework that underscored cultural differences to secure government recognition.

### 1.1 The Multicultural Turn

During the 1980s and 1990s, Latin American countries began shifting away from long-held ideologies of mestizaje (cultural and biological racial mixture) that promoted national homogeneity toward recognizing their nations' multicultural and pluri-ethnic composition.<sup>4</sup> Scholars have referred to this transition as the region's "multicultural turn." Such a shift took shape in constitutional reforms across Latin America, where countries declared themselves to be culturally and ethnically diverse. By 2013, all but six Latin American countries had amended their constitutions to officially recognize their nations as multicultural. Mara Loveman fittingly notes, "For states that had invested for decades the cultivation of mestizo nationalism or myths of

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<sup>4</sup> For literature on mestizaje in Mexico and Latin America, see Alexandra Mina Stern, "From Mestizophilia to Biotypology: Racialization and Science in Mexico, 1920-1960," in *Race and Nation in Modern Latin America*, ed. Nancy P. Appelbaum, Anne S. Macpherson, and Karin Alejandra Roseblatt (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 187-210; Nancy Leys Stepan, *The Hour of Eugenics: Race, Gender, and Nation in Latin America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

racial democracy, the embrace of a multicultural national identity marked a momentous symbolic break with the past.”<sup>5</sup>

A key feature of this multicultural turn was how Latin American countries collected census data on their population. Loveman has found that during the mid-twentieth century, most Latin American states stopped collecting data on race and ethnicity. In 1980, only Brazil, Cuba, and Guatemala had included questions in their census designs to capture data based on racial and ethnic affiliations. By 2010, all Latin American countries except for the Dominican Republic had either included or had publicly committed to including at least one question to capture data on Indigenous and/or Afrodescendant populations. Loveman and other scholars argue that this shift in census-taking resulted from grassroots mobilization and pressures from international organizations.<sup>6</sup>

As scholars have indicated, Indigenous social mobilization played a critical role in driving this shift from mestizaje to multiculturalism. The upsurge of Indigenous organizing

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<sup>5</sup> The six countries that had yet to make such multicultural reforms were Chile, Costa Rica, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, and Uruguay. See Mara Loveman, *National Colors: Racial Classification and the State in Latin America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 268-270. For Latin American constitutional amendments during the multicultural turn also see Detlef Nolte and Almut Schilling-Vacaflor, “Introduction: The Times they are a Changin’”: Constitutional Transformations in Latin America since the 1990s in *New Constitutionalism in Latin America: Promises and Practices* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2012), 3-5.

<sup>6</sup> For discussion on Latin America censuses, see Fabiana del Popolo and Susana Schklonik, “Indigenous Peoples and Afro-Descendants: The Difficult Art of Counting,” in *Everlasting Countdowns: Race, Ethnicity and National Censuses in Latin American States*, ed. Luis Fernando Angosto Ferrández and Sabine Kradolfer (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 304-334; Loveman, *National Colors*, 250-300; George Reid Andrews, *Afro-Latin America: Black Lives, 1600-2000* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 18-44.

throughout Latin America in the 1970s began to gain considerable traction during the 1980s with support from various international actors and organizations. Equally important, Indigenous organizations and activists also started to build horizontal transnational networks among themselves.<sup>7</sup> In 1989, Indigenous activists from seventeen Latin American countries gathered in Bogotá, Colombia, for the Primer Encuentro Latinoamericano de las Organizaciones Populares e Indígenas (First Latin American Meeting of Popular and Indigenous Organizations). At this conference, which they organized in response to the 500th anniversary of the European-American encounter, activists created the Campaña Continental 500 Años de Resistencia Indígena, Negra y Popular (500-YR, 500 Years of Indigenous, Black, and Popular Resistance) to transform state-sponsored quinquennial celebrations into anti-colonial protests. Activists also established national councils, which were comprised of Black and Indigenous populations, and continued organizing subsequent meetings through the early 1990s.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Donna Lee Van Cott, "Latin America's Indigenous Peoples," *Journal of Democracy* 18, 4 (2007): 130-131.

<sup>8</sup> On the 500-YR campaign and the internationalization of the Indigenous rights movement see Martha Rodríguez, "Campaña Continental," *Chasqui: Revista Latinoamericana de Comunicación* 40 (Sept-Dec 1991): 80-83; Walter L. Becknecker and Verónica Jaffé, "El aniversario del 'descubrimiento' de América en el conflicto de opiniones," *Ibero-amerikanisches Archiv* 18 (1992): 514-517; Alison Brysk, "Turning Weakness Into Strength: The Internationalization of Indian Rights," *Latin American Perspectives* 23, 2 (Spring 1996): 38-57; Araceli Burguete Cal y Mayor, "Movimiento indígena en México: El péndulo de la resistencia: ciclos de protesta y sedimentación," in *Movimientos indígenas en América Latina: Resistencia y nuevos modelos de integración*, ed. Ana Cecilia Betancur J. (Copenhagen, DK: IWGIA, 2011), 20-23; Carmen Diana Deere and Frederick S. Royce, "The Rise and Impact of National and Transnational Rural Social Movements in Latin America," in *Rural Social Movements in Latin America: Organizing for Sustainable Livelihoods*, ed. Carmen Diana Deere and Frederick S. Royce (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2018), 16-17.

What makes the multicultural turn notably significant is that beyond recognizing and promoting cultural diversity, Latin American governments were adopting legal protections and guarantees grounded in the international human rights regime.<sup>9</sup> In 1989, the International Labor Organization adopted the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, number 169 (ILO 169), to call “attention to the distinctive contributions of indigenous and tribal peoples to the cultural diversity and social and ecological harmony of humankind and to international cooperation and understanding.”<sup>10</sup> The ILO developed the convention in collaboration with other multilateral institutions, including multiple bodies of the United Nations, the World Health Organization (WHO), and the Inter-American Indian Institute, in response to the pervasive violations of the rights of Indigenous peoples. In fact, it was Indigenous organizations that successfully pressured the International Labor Organization to reform its 1957 Convention 107 on Indigenous and Tribal Populations, which they argued was assimilationist at its core.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> For literature on human rights in Latin America, see Patrick William Kelly, *Sovereign Emergencies: Latin America and the Making of Global Human Rights Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Arnulf Becker Lorca, “Human Rights in International Law?: The Forgotten Origins of Human Rights Law in Latin America,” *University of Toronto Law Journal* 67, 4 (Fall 2017): 465-495; Erika Moreno, “The Contributions of the Ombudsman to Human Rights in Latin America, 1982-2011,” *Latin American Politics and Society* 58, 1 (Spring 2016): 98-129; Sonia Picado, “The Evolution of Democracy and Human Rights in Latin America: A Ten Year Perspective,” *Human Rights Brief* 11, 3 (2004): 28-31.

<sup>10</sup> Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169), International Labor Organization, [https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:55:0::NO::P55\\_TYPE,P55\\_LANG,P55\\_DOCUMENT,P55\\_NODE:REV,en,C169,/Document](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:55:0::NO::P55_TYPE,P55_LANG,P55_DOCUMENT,P55_NODE:REV,en,C169,/Document) (Last accessed 1 May 2024).

<sup>11</sup> Catherine Walsh, “Afro In/Exclusion,” Resistance, and the ‘Progressive’ State: (De)Colonial Struggles, Questions, and Reflections,” in *Black Social Movements in Latin America: From Monocultural Mestizaje to Multiculturalism*, ed. Jean Muteba Rahier (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2012), 18.

Scholars have shown that ILO 169 was a significant driver of the late-twentieth-century wave of multicultural reforms in Latin America and an influencing force in global policy norms, of which Indigenous peoples were the primary subjects. After the ILO adopted Convention 169, the United Nations designated 1994 to 2005 as the International Decade of the World's Indigenous People. By the 2000s, the U.N. had established new mechanisms devoted to Indigenous rights, like the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the U.N. Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, and the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.<sup>12</sup>

During the 1990s, the World Bank also began including programming explicitly addressing the plight of Indigenous peoples. According to Paschel, this included providing aid to Latin American governments to “demarcate and title collective ethnic territories.” Paschel and other scholars have noted that other international development institutions also began following this trend that prioritized Indigenous rights, like the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), the Organization of American States (OAS), the Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO), and the Inter-American Foundation.<sup>13</sup> This international trend helped shed light on the marginalization of

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<sup>12</sup> Tianna S. Paschel, *Becoming Black Political Subjects: Movements and Ethno-Racial Rights in Colombia and Brazil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 260. For a discussion on international organizations and their increasing attention to Indigenous peoples in the 1900s and onward, also see Luis Fernando Angosto Ferrández and Sabine Kradolfer, “Race, Ethnicity and National Censuses in Latin American States: Comparative Perspectives,” in *Everlasting Countdowns: Race, Ethnicity and National Censuses in Latin American States*, ed. Luis Fernando Angosto Ferrández and Sabine Kradolfer (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 24-25.

<sup>13</sup> For the role of the World Bank in the multicultural turn, see Paschel, *Becoming Black*, 85; Catherine Walsh, “Afro In/Exclusion,” 18, 25-28. For the Colombia case of development and land titling see Bettina Ng’weno, “Can

Indigenous peoples and compelled member states to confront the social and economic inequalities that had disproportionately affected this population.

As primary subjects of these multicultural reforms, Indigenous peoples were gaining collective rights through a new wave of constitutional reforms. Donna Lee Van Cott found five key features in these new multicultural constitutions:

1) Rhetorical recognition of the existence of Indigenous peoples as collective entities preceding the establishment of national states; 2) recognition of customary Indigenous law as binding public law, typically limited by international human rights or higher-order constitutional rights, such as the right to life; 3) protection of collective property rights from sale, dismemberment, or confiscation; 4) official status for Indigenous languages; and 5) access to bilingual education.<sup>14</sup>

In some cases, states also extended similar rights to Afrodescendants in rural areas. Nevertheless, scholars like Juliet Hooker have found that “Indigenous peoples gained more collective rights than [Afrodescendants] in part because Latin America’s new multicultural citizenship regimes were more amenable to demands made on the basis of cultural difference or ethnic identity rather than racial difference or racial discrimination.”<sup>15</sup> When Afrodescendants

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Ethnicity Replace Race? Afro-Colombians, Indigeneity, and the Colombian Multicultural State,” *Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 12, 2 (2007): 414–440; Arturo Escobar, *Territories of Difference: Place, Movements, Life, redes* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Kiran Asher, *Black and Green: Afro-Colombians, Development, and Nature in the Pacific Lowlands* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> Van Cott, “Latin America’s Indigenous Peoples,” 132.

<sup>15</sup> Juliet Hooker, “Indigenous Inclusion/Black Exclusion: Race, Ethnicity and Multicultural Citizenship in Latin America,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 37, (2005), 306. For literature on Indigenous populations being the primary subjects of multicultural reforms, also see Paschel, *Becoming Black*, 4-9; Donna Lee Van Cott,

gained similar recognition and rights, they were compelled to adopt Indigenous-like identities that demonstrated their cultural difference and ancestral links to their lands. According to Peter Wade, Afro-Latin Americans adopted this stance because, unlike their Indigenous counterparts, they lacked an institutionalized identity that gave them a “conceptual, political, and often a territorial basis [...] on which to organize themselves.” In the end, only a small number of countries that recognized Afrodescendants as culturally distinct afforded Blacks equivalent rights to Indigenous peoples.<sup>16</sup>

By the 2000s, international trends prioritizing multicultural policies centering Indigenous peoples began shifting toward racial equality reforms that focused on the rights of Afrodescendants. The 2001 United Nations Third World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance held in Durban, South Africa (2001 Durban Conference) helped usher in this transition, bringing Afrodescendants a similar degree of international visibility that the ILO 160 did to the Indigenous population. The 2001 Durban Conference's Declaration and Program of Action proposed actions to address racism globally.

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“Multiculturalism versus Neoliberalism in Latin America,” in *Multiculturalism and the Welfare State: Recognition and Redistribution in Contemporary Democracies*, ed. Keith Banting and Will Kymlicka (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2006), 273-279.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Wade, *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (New York: Pluto Press, 2010), 116-117. For literature on Afro-Latin Americans gaining recognition through multicultural reforms, also see Carlos de la Torre and Jhon Sánchez, “Afro-Ecuadorian Politics,” in *Comparative Racial Politics in Latin America*, ed. Kwame Dixon and Ollie A. Johnson III (New York: Routledge, 2019), 163; Paschel, *Becoming Black*, 81-116; Jean Muteba Rahier, “Black Social Movements in Latin America: From Monocultural Mestizaje and ‘Invisibility’ to Multiculturalism and State Corporation/Co-Optation,” in *Black Social Movements in Latin America: From Monocultural Mestizaje to Multiculturalism*, ed. Jean Muteba Rahier (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 1-6.



The document aimed to engage member states and called on them to implement stricter anti-discrimination legislation, among other specific measures.

In the wake of the Durban Conference, the U.N. Committee to Eliminate Racial Discrimination began pressuring states to gather data on their Black populations and implement policy reforms and practical solutions against racism and racial discrimination. In 2009, the U.N. organized the Durban Review Conference in Geneva, Switzerland, to evaluate member states' progress in fulfilling their commitments to the Durban Declaration and Program of Action. The U.N. then designated 2011 as the International Year for People of African Descent and 2015-2024 as the International Decade for People of African Descent. As had occurred with the Indigenous population in the 1980s and 1990s, multilateral lending institutions like the World Bank began incorporating Afrodescendant-specific programming to similarly address the plight of this population.

For Tianna Paschel, collective ethnic rights and race-based affirmative action were two types of ethno-racial policies produced in two historical moments that aligned with distinct international policy norms. She argues that collective ethnic rights, wherein Afrodescendants adopted an “Indigenous-like” identity, emerged during what she terms the “multicultural alignment” of the 1980s-1990s. She proceeds to argue that race-based affirmative action policies followed along with the “racial equality alignment” in the 2000s-2010s.<sup>17</sup> However, Jean Muteba Rahier cautions against Paschel’s “political field alignments,” arguing that they conceptualize multi-cultural rights and racial equality laws “as two separate and mutually exclusive politico-legal discourses” corresponding rigidly to two different historical moments. Rahier notes that while the framework is useful for Brazil and Colombia, both “alignments” could be found

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<sup>17</sup> Paschel, *Becoming Black*, 18-23.

working simultaneously in other Latin American countries and during different periods that do not align neatly with Paschel's periodization. In fact, Rahier points out that Mexico is a case that does not fit into Paschel's framework.<sup>18</sup>

However, Paschel does not create a rigid temporal demarcation between collective ethnic rights and race-based affirmative action policies. Indeed, as Rahier notes, both alignments could be found working simultaneously in other parts of Latin America. Paschel acknowledges that possibility and adds that Black movements in Brazil and Colombia made claims using language from both alignments. She argues that the distinct policy reforms that emerged in those countries were connected to "the different ways in which Blackness figured into each country's nationalist imaginary and differences in the articulations of black movements in each case."<sup>19</sup> As this dissertation will show, Mexico's racial ideology aligned more closely to a multicultural framework than a racial equality one, as did the articulations of the Afro-Mexican movement.

## **1.2 Black Movements in Latin America**

A new wave of Black mobilization in Latin America emerged in the late 1970s and started gaining momentum in the 1980s and beyond. Black movements set their sights on gaining specific legal and social rights ranging from constitutional recognition and collective land rights to affirmative action policies. Some scholars have found that Black rural movements aligned

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<sup>18</sup> Jean Muteba Rahier, "Afrodescendants, Multiculturalism, and the Adoption of Ethnoracial Law in Latin America," in *Routledge Handbook of Afro-Latin American Studies*, ed. Bernd Reiter and John Antón Sánchez (New York: Routledge, 2022), 226-227.

<sup>19</sup> Paschel, *Becoming Black*, 23.

more closely with territorial multicultural rights and Black urban movements to racial equality rights.<sup>20</sup> Although we find two types of Black movements in Latin America based on their geographic needs, both sought to reshape state policies, participated in transnational forms of activism, and were organized and led by a small group of activists and civic organizations.

Before proceeding, it is important to specify how this project defines Black mobilization and social movements. Drawing from Tianna Paschel's research on Brazil and Colombia, this project understands Black mobilizing as "the collective action of activists and organizations that organize primarily, though not always exclusively, as black."<sup>21</sup> It also draws from a rich body of literature on social movements. Scholars largely agree that collective action becomes a social movement when groups with shared identities form solidarity networks to carry out sustained collective actions aiming to generate social change through contentious interactions with power holders.<sup>22</sup> This project considers Black mobilizations in Latin America that have emerged during the region's multicultural turn as social movements.

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<sup>20</sup> George Reid Andrews, "Black Movements in Latin America, 1970-2000," in *Black Power in Hemispheric Perspective: Movements and Cultures of Resistance in the Black Americas*, ed. Wilfried Raussert, Matti Steinitz (New Orleans: University of New Orleans Press, 2023), 89; Tianna S. Paschel, "Rethinking Black Mobilization in Latin America," in *Afro-Latin American Studies: An Introduction*, ed. Alejandro de la Fuente and George Reid Andrews (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 222-263; Asher, *Black and Green*, 3.

<sup>21</sup> Paschel, "Rethinking Black Mobilization, 224.

<sup>22</sup> For literature on social movements see Margert E Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); Sidney Tarrow, *The New Transnational Activism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Donatella della Porta, *Social Movements: An Introduction* (Newark: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2006); Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, *Contentious Politics* (New

The upsurge of this new wave of Black movements coincided with a period in which Latin American governments were undergoing a democratization process while simultaneously enacting market-oriented policy reforms that accelerated the privatization of public resources, deregulation of markets, and reduced public spending. These reforms increased the economic precarity among vulnerable groups, which were disproportionately Black and Indigenous populations. As these economic reforms unfolded, Latin American governments adopted multicultural policies that sought to recognize and protect cultural and ethnic differences.

To be sure, Black organizing in Latin America occurred prior to the 1970s, when the region was experiencing authoritarian and military dictatorships that attempted to create a unified national identity under mestizaje and racial democracy ideologies. Within this context, Black mobilization often took on different articulations, centering social and political identities not explicitly rooted in Blackness, or as Paschel calls it, "mobilizing *while* Black."<sup>23</sup> However, there were instances of small groups, almost exclusively comprised of educated Black men, that did center their racial identity. For example, Afro-Cubans created a political party in Cuba in the early 1900s. In Brazil and Uruguay, intellectuals created Black presses in which they voiced their thoughts on racial inequality and national ideologies of racial harmony.<sup>24</sup> As some scholars have

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York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015); Paul Almeida, *Social Movements: The Structure of Collective Mobilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019).

<sup>23</sup> Paschel, *Becoming Black*, 48-50.

<sup>24</sup> For Cuba and the short-lived Partido Independiente de Color (PIC, Independent Party of Color) see Alejandro de la Fuente, *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 66-78. For Afro-Brazilian intellectuals and the Black press see Paulina Alberto, *Terms of Inclusion: Black Intellectuals in Twentieth-Century Brazil* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press,

shown, these earlier forms of Black organizing were grounded in nationalist ideas of mestizaje and racial democracy, in which activists called on their respective governments to follow those ideals. As Paschel aptly notes, these earlier instances of Black mobilization were predominantly urban, male-dominated, and "integrationist."<sup>25</sup>

By the 1970s, a new wave of Black urban mobilizing emerged in Latin America. As scholars have shown, many of these early forms of organizing began as cultural movements seeking to rescue and promote their nation's African heritage and history. Activists were also paying close attention to how Black movements in the U.S. and South Africa unfolded, subsequently influencing how Afro-Latin America's cultural movements developed.<sup>26</sup> Though activists, most of whom were highly educated, emphasized Black culture, they also had connections to burgeoning political organizations concentrating on issues like racial discrimination and inequality. By the 1990s and 2000s, urban Black movements, especially in Brazil, were instrumental in shifting public policy around racial inequality by pressuring the state to adopt ethno-racial policies like affirmative action.<sup>27</sup>

By the 1980s, Black mobilizing efforts had expanded to rural areas. Scholars have shown that radical actors of the Catholic Church inspired by Liberation Theology played a significant

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2011). For a history of Uruguay's Black organizations and Black press see George Reid Andrews, *Blackness in a White Nation: A History of Afro-Uruguay* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

<sup>25</sup> Paschel, "Rethinking Black Mobilization," 232.

<sup>26</sup> See Paschel, *Becoming Black*, 55-56; David Covin, *The Unified Black Movement in Brazil* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2006), 53-59, 67; Andrews, *Afro-Latin America, 1800-2000*, 183-186; Michael George Hanchard, *Orpheus and Power: The Movimento Negro of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, Brazil, 1945-1988* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 111-129.

<sup>27</sup> Paschel, *Becoming Black*, 117-152; Andrews, "Black Movements," 93-94.

role in helping create and drive Black and Indigenous rural movements. These religious actors began organizing Black and Indigenous communities to help raise local ethno-racial consciousness and generate struggles for land in countries like Brazil, Colombia, and Ecuador. According to Arturo Escobar, one of the most "important conceptual innovations" that grew from this relationship in the Pacific region of Colombia was the idea of territory, which activists and organizations linked to ethnicity and culture. He writes that territory was "fundamental to the physical and cultural survival of the communities [...who had...] unique ways, rooted in culture, of using the diverse spaces constituted by forest, river, mangrove, hills, and ocean."<sup>28</sup> However, as noted earlier, this compelled Afrodescendants to adopt Indigenous-like identities. In so doing, whatever rights were gained were limited specifically to Black rural communities, leaving out non-rural Black populations.

Since the 1970s, Black movements in Latin America have also become more internationalized. Afro-Latin American activists and organizations forged and cultivated horizontal transnational networks. They organized international meetings and conferences, such as the Congresses of Black Culture in the Americas between 1977 and 1982, among other such gatherings that continued through the 1990s and into the twenty-first century.<sup>29</sup> Black activists

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<sup>28</sup> Escobar, *Territories of Difference*, 54; For a discussion on "land-based ethno-racial groups in the Brazilian Northeast," see Jan Hoffman French, *Legalizing Identities: Becoming Black or Indian in Brazil's Northeast* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

<sup>29</sup> The Congresses were held in Colombia in 1977, Panama in 1980, and Brazil in 1982. See: Laura Correa Ochoa, "Manuel Zapata Olivella, Racial Politics and Pan-Africanism in Colombia in the 1970s," *The Americas* 79, 3 (July 2022): 457-489; Darién J. Davis, "Beyond Representation: Rethinking Rights, Alliances, and Migrations: Three Historical Themes in Afro-Latin American Political Engagement," in *Comparative Racial Politics in Latin America*, ed. Kwame Dixon and Ollie A. Johnson III (New

established formal networks from these international events, like the Red Continental de Organizaciones Afroamericanas, which grew out of a 1994 conference in Uruguay. Regionally based networks, such as the Organización Negra Centroamericana (ONECA), were also emerging. Additionally, Afro-Latin American activists, organizations, and collectives received support from multilateral institutions like the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank and organizations like the Ford Foundation. Equally important, Afro-Latin American movements aligned themselves with global ethno-racial policies from international bodies like the United Nations and the International Labor Organization. They did so to make demands, legitimized and supported by those institutions and the international human rights regime, on their respective governments for multicultural recognition and racial equality.<sup>30</sup>

In 2000, Afro-Latin American activists gathered in Santiago, Chile, for the 2000 Santiago Regional Conference of the Americas (2000 Santiago Conference), held in preparation for the

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York: Routledge, 2019), 29; Elisa Larkin Nascimento, "Pan-Africanism in Latin America," in *Comparative Racial Politics in Latin America*, ed. Kwame Dixon and Ollie A. Johnson III (New York: Routledge, 2019), 75; de la Torre and Antón Sanchez, "Afro-Ecuadorian Politics," 166; Darién J. Davis, Tianna S. Paschel, and Judith A. Morrison, "Pan-Afro-Latin Americanism Revisited: Legacies and Lessons for Transnational Alliances in the New Millenium," in *Afrodendants, Identity, and the Struggle for Development in the Americas*, ed. Berndt Reiter and Kimberly Eison Simmons (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2012), 22-25; Escobar, *Territories of Difference*, 264-269; Andrews, *Afro-Latin America, 1800-2000*, 186-87.

<sup>30</sup> Cristina Echeverri-Pineda, "Normas internacionales para afrodescendientes en América Latina: interacción entre movimientos sociales, Estados e instituciones internacionales," *Colombia Internacional* 102 (2020): 139-164; Paschel, *Becoming Black*; Corinne Lennox and Carlos Minott, "Inclusion of Afro-Descendants in Ethnic Data Collection: Towards Visibility," *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 18 (2011): 257-275; Escobar, *Territories of Difference*; Asher, *Green and Black*.

2001 Durban Conference. Some scholars have argued that the 2000 Santiago Conference had a more significant impact on Afro-Latin American activists than the 2001 Durban Conference. It was at that conference that activists and state actors produced the Santiago Program of Action, which acknowledged the racism and systemic discrimination that Afrodescendants experienced in the region and urged states to implement measures that addressed inequality stemming from the historical legacy of slavery.<sup>31</sup>

Women were also becoming more visible during the late-twentieth-century wave of Black mobilization at the local, national, and international levels. Though women had been active members of Black organizations and movements, their male counterparts dominated leadership positions. By the 1980s and 1990s, Black women began organizing separately from broader Black movements in response to the limitations they encountered in mixed-gendered organizations, which also ignored intersectional issues that concerned Black women. Additionally, Black women encountered similar forms of marginalization in feminist movements that neglected issues of racism that Black women experienced. Thus, a Black women's movement took shape in countries like Brazil. In organizing separately from Black men and white women, Black women took leadership roles and addressed intersectional issues without pushback from groups neglecting their experiences as triply-oppressed people. At the international level, Afro-Latin American women were also attending and organizing international events. In 1992, Afro-Latin American women activists created La Red de Mujeres

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<sup>31</sup> Alejandro de la Fuente, "The Rise of Afro-Latin America," *ReVista: Harvard Review of Latin America* 18 (January 2017), <https://revista.drclas.harvard.edu/the-rise-of-afro-latin-america/> (last accessed 7 September 2023); Paschel, *Becoming Black*, 128.



Afrolatinoamericanas, Afrocaribeñas y de la Diáspora. In fact, Afro-Latin American women played a critical role in organizing the 2000 Chile Conference due to their experience in international organizing.<sup>32</sup>

### 1.3 Afro-Mexico

Since the mid-twentieth century, scholars in Mexico and the U.S. have produced a rich body of literature on Blacks in colonial Mexico. Through their research, we have gained a deeper understanding of the diverse roles that Afrodescendants took in New Spain.<sup>33</sup> That scholarship

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<sup>32</sup> For literature on Black women organizing see Andrews, “Black Movements,” 94; Paschel, *Becoming Black*, 59-62; Keisha-Khan Y. Perry, *Black Women Against the Land Grab: The Fight for Racial Justice in Brazil* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2013); Asher, *Black and Green*, 130-153; Escobar, *Territories of Difference*, 236-250; Kia Lilly Caldwell, *Negras in Brazil: Re-envisioning Black Women, Citizenship, and the Politics of Identity* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 150-176.

<sup>33</sup> For literature on colonial Afro-Mexico see Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra de México: Estudio etnohistórico*, Segunda edición (México, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1972); David M. Davidson, “Negro Slave Control and Resistance in Colonial Mexico, 1519-1650,” *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 46, 3 (1966): 235–53; Peter Gerhard, “A Black Conquistador in Mexico,” *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 58, 3 (1978): 451-459; Matthew Restall, “Black Conquistadors: Armed Africans in Early Spanish America,” *The Americas* 57, 2 (2000): 171–205; Patrick James Carroll, *Blacks in Colonial Veracruz: Race, Ethnicity, and Regional Development* 2nd ed (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001); Ben Vinson, *Bearing Arms for His Majesty: The Free-Colored Militia in Colonial Mexico* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); Herman L. Bennett, *Africans in Colonial Mexico: Absolutism, Christianity, and Afro-Creole Consciousness, 1570-1640* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003); Brígida von Mentz, “Esclavitud en centros mineros y azucareros novohispanos. Algunas

has shown that Afrodescendants were anything but a numerically insignificant population. At one point, Mexico was one of the largest importers of enslaved Africans in Spanish America. Throughout the colonial period, from the sixteenth through the eighteenth century, Afrodescendants constituted Mexico's second largest ethno-racial group, after the Indigenous population. By the nineteenth century, it is estimated that Afrodescendants constituted up to ten percent of Mexico's population.<sup>34</sup>

The scholarship on Blacks in Mexico during the wars of independence and the nineteenth century is much more limited. Nevertheless, the literature has shown that Afrodescendants were critical actors in the independence movement. As Ted Vincent notes, their significance was such that "two of the four heroes [of Mexican independence] to have states named after them were Afro-Mexicans." Those two men were José María Morelos and Vicente Guerrero. The latter played a critical role in abolishing slavery and the *casta* system in Mexico, which, in theory,

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propuestas para el estudio de la multietnicidad en el centro de México," in *Poblaciones y culturas de origen africano en México*, ed. María Elisa Velázquez and Ethel Correa (México D.F.: INAH, 2005), 259-283; Blanca Lara Tenorio, "La integración de los negros en la naciente sociedad poblana 1570-1600," in *Poblaciones y culturas de origen africano en México*, ed. María Elisa Velázquez and Ethel Correa (México D.F.: INAH, 2005), 285-297; Matthew Restall, *The Black Middle : Africans, Mayas, and Spaniards in Colonial Yucatan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009). For literature on Afrodescendant women in colonial Mexico see María Elisa Velázquez Gutiérrez, "Amas de leche, cocineras y vendedoras: mujeres de origen africano, trabajo y cultura en la ciudad de México durante la época colonial," in *Poblaciones y culturas de origen africano en México*, ed. María Elisa Velázquez and Ethel Correa (México D.F.: INAH, 2005), 335-356.

<sup>34</sup> Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra*, 197-241; George Reid Andrews, *Afro-Latin America, 1800-2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 41.

made Afro-Mexicans equal to all other Mexican citizens.<sup>35</sup> However, once Mexico eliminated racial categories and racial classifications no longer appeared on official documents, an unintended consequence was the erasure of Afro-Mexicans as a distinct racial group. By the late nineteenth century, Mexican officials argued that Afro-Mexicans were in the process of being biologically and culturally assimilated into the Mestizo majority. During this time, elite Mexican state actors were attempting to lure European immigrants to whiten Mexico, both biologically and culturally. However, their efforts were unsuccessful, and by the early twentieth century, the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1917 derailed any such plans.<sup>36</sup>

In post-revolutionary Mexico, intellectuals and policymakers reinforced nineteenth-century claims that Afro-Mexicans had assimilated into the Mestizo majority and practically disappeared as a social group. However, elite ideas of mestizaje no longer exalted whiteness as had been the case in the previous century. Instead, they heralded a cosmic race that prioritized homogeneity over group difference. In other words, they upheld racial mixture to create a new

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<sup>35</sup> Ted Vincent, “The Blacks Who Freed Mexico,” *The Journal of Negro History* 79, 3 (1994): 257–76; Theodore G. Vincent, “The Contributions of Mexico’s First Black Indian President, Vicente Guerrero,” *The Journal of Negro History* 86, 2 (2001): 148–59; Andrews, *Afro-Latin America: 1800-2000*, 87.

<sup>36</sup> Ben Vinson III, “La historia del estudio de los negros en México,” in *Afroméxico el pulso de la población negra en México ; una historia recordada, olvidada y vuelta a recorder*, by Ben Vinson III and Bobby Vaughn (México, D.F: Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas, 2004), 34-39; Christina A. Sue, *Land of the Cosmic Race: Race Mixture, Racism, and Blackness in Mexico* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 12-13; Theodore W. Cohen, *Finding Afro-Mexico: Race and Nation after the Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 31-36; Dora Elena Careaga-Coleman, *La ausencia de lo afro en la identidad nacional de México: raza y los mecanismos de la invisibilización de los afrodescendientes en la historia, la cultura popular, y la literatura mexicana* (PhD diss., University of New Mexico, 2015), 89-107.

race that they believed would be the composite of all the positive attributes of all the races in Mexico. By the mid-twentieth century, a small group of elite non-Black men from intellectual, artistic, and policy-making circles began taking an interest in Mexico's African heritage. Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, now commonly referred to as the father of Afro-Mexican studies, began publishing findings about Mexico's Black population during the colonial and contemporary periods. Those works were primarily bound to academic spaces and were driven by ideas of mestizaje. Furthermore, the niche status of Afro-Mexican studies and its disconnect to public education reinforced the idea to the popular masses that Afro-Mexicans had assimilated into Mexico's Mestizo majority.<sup>37</sup>

Amid the multicultural turn in Mexico, Mexican scholars began publishing ethnographic works on Black communities that emphasized their cultural distinctness. One of the most visited and studied Black regions in Mexico was and continues to be the Costa Chica of Guerrero and Oaxaca. This project also centers on that region because it has one of the highest concentrations of Afro-Mexicans and because it was in the Costa Chica that Black mobilization for recognition and inclusion emerged.<sup>38</sup>

By the late 1990s, Afro-Mexicans in the Costa Chica began to organize as Black. As some scholars have noted, Black mobilization in Mexico started relatively late compared to movements in Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, and other Latin American nations. Nevertheless, the

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<sup>37</sup> For discussion on mestizaje and invisibility, see Marco Polo Hernández Cuevas, *African Mexicans and the Discourse on Modern Nation* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2004), 1-30; Sue, *Land of the Cosmic Race*, 13-17; Cohen, *Finding Afro-Mexico*.

<sup>38</sup> Gloria Lara, "Las organizaciones afromexicanas: recursos, cambios y regulación institucional en los albores del siglo XXI," *Cuadernos de Antropología* 30, 2 (Julio-Diciembre 2020), 8-13.

Afro-Mexican movement shares many critical traits with other Black rural movements (specifically) in Latin America. First, the Catholic Church played a significant role in organizing Afro-Mexicans in the Costa Chica. It was with the support of an Afro-Trinidadian priest that Afro-Mexicans organized the first Encuentro de Pueblos Negros (EPN). This annual conference has become a critical event for Black organizing in Mexico as it is the only one that has been held consistently since 1997 and has also been held outside the Costa Chica.<sup>39</sup> Second, civic organizations have been the driving force in Mexico's Black movement. By 2015, at least twenty-three organizations were registered in the Costa Chica with either cultural or political agendas. The former prioritized culture and history, while the latter emphasized ethno-racial policy reforms like constitutional recognition and affirmative action policies.<sup>40</sup>

A third trait shared with other Black organizations in Latin America is establishing and cultivating transnational networks. Though Afro-Mexicans did not participate in earlier Black conferences in Latin America, by the 2000s, they attended such gatherings, like the 2000 Chile Conference. One differentiating aspect of Afro-Mexican mobilization from other Afro-Latin

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<sup>39</sup> Note: The EPN has been held annually since 1997, except for a few years when the event was not held due to a lack of resources. In 2023, the 24<sup>th</sup> EPN was held in Tamiahuá, Veracruz. For discussions on the role of the Catholic Church in Afro-Mexican organizing and of the EPN events see: América Nicté-Ha López Chávez, “La movilización etnopolítica afromexicana de la Costa Chica de Guerrero y Oaxaca: logros, limitaciones y desafíos,” *Perfiles Latinoamericanos* 26, 52 (2018), 9-10; LaKai Dill and Louis Greathouse Amador, “El Pueblo Negro: Identity Politics in Mexico,” *Latin American Policy* 5, 1 (2014), 108-109.

<sup>40</sup> Heriberto Ruiz Ponce, “Organización civil de pueblos negros en Oaxaca,” *Acta Sociológica* 74 (Septiembre-Diciembre 2017), 122-124. For the role of civic organizations in the Afro-Mexican movement also see María Elisa Velázquez y Gabriela Iturralde, “Afromexicanos: reflexiones sobre las dinámicas del reconocimiento,” *Anales de Antropología* 50 (2016), 237-239.

Americans is the absence of the World Bank in Mexico's Black movement. More recently, Afro-Mexicans have been gaining material support from international NGOs and international agencies but not from multilateral lending institutions.<sup>41</sup> A fourth characteristic is the increasing leadership roles of women. As scholars have found for Brazil and Colombia, women have held a critical role in the Afro-Mexican movement. However, they have also had to navigate limitations in terms of positions of authority and addressing issues of concern to Afrodescendant women. The literature on gender in the Afro-Mexican movement is only beginning to take shape in Mexico.<sup>42</sup> As this project will show, it was in the mid-2010s that women began taking leadership roles and organizing independently from the Afro-Mexican movement.

A fifth and final feature is the rural nature of the Afro-Mexican movement and the multicultural arguments it used to gain inclusion in the 2015 inter-census, recognition in the Mexican Constitution in 2019, and inclusion in the 2020 national census. Taking on an Indigenous-like status, as scholars have found in other national cases involving Afro-Latin Americans, has brought on debates among Afro-Mexican activists and their allies regarding how

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<sup>41</sup> Bianca Silvia Ramírez y Claire Wright, “Redes de defensa transnacionales frente a estructuras políticas federales: El caso afroamericano,” *Razon Critica* 6 (2019): 257-288; Gloria Lara Millán, “Construcción del sujeto de derecho afrodescendiente en México. Reflexiones desde el Pacífico Sur mexicano,” *Diálogo Andino*, 52 (2017), 63-65; Velázquez y Iturralde, “Afromexicanos: reflexiones,” 239-242.

<sup>42</sup> Itza Amanda Varela Huerta, “Mujeres Negras en el movimiento político afrodescendiente: una genealogía,” *A Contra Corriente* 19, 1 (2021): 190-208; María Elisa Velázquez Gutiérrez and Gabriela Iturralde Nieto, *Afromexicanas: trayectoria, derechos y participación política*, (Ciudad de Mexico: Instituto Electoral de la Ciudad de Mexico, 2020); Itza Amanda Varela Huerta, “Nunca más un México sin nosotras: feminismo y mujeres Afromexicanas,” *Política y Cultura* 51 (2019): 105-124.

much these multicultural reforms could actually improve the lives of Afro-Mexicans, who have been and continue to be one of the most socially and economically marginalized groups in Mexico.

Because Afro-Mexicans gained constitutional recognition much later than other Afro-Latin Americans, who achieved this in the 1980s and 1990s, they could leverage a larger number of international conventions to pressure the Mexican state into recognizing them. In this case, U.N. conventions played an equally prominent role as the ILO 169. Scholars in Mexico have found that the 2009 Durban Review Conference and 2011 International Year for People of African Descent significantly influenced the Mexican state to recognize and include Afro-Mexicans in the agendas of multiple public agencies and in the 2015 inter-census. This dissertation will show that the 2015-2024 International Decade for People of African Descent equally played a crucial role in pressuring Mexico to recognize Afro-Mexicans, leading to the 2019 constitutional amendment to Article 2 and their inclusion in the 2020 national census.

#### **1.4 Mexican Mestizaje and Post-Racial Ideology**

Mexico's national identity and racial ideology remain deeply entrenched in mestizaje and have endured despite the nation's embrace of multiculturalism. A key feature of mestizaje's hold on Mexico can be found in how the government collects demographic data on its population. As some scholars have explained, "since the national ideology of mestizaje fostered the idea that all non-indigenous individuals were mestizos, the mestizo category was dropped" from the census. In other words, mestizo and Mexican remain interchangeable terms. With a lack of ethno-racial categories in Mexico's census from which to self-identify, 14.8 percent of the population

identified as Indigenous based on cultural practices and affiliations. The Indigenous population was the sole ethno-racial minority recognized and counted as such in the census.<sup>43</sup>

Also missing from the census and official documents are the terms “race” and “racial.” Beneath the surface, Mexico's official avoidance of the term is more nuanced and inconsistent. Though the Mexican Constitution prohibits all forms of discrimination and describes multiple types of discrimination based on ethnicity, gender, sexual preferences, and other factors, the document refrains from mentioning racial discrimination. In 2012, the omission prompted the UN Commission on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) to express concern that Mexico did not include “racial discrimination” in the language of its anti-discrimination law. CERD repeated that concern in 2019 and reiterated its recommendation that Mexico align its existing anti-discrimination laws and policies with the U.N.’s International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.<sup>44</sup>

Mexico’s official disavowal of the terms “race” and “racial discrimination” is inextricably linked to its mestizaje ideology that promised racial harmony. Prominent Mexican intellectuals and state actors have insisted that the term “race” is part of Mexico’s bygone colonial era and thus incompatible with the modern nation, considering that racial classifications

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<sup>43</sup> See Regina Martínez Casas, Emiko Saldivar, René D. Flores, and Christina A. Sue, “The Difference Faces of Mestizaje: Ethnicity and Race in Mexico,” in *Pigmentocracies: Ethnicity, Race, and Color in Latin America*, ed. Edward Telles and the Project on Ethnicity and Race in Latin America (PERLA) (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 49.

<sup>44</sup> UN CERD, Concluding observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, Mexico, CERD/C/MEX/CO/16-17 (4 April 2012), p.2-3; UN CERD, Concluding observations on the combined eighteenth to twenty-first periodic reports of Mexico, CERD/C/MEX/CO/18-21 (19 September 2019), 2-3.



were eliminated in the nineteenth century and the concept of biological race has been disproven. According to Monica G. Moreno Figueroa and Emiko Saldívar Tanaka, intellectuals have also maintained that the concept of race has been imported to Mexico from outside. During my research, some academics echoed similar sentiments and added that, specifically, U.S. intellectuals and activists were attempting to impose the concept of race on Mexico.<sup>45</sup>

Mexicans have contrasted their history of mestizaje with that of institutionalized racial segregation in the United States to adopt and uphold a “raceless” ideology and a discourse of non-racism.<sup>46</sup> Tanya Katerí Hernández aptly refers to this national understanding of itself as “racial innocence.”<sup>47</sup> For Moreno and Saldívar, Mexico’s negation of race and racism is emblematic of its post-racial ideology rooted in mestizaje. Such an ideology, they argue, concealed and rebuffed racism in the nation by invoking a rhetoric of national unity: “How can we be racist, we are Mexican and mixed?”<sup>48</sup> According to Gabriela Iturralde, it is this ideology that allowed for objections to recognizing Afro-Mexicans in the Mexican Constitution to go uncontested as racism.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Monica G. Moreno Figueroa and Emiko Saldívar Tanaka, “‘We Are Not Racists, We Are Mexicans’: Privilege, Nationalism, and Post-Race Ideology in Mexico,” *Critical Sociology* 42, 4-5 (2016): 515-533; Monica G. Moreno Figueroa, “El archivo del estudio del racismo en México,” *Desacatos* 51 (mayo-agosto 2016): 92-107.

<sup>46</sup> Christina A. Sue, *Land of the Cosmic Race*; Monica G. Moreno Figueroa, “Distributed Intensities: Whiteness, Mestizaje, and the Logics of Mexican Racism,” *Ethnicities* 10, 3 (2010): 387-401.

<sup>47</sup> Tanya Katerí Hernández, *Racial Subordination in Latin America: The Role of the State, Customary Law, and the New Civil Rights Response* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>48</sup> Moreno and Saldívar, “We Are Not Racists,” 516.

<sup>49</sup> Gabriela Iturralde, “Obstáculos al reconocimiento constitucional de los pueblos y comunidades afroamericanas: ¿Objeciones del racismo?” *Revista Antropologías del Sur* 4, 8 (2017): 127-147.

Beginning in the 2010s, state institutions have gradually begun to incorporate the term “racial discrimination” in their published reports, albeit inconsistently. For instance, a 2012 publication jointly issued by the Consejo Nacional para Prevenir la Discriminación (CONAPRED, National Council to Prevent Discrimination) and the Movimiento Nacional por la Diversidad Cultural de México (National Movement for the Cultural Diversity of Mexico) provided definitions of discrimination, explicitly identifying racial discrimination as a form experienced specifically by Afrodescendants.<sup>50</sup> However, despite this acknowledgment, the term “racial discrimination” did not appear as a distinct category of discrimination in any of CONAPRED’s three reports for the Encuesta Nacional Sobre Discriminación (ENADIS, National Survey on Discrimination), conducted between 2010 and 2020. Conversely, a 2017 report submitted to the Inter-American Human Rights Commission by the Comisión de Derechos Humanos del Distrito Federal (CDHDF, Federal District’s Human Rights Commission) consistently utilized the term throughout the document, emphasizing the continued necessity for Mexico City to address and eradicate racial discrimination.<sup>51</sup> Several other institutions have also begun to adopt similar language and approaches during this period.

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<sup>50</sup> CONAPRED, *Guía para la acción pública: Población afrodescendiente en México* (México D.F.: CONAPRED, 2012). <https://www.conapred.org.mx/publicaciones/guia-para-la-accion-publica-poblacion-afrodescendiente-en-mexico/>.

<sup>51</sup> CDHDF, *Reporte en el marco del encuentro con la CIDH sobre la situación de los Derechos de las Personas Afrodescendientes y contra la Discriminación Racial* (México D.F.: CDHDF, 2017).

## 1.5 Terminology

Afro-Mexican activists identify with the terms Black, Afro, and Afro-Mexican. The Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI, National Institute of Statistics and Geography) used the categories Afro-Mexican, Afrodescendant, and Black in the 2020 census. For this reason, I use those terms interchangeably in this study, with the exception of Afro. Additionally, I use the term Afro-Mexican to align with the language of the growing field of Afro-Latin American studies in which scholars use the prefix Afro to refer to Latin Americans of African ancestry like Afro-Brazilian, Afro-Colombian, Afro-Cuban, and so on. For Black folks in the U.S., I use the term U.S. African American or identify them as African Americans from the U.S.

Gender-neutral language has gained prominence in Spanish-speaking contexts over the past decade, particularly in recent years. In the United States, Latina/o has evolved to Latinx and, more recently, Latine. A similar linguistic shift has transpired in Mexico and other Spanish-speaking nations. Some alternatives to Latina/o include Latin@, and similarly, variations incorporating the Afro prefix have emerged, such as Afro-Latinx, Afro-Latine, and Afro-Latin@. These terms are more prevalent in written form and appear primarily in social media platforms and academic discourse. Nevertheless, written terms like “negrx” have begun to surface within certain Afro-Mexican activist circles.

It is important to note that the terms activists use do not necessarily reflect how Afro-Mexican non-activists self-identify, as will become apparent later in the dissertation. For example, non-activists have historically been reluctant to self-identify as *negra/o* due to its being a derogatory term in twentieth-century Mexico. Instead, they reserve *negra/o* to refer to people in other communities and to whom they perceive to be darker-skinned. The term of choice for most

Afro-Mexicans is *morena/o*, which they, and Mexicans more generally, consider to be more polite and politically correct.<sup>52</sup> Afro-Mexicans use other terms to self-identify that are grounded in specific geographies and cultures. In Coahuila, there is a small community of Afro-Mexicans who self-identify as *mascoegas/os* and are descendants of escaped enslaved Africans and Afrodescendants from the U.S. Additional terms like *jarocha/o* in Veracruz and *costeña/o* in the Costa Chica are not exclusively ethno-racial identities, as individuals from other racial backgrounds also identify as *jarocha/o* and *costeña/o*. There appears to be a growing trend to incorporate the prefix Afro into those terms, but it is too early to determine how pervasive terms like *afro-jarocha/o* will become in Mexico.

## 1.6 Chapter Outline

The first chapter of the dissertation examines how international conventions, campaigns, and actors played an important role in stimulating institutional interests in Mexico's African heritage and catalyzing the Afro-Mexican movement in the Costa Chica. Specifically, it links the emergence of the Nuestra Tercera Raíz program to ILO 169 and the 500 Years of Indigenous, Black, and Popular Resistance campaign. At the local level, it looks at how the arrival of an Afro-Trinidadian priest helped consolidate dispersed efforts to rescue and promote local Afro-Mexican cultures into a single movement through the annual Encuentro de Pueblos Negros.

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<sup>52</sup> Sue, *Land of the Cosmic Race*, 28-46; Laura A. Lewis, *Chocolate and Corn Flour: History, Race, and Place in the Making of "Black" Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

Chapter two explores how Mexico went from negating the existence of racial discrimination to admitting its history of discriminating against racialized peoples. It focuses on what led the Mexican government to create anti-discrimination legislation and an institution (CONAPRED) to ensure its implementation. The chapter also looks at how international pressures, especially from the UN's Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, urged CONAPRED to recognize and include Afro-Mexicans in the institution's agenda.

The third chapter examines how the Afro-Mexican movement gained strength during the 2000s despite fractures emerging within the movement. It also shows that in response to the 2011 International Year for People of African Descent and continued pressures from CERD, state institutions went from completely ignoring Afro-Mexicans to supporting their claims to be included and recognized in the national census and constitution. This chapter shows how those institutions began working with Black organizations in the Costa Chica and helped them create a racial category, "Afro-Mexican," to strengthen their campaign for recognition.

Chapter four uses gender to explore hierarchies within the movement and identify the positions men and women held. The chapter gives special attention to the roles of women in the movement and how those changed over time. It shows that by 2011 a new small group of women had joined the movement during a period that coincided with the International Year for People of African Descent and the many institutionally sponsored events that followed. Their arrival helped subvert traditional gender roles and catalyzed an Afro-Mexican women's movement.

The fifth and final chapter explores how Mexico's state and central governments formally recognized Afro-Mexicans as an ethnic group and included them as such in their constitutions. The chapter shows how a convergence of local activism, increased institutional support, and international pressures compelled the Mexican Congress to reform the national constitution to

recognize Afro-Mexicans and indicate that they could enjoy special rights “equivalent” to their Indigenous counterparts.

## **2.0 *Pueblos Negros*: Bringing Visibility to Black Mexicans in Twentieth-Century Mexico**

In 2018, a World Bank report indicated that when Afro-Mexicans traveled outside their communities, Mexican officials routinely questioned their nationality and threatened to forcibly remove them from the country. The report featured the case of Leonardo and José González Silverio, two brothers from the state of Oaxaca. During a trip to Tijuana, agents from the Instituto Nacional de Migración (INM) detained the brothers and threatened to deport them to the Dominican Republic.<sup>53</sup> The immigration officials reasoned that in Mexico there were no Black nationals. Despite the brothers' insistence that they were Mexican, the agents accused them of being undocumented immigrants from the Caribbean or Central America. Immigration officials then placed the González Silverio brothers in detention as they prepared their deportation. After fifteen days in custody, the brothers were released to their parents, who had worked diligently to prevent their deportation.<sup>54</sup>

In a 2020 report that Mexican activists submitted to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, they stated that the experience of the González Silverio brothers was a reality that “countless Afro-Mexicans face.” One of the authors, Tanya Duarte, an Afro-Mexican activist, recounted her long history of being profiled and detained by INM agents. After multiple occasions of detainment, Duarte's daily life had consisted of carrying “all of her

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<sup>53</sup> Translation: National Institute of Migration

<sup>54</sup> World Bank, *Afro-Descendant in Latin America: Toward a Framework of Inclusion* (Washington DC: World Bank, 2018), 44; Témoris Grecko, “Afromexicanos: La discriminación visible,” *Proceso*, 1 April 2017, <https://www.proceso.com.mx/reportajes/2017/4/1/afromexicanos-la-discriminacion-visible-181471.html>.

identification documents in case of stops and interrogations by immigration authorities.” Like the González Silverio brothers, Duarte was never forcibly removed from Mexico. However, other Afro-Mexicans have not been so lucky and have been deported to places like Cuba and Haiti.<sup>55</sup>

The stories of Duarte and the González Silverio brothers are not unique. Anecdotal accounts are plentiful of Afro-Mexican activists from the Costa Chica region encountering challenges to their nationality from Immigration and Customs officers at airports upon returning to Mexico after international travel. Nor is official negation of their nationality limited to international travel, as revealed by Duarte’s and the González Silverio brothers’ cases. The institutionalized invisibility of Black Mexicans leading agency officials to negate Afro-Mexican citizenship was part of a long process intrinsically linked to the nation’s mestizaje project. This chapter asks, how was it that Mexico’s Black presence gained the attention of international organizations like the World Bank and a sector of the Mexican press after being absent from wide public view? Who was involved in raising that awareness at the national and international levels?

This chapter also explores how Afro-Mexicans went from organizing as *campesinos* (peasants) for most of the twentieth century to mobilizing as Blacks by the late 1990s. How did that transition from organizing under a class-based identity to organizing under an ethno-racial one occur? Who was involved in that process and how did it compel Afro-Mexican activists to reverse their state of invisibility in mestizo Mexico?

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<sup>55</sup> Tanya Duarte et al., “*Because of the Color of My Skin and the Way I Speak Spanish*”: *The INM’s Detention and Deportation of Indigenous and Afro-Descendant Mexicans* (2020), 4-5,

[https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Racism/RES\\_43\\_1/NGOsAndOthers/coalicion-indigena-migrantes-chiapas-proyecto-afro-mexico-imumi.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Racism/RES_43_1/NGOsAndOthers/coalicion-indigena-migrantes-chiapas-proyecto-afro-mexico-imumi.pdf)



## 2.1 Rescuing Mexico's African Heritage

As historian Theodore Cohen and others have argued, Afro-Mexican disappearance from the national identity and consciousness was a process that began shortly after Mexico's independence from Spain. The new ruling elite sought to replace the colonial caste system that classified human difference and racial mixture with a relatively egalitarian ideology that prioritized homogeneity through mestizaje (racial mixture). That ideology undergirded Mexico's nation-building project of the nineteenth century, which aimed to achieve biological homogeneity while privileging whiteness. Achieving whiteness required the disappearance of Afrodescendants and Indigenous peoples alike. In the case of Afro-Mexicans, power holders highlighted their low demographic presence throughout Mexico, with the exception of specific isolated coastal areas, to advance claims of the inevitable disappearance of Blacks in Mexico. Hence, mestizaje in Mexico became synonymous with Spanish and Indigenous mixture.<sup>56</sup>

By the twentieth century, academics and policy makers considered Afro-Mexicans numerically insignificant and largely disappeared through the process of biological and cultural mestizaje. Revolutionary Mexico continued to uphold the idea of mestizaje through José Vasconcelos' conceptualization of the cosmic race. According to Vasconcelos, the Americas were set to become the birthplace of a new and superior race that emerged from the mixture of

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<sup>56</sup> Theodore Cohen, *Finding Afro-Mexico: Race and Nation After the Revolution* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2020), 30-34; Ben Vinson, "La historia del estudio de los negros en México," in *Afroméxico: el pulso de la población negra en México; una historia recordada, olvidada y vuelta a recordar*, by Ben Vinson and Bobby Vaughn, trans. Clara García Ayuardo (México, D.F: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2004), 34-38; Ben Vinson, *Before Mestizaje: The Frontiers of Race and Caste in Colonial Mexico* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 18-34.

the different races. However, Vasconcelos' cosmic race reinforced notions of white superiority, which would absorb "lower types." To be sure, this new race would be superior to whiteness, but Vasconcelos determined that the other races comprising the cosmic race were relationally inferior. He wrote, "the Black could be redeemed [...] by voluntary extinction [...] together with the types that a free instinct of beauty may go on signaling as fundamentally recessive and undeserving."<sup>57</sup>

For Vasconcelos and other men occupying positions of state power, Afro-Mexicans were perceived as having largely assimilated into the dominant culture. In contrast to Indigenous peoples, who maintained a significant social visibility, the national Black presence was largely absent from popular view. Consequently, Mexican academics and policymakers directed their attention almost exclusively towards the Indigenous population. From the 1920s to the 1940s, discussions concerning Afrodescendants within spheres of political power largely revolved around foreign Blacks. Afro-Mexicans, for the most part, remained entirely outside the purview of the Mexican state.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> José Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic Race: A Bilingual Edition*, trans. Didier T. Jaén (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), 32. Also see Dora Elena Careaga-Coleman, *La ausencia de lo afro en la identidad nacional de México: raza y los mecanismos de la invisibilización de los afrodescendientes en la historia, la cultura popular, y la literatura mexicana* (PhD diss., University of New Mexico, 2015), 154-169.

<sup>58</sup> Vinson, "La historia del estudio de los negros en México," 38-41; Marta María Saade Granados, "Inmigración de una 'raza prohibida': Afro-estadounidenses en México, 1924-1940," *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 34, 1 (Spring, 2009): 169-192; Pablo Yankelevich, "Mexico for the Mexicans: Immigration, National Sovereignty and the Promotion of Mestizaje," *The Americas* 68, 3 (2012): 405-436. Elisabeth Cunin, *Administrar los extranjeros: Raza, mestizaje, nación. Migraciones afrobeliceñas en el territorio de Quintana Roo, 1902-1940* (Mexico: CIESAS, 2014); Ted Vincent, "Black Hopes in Baja California: Black American and Mexican Cooperation, 1917-1926," *The*

By the 1940s, a small group of non-Black Mexican artists, academics, and policy makers began to take an interest in the nation's African heritage. Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, who has been recognized in academic circles as the father of Afro-Mexican studies, was among those individuals seeking to recover Mexico's African culture. In 1946, Aguirre Beltrán published *La población negra de México* and in 1958 *Cuijla: Esbozo etnográfico de un pueblo negro*. In the 1940s, that small group of prominent Mexican men collaborated with Black and non-Black international actors (mostly men) to establish the short-lived International Institute of Afro-American Studies in Mexico City and its accompanying journal *Afroamérica*. Due to a lack of funding, neither the institute nor the journal lived beyond the 1940s.<sup>59</sup>

Despite that newfound interest, the academic output and state interest in Afro-Mexicans was scarce in comparison to that in the Indigenous population. After the publication of Aguirre Beltrán's *Cuijla*, there was a dearth of literature produced on modern day Afro-Mexican experiences; one historian has noted that *Cuijla* was the most significant study on Afro-Mexican

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*Western Journal of Black Studies* 21, no. 3 (1997): 204-213; Laura A. Lewis, *Chocolate and Corn Flour: History, Race, and Place in the Making of "Black" Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012) 265-303. On race-based exclusionary immigration policies in Latin America during the interwar period see Lara Putnam, *Radical Moves: Caribbean Migrants and the Politics of Race in the Jazz Age* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 100-104.

<sup>59</sup> See Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra de México, 1519-1810: Estudio etnohistórico* (Mexico City: Ediciones Fuente Cultural, 1946); Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *Cuijla: Esbozo etnográfico de un pueblo negro* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1958); Guitierre Tibón, *Pinotepa Nacional: Mixtecos, negros y triques* (Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma de México, 1961). For an historical analysis of *Afroamérica* see Cohen, *Finding Afro-Mexico*, 126-134.

communities for twenty-five years. Most research on Blackness in Mexico during that time almost exclusively addressed the colonial period.<sup>60</sup>

During the 1960s, the conversation among Mexican students and intellectuals largely shifted from the topic of Mexico's African heritage to following the struggle against anti-Black racism in the United States. However, there was still a small minority who were giving attention to the Afro-Mexican experience. Among them was Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, who became a prominent Mexican scholar and state actor. In 1960, Bonfil Batalla offered a seminar on the African American civil rights movement at the Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia (ENAH). Luz María Martínez Montiel was among the students who attended that seminar, where the two met and developed a strong professional relationship. The next year, Bonfil Batalla invited Martínez Montiel to Guerrero, where he was conducting fieldwork, so she could visit Afro-Mexican communities and get to know Black Mexicans.<sup>61</sup>

Between the 1970s and 1980s, Bonfil Batalla gained leadership positions at the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) and the Dirección General de Culturas Populares (DGCP). In 1973, Bonfil Batalla and Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán collaborated with other prominent Mexican scholars like Arturo Warman and Ángel Palerm to establish the Centro de Investigaciones Superiores del Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (CISINAH). During that period, Martínez Montiel had also secured prominent roles within academia, at times with

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<sup>60</sup> Vinson and Vaughn, *Afroméxico*, 69.

<sup>61</sup> Dirección General de las Culturas Populares (DGCP) - Archivo Histórico Centro de Información y Documentación Alberto Beltrán (AHCIDAB), CNCA/DGCP/01S – D/TR/52 Luz María Martínez Montiel, “La tercera raíz en la integración del Caribe,” Homenaje al Dr. Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, July 1992, 1-2. Translation: National School of Anthropology and History (ENAH)

the assistance of Bonfil Batalla. In fact, after co-founding CISINAH, Bonfil Batalla recruited Martínez Montiel to join the Center at INAH. All the while, Martínez Montiel had developed projects and seminars that focused on Afro-America at INAH and the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM). The most notable project she created was “Afroamérica: la tercera raíz,” which she established at INAH in 1974.<sup>62</sup> During the 1980s the topic of Afro-Mexico reemerged with a small group of Mexican college students who began conducting anthropological and ethnographic studies in Mexico’s Black communities.<sup>63</sup>

In 1988, Bonfil Batalla, who at the time was director of the Dirección General de las Culturas Populares (DGCP), initiated the *Nuestra Tercera Raíz* program. He assigned the program to the DGCP’s regional office, Unidad Regional de Guerrero de Culturas Populares (URGCP), which in turn developed the “Vigencia de la Cultura Afromexicana de la Costa Chica de Guerrero” project. The URGCP selected three Black communities of coastal Guerrero to work with for the project: San Nicolás Tolentino, Maldonado, and Huehuetán. By 1990, the project

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<sup>62</sup> DGCP - AHCIDAB, CNCA/DGCP/01S – D/TR/52, Luz María Martínez Montiel, “La tercera raíz en la integración del Caribe,” Homenaje al Dr. Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, July 1992, pgs. 2-3; DGCP - AHCIDAB, D/TR/52, Luz María Martínez Montiel, “Programa Nuestra Tercera Raíz, 1993,” 4. *Afroamérica: la tercera raíz*, <https://www.nacionmulticultural.unam.mx/afroamerica/antecedentes/antecedentes01.html> (last accessed 7 September 2023); *Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social*, <https://ciesas.edu.mx/investigacion/ciudad-de-mexico/> (last accessed 25 February 2024).

<sup>63</sup> Vinson and Vaughn, *Afroméxico*, 66-67; Cohen, *Finding Afro-Mexico*, 275-276. Translation: National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH); Research Center of the National Institute of Anthropology and History (CISINAH); National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM).

had generated three local symposiums, a document of *versos* (oral traditions), and a photography exhibit.<sup>64</sup>

By 1989, the DGCP had come under the jurisdiction of the Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes (CONACULTA), with Bonfil Batalla still in his role as director. That year, Bonfil Batalla developed a new agenda for the DGCP, which sought to celebrate Mexico's pluri-ethnic and multicultural reality and acknowledge the international trend toward multiculturalism. From this new agenda emerged multiple action plans relating to Indigenous peoples and popular culture at the national scale. Among those plans, two stood out that contributed to increased efforts to visibilize Afro-Mexicans and the nation's African heritage. First was the Programa de Apoyo a las Culturas Municipales y Comunitarias (PACMYC). The program was established to provide direct support to local initiatives seeking to rescue or develop cultural programs from within the community. The PACMYC was also envisioned as a direct line between DGCP and local communities, so as to bypass unnecessary bureaucracy that stalled community projects. Moreover, it was conceived as an instrument that would help stimulate local cultural initiatives. The program would provide support for cultural projects in the Costa Chica.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> DGCP - AHCIDAB, D/TR/52, Luz María Martínez Montiel, "Programa Nuestra Tercera Raíz, 1993," 4.

Translation: National Director of Popular Cultures (DGCP); Our Third Root (Nuestra Tercera Raíz); Guerrero Regional Unit of Popular Cultures (URGCP); Validity of the Afro-Mexican Culture of the Costa Chica of Guerrero (Vigencia...).

<sup>65</sup> DGCP - AHCIDAB, D/2483, Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, "La Dirección General de las Culturas Populares, 1989 (Documento preliminar: circulación restringida)," 1-13. Also see: DGCP - AHCIDAB, D/1813, Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, "Programa de Apoyo a las Culturas Municipales y Comunitarias (PACMYC): Propuesta Inicial," Enero 1989, 1-12. Translation: National Council of Arts and Culture (CONACULTA); Support Program for Municipal and Community Cultures (PACMYC).

The second action plan that Bonfil Batalla outlined was the expanded Nuestra Tercera Raíz program. The name signaled Mexico's multiculturalism that celebrated the nation's three roots that created the mestizo nation: Indigenous, Spanish, and African. The concept of three roots in turn repudiated previous claims of Mexican *mestizaje* as exclusively Indigenous and Spanish. The idea for the program emerged in response to the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the European encounter of the Americas. The "Comisión Mexicana para la conmemoración del V Centenario del encuentro de dos mundos" tasked the DGCP with prioritizing and carrying out the Nuestra Tercera Raíz program. Moreover, the program was built upon Martínez Montiel's Afroamérica program at INAH. Bonfil Batalla assigned the program to the Museo Nacional de Culturas Populares and recruited Martínez Montiel to spearhead it.<sup>66</sup>

Under Martínez Montiel's leadership, the Nuestra Tercera Raíz program began operating in 1990, lasting ten years. During that decade, the program organized conferences that brought together expert scholars on Afro-Mexico like Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán and international scholars and artists from the Caribbean, Europe, Latin America, and United States working on the topic of the African diaspora in the Americas and the Caribbean.<sup>67</sup> The program then published the research that was presented at those events. In addition to conferences and academic publications, the program also organized international film and cultural festivals that highlighted

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<sup>66</sup> DGCP - AHCIDAB, D/2483, Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, "La Dirección General de las Culturas Populares, 1989 (Documento preliminar: circulación restringida)," 19-21. Translation: Mexican Commission for the Commemoration of the V Centennial of the Meeting of Two Worlds; National Museum of Popular Cultures.

<sup>67</sup> DGCP – AHCIDAB, D/TR18; Araceli Reynoso Medina, "Nuestra tercera raíz y los estudios sobre la presencia africana en México," in *Poblaciones y culturas de origen africano en México*, ed. María Elisa Velázquez and Ether Correa (Mexico: INAH, 2005), 85-102.

and celebrated Afrodescendant music, dances, and art. The program also created a space to share and exchange knowledge among academic experts and to promote the region's African heritage to spectators.

As the *Nuestra Tercera Raíz* program was underway, interest in Afro-Mexico increased with a small group of university students embarking on new research on Afro-Mexican colonial ethnohistory under the guidance of Luz María Martínez Montiel and Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán. By the 2000s, some of those students had become prominent academics, like María Elisa Velázquez Gutiérrez (student of Martínez Montiel) and Sagrario Cruz Carretero (student of Aguirre Beltrán).<sup>68</sup> Unlike the 1930s and 1940s, twenty-first-century academics researching Mexico's African heritage were predominantly female. However, like their predecessors, the later group was mainly urban and non-Black.

Sagrario Cruz Carretero, from Veracruz, began her scholarly work on Afro-Mexicans in the 1980s. Her interest in Afro-Mexicans came after a research trip to Cuba. Cruz Carretero recalled showing a picture of her family to a group of Cubans who identified her father and grandfather as Black. According to Cruz Carretero, up to that point she had never identified, nor had her family, as Black. She also never suspected African ancestry in her family lineage due to a lack of physical features prominent in Afrodescendants, like skin pigmentation and hair

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<sup>68</sup> Luz María Martínez Montiel, "La Tercera Raíz en la Integración del Caribe," July 1992, Archivo Histórico, Centro de Información y Documentación Alberto Beltrán, D/TR/52; <https://www.nacionmulticultural.unam.mx/afroamerica/antecedentes/antecedentes01.html> (last accessed 7 September 2023). Also see María Elisa Velázquez, interview by author, 17 March 2022, and Sagrario Cruz Carretero, interview by author, 22 April 2021; María Elisa Velázquez y Gabriela Iturralde, "Afromexicanos: reflexiones sobre las dinámicas del reconocimiento," *Anales de Antropología* 50 (2016), 235-236.



texture. Upon her return to Mexico, Cruz Carretero's family told her that her great-grandmother was indeed Afrodescendant. Learning about her family lineage became an impetus for her research on Afro-Mexicans.<sup>69</sup>

In the 1990s, María Elisa Velázquez Gutiérrez was conducting research on colonial Afro-Mexican women as a doctoral student and faculty member at the Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia (ENAH). Velázquez Gutiérrez's interest in Mexico's Afrodescendant population began during her childhood when her family traveled from Mexico City to Acapulco, Guerrero, for vacation.<sup>70</sup> By the late 1990s, her doctoral studies took her to the Costa Chica where Velázquez Gutiérrez established connections with Black locals in the region. From then on, Velázquez Gutiérrez became one of the most dedicated allies to the movement and began strengthening her links with local Afro-Mexican activists.<sup>71</sup>

In addition to Cruz Carretero and Velázquez Gutiérrez, other scholars were writing and publishing about Afro-Mexico. Some of those prominent scholars in Mexico include Odile Hoffman (CIESAS) and Gloria Lara (CIESAS).<sup>72</sup> It was during the late 1990s and the 2000s that scholars and Black activists began building relationships. As one Mexican scholar noted, academic institutions offered a degree of legitimacy to the Afro-Mexican movement's demands

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<sup>69</sup> Cruz Carretero, interview.

<sup>70</sup> Coastal Guerrero is one of the Mexican regions with the highest number of people identifying as Afro-Mexican.

<sup>71</sup> Velázquez, interview.

<sup>72</sup> This section does not offer an exhaustive list of academics who work on the Afro-Mexican topic and have been allies of Black activists. Translations: Center for Research and Advanced Studies in Social Anthropology (CIESAS), Autonomous National University of Mexico (UNAM).

for recognition and inclusion. Moreover, academics provided Afro-Mexican activists access to resources that otherwise were largely out of their reach.

## 2.2 Class-Based Organizing

During the late 1960s to 1970s, multiple forms of popular resistance against the Mexican government emerged throughout Guerrero. Mexico's Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) regime responded with violent repression against leftist militant groups and student activists who were at the forefront of regional uprisings and collective organizing.<sup>73</sup> It is unclear to what degree Afro-Mexicans were involved in acts of resistance. However, there is evidence demonstrating that insurgent groups were active in the Costa Chica.<sup>74</sup> Seeing that the region had

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<sup>73</sup> See Alexander Aviña, "Seizing Hold of Memories in Moments of Danger: Guerrillas and Revolution in Guerrero, Mexico," in *Challenging Authoritarianism in Mexico: Revolutionary Struggles and the Dirty War, 1964-1982*, eds. Fernando Herrera Calderón and Adela Cedillo (New York: Routledge, 2012), 40-59. Translation: Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI).

<sup>74</sup> According to a 2006 report from Mexico's Special Prosecutor for Social and Political Movements of the Past (*Fiscalía Especial para Movimientos Sociales y Políticos del Pasado - FEMOSPP*), in 1963 the Mexican military attacked communities of the Costa Chica and executed at least seven rural workers. The report identified three communities in the Costa Chica that were directly affected by the dirty war: Contepec Costales, San Luis Acatlán, and La Barra. Beside those three villages, it is unclear to what degree neighboring communities participated either in direct action or support of guerrillas. See Alberto López Limón, José Luis Moreno, Agustín Evangelista Muñoz, "Ch

6: La Guerra Sucia en Mexico" (Draft report, 2006), 20-21, [https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB180/060\\_Guerra%20Sucia.pdf](https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB180/060_Guerra%20Sucia.pdf). For the full report see

<https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB180/>. For state censorship of the report see *Boletín de Prensa*, 07

a significant Afrodescendant population, it is plausible that Afro-Mexicans participated in or supported leftist guerrilla groups.

In 1961, the Mexican government established the *Compañía Nacional de Subsistencias Populares* (CONASUPO) to regulate the prices of agricultural products and offer subsidies for basic goods in rural Mexico. Throughout its first twenty years of existence, the state implemented multiple changes to decentralize the CONASUPO.<sup>75</sup> In its attempt to decentralize, the state incorporated the participation of local communities with the creation of the *Consejos Comunitarios de Abasto* (CCA).<sup>76</sup> The CCAs were constituted of at least six representatives who administered the community stores (*tiendas campesinas*, sometimes simply referred to as the CONASUPO). The program was a great success in Oaxaca, including in the Costa Chica region.<sup>77</sup> Some scholars in Mexico have argued that programs like the CONASUPO's CCAs

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December 2006, [https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB209/boletin\\_de\\_prensa.pdf](https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB209/boletin_de_prensa.pdf). Also, Mexican scholar Evangelina Sánchez Serrano, notes that armed mobilization was indeed present in the Costa Chica of Guerrero. See Evangelina Sánchez Serrano, “La represión del estado mexicano durante la guerra sucia en guerrero,” (conference paper, XXVII Congreso de la Asociación Latinoamericana de Sociología. VIII Jornadas de Sociología de la Universidad de Buenos Aires. Asociación Latinoamericana de Sociología, Buenos Aires, August 31 – September 4, 2009), 5.

<sup>75</sup> For report by Mexico to the UN regarding the CONASUPO see Gustavo Esteva and David Barkin, “El papel del sector público en la comercialización y la fijación de precios de los productos agrícolas básicos en México” (CEPAL, 1981), 10-21, [https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/25132/S8100484\\_es.pdf?sequence=1](https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/25132/S8100484_es.pdf?sequence=1).

Translation: National Company of Popular Subsistence.

<sup>76</sup> Translation: community supply councils.

<sup>77</sup> Jonathan Fox, “La participación popular en los consejos comunitarios de abasto en México: Una lucha desigual,” in *Investigaciones sobre el desarrollo de base: Colección de artículos y estudios basados en las investigaciones*

helped the state coopt social movements in places like Oaxaca. They claim that the CONASUPO became a space for local communities to engage in negotiations with the state, which effectively curbed collective organizing.<sup>78</sup> While there might be truth to that claim, it is also true that the CCAs served as incubators for Afro-Mexican organizing, especially in Oaxaca's Costa Chica region.

During the 1980s, some of the CCAs in Oaxaca's Costa Chica were forming activists who would later take leadership roles in the Afro-Mexican movement, like Néstor Ruiz Hernández, Manuel Avila, and Francisco Ziga Gabriel. Ruiz Hernández, resident of Pinotepa Nacional, recalls that in 1983, Manuel Avila, a local from San José Estancia, recruited him to participate in the Pinotepa Nacional CCA.<sup>79</sup> During Ruiz Hernández's time in the CCA, he and other participants engaged in community-building efforts with multiple villages to denounce inequality.<sup>80</sup>

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*para el doctorado de becarios de la Fundación Interamericana*, ed. Diane Bendahmane (Arlington, VA: Inter-American Foundation, 1993), 21-48.

<sup>78</sup> Odile Hoffman and Gloria Lara Millán add that when organizing did transpire, it often occurred within the institutions and organizations of the PRI. For them, state cooptation of collective action explains why Afro-Mexican mobilization occurred two decades after other parts of Latin America experienced Black collective organizing. See Odile Hoffman and Gloria Lara Millán, "Reivindicación afromexicana: formas de organización de la movilización negra en México," in *Las poblaciones afrodescendientes en América y el Caribe: pasado, presente, y perspectivas desde el siglo XXI*, ed. María José Becerra et al. (Cordoba: Universidad Nacional de Cordoba, 2012) 28-29.

<sup>79</sup> San José Estancia and Pinotepa Nacional are municipalities in the coastal Oaxaca. Pinotepa Nacional is also the largest city in Oaxaca's Costa Chica and serves as the administrative center of the municipality of the same name.

<sup>80</sup> Ruiz Hernández.

Francisco Ziga Gabriel, who also participated in the local councils, echoed Ruiz Hernández's statements that he and other council members used the program to help communities denounce federal policies and projects that were harmful to local subsistence.<sup>81</sup> In the Costa Chica, some of the community struggles were linked to environmental destruction brought on by federally sponsored development projects. For example, in the fishing-village of Chacahua, the community was demanding the Mexican government take necessary steps to address human-caused environmental degradation of the Chacahua-Pastoría lagoons. In 1937, President Lázaro Cardenas had declared the lagoons and the surrounding lands a national park. As a result, Chacahua and three other villages now sit inside the national park. During the 1970s, the federal government began constructing breakwaters to prevent flooding around the lagoons and estuaries. However, the placement of breakwaters in rivers critical for the filtration of the lagoons led to the destruction of the lagoons and estuarine ecosystem. For fishermen this was a threat to their subsistence, especially as fish were dying off. The councils stepped in and partnered with local leaders to denounce the government's inaction. In addition to their work in Chacahua, the CCAs helped form a coffee growers union and organized lime producers in other communities.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Francisco Ziga Gabriel, interview by author, 07 April 2021.

<sup>82</sup> Ruiz Hernández, interview; Ziga Gabriel, interview. For a case study on the Chacahua-Pastoría lagoons see Meztli Yoalli Rodríguez Aguilera, "Grieving Geographies, Mourning Waters: Life, Death, and Environmental Gendered Racialized Struggles in Mexico," *Feminist Anthropology* 3 (2022), 28-42. Also, Gloria Lara offers a brief but important discussion on how participants of the community supply councils worked with communities that the Mexican government had largely marginalized before they established Afro-Mexican organizations. See Gloria Lara, "'Las organizaciones afromexicanas: recursos, cambios, y regulación en los albores del siglo XXI,'" *Cuadernos de Antropología* 30, 2 (2020), 8-11.

Néstor Ruiz Hernández recalls that PRI officials began considering the CCAs a political threat to the regime's power. Council members not only transformed the CCAs into community-based organs that denounced social inequality but they also began challenging the legitimacy of the PRI's authority. During the 1991 legislative elections, an oppositional candidate in Oaxaca from the Partido Revolucionario Democrático (PRD) running for the National Chamber of Deputies emerged from a CCA.<sup>83</sup> Though the candidate failed to defeat the PRI candidate, CCAs in Oaxaca's Costa Chica supported the candidate, which drew the ire of the CONASUPO's general director. After the elections, the director met with Ruiz Hernández and other council participants in Oaxaca City. In that meeting, the director accused the men of acting against the state for supporting and campaigning on behalf of a PRD candidate. According to Ruiz Hernández, CONASUPO officials attempted to transfer him and other CCA members to other Oaxacan regions outside the Costa Chica. Ruiz Hernández refused to transfer and instead left the CONASUPO community council altogether.<sup>84</sup>

In 1992, after leaving the CONASUPO's community councils, Ruiz Hernández and other departing CCA members created the Comisión Regional de Derechos Humanos de la Costa (CRDHC).<sup>85</sup> The founding members first established the organization informally to advocate for the fundamental rights of the communities in the Costa Chica. By 1993, they had registered the CRDHC in the state of Oaxaca. Using their severance pay from the CONASUPO, they formalized the organization, bought a vehicle for transportation, and rented a house for office space. In 2001, the founding members dissolved the organization due to internal conflicts. But

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<sup>83</sup> Translation: Democratic Revolution Party (PRD).

<sup>84</sup> Ruiz Hernández, interview.

<sup>85</sup> Translation: Regional Commission of Human Rights of the Coast.

the presence and success of the organization in the region helped secure Ruiz Hernández's 1998 election to Oaxaca's Chamber of Deputies. After his term in office and the dissolution of the CRDHC, Ruiz Hernández founded the Enlace de Pueblos y Organizaciones Autónomas (EPOCA) in 2002.<sup>86</sup> That organization followed a similar mission to the CRDHC and later adopted Afro-Mexican-specific issues into its agenda.

Neither race nor ethnicity was a central tenet in the mobilizing efforts of the CCA or its members. In fact, most activists had not self-identified as Black when they were with the CCA. In other words, the driving force in the 1980s and early 1990s was centered on a *campesino* identity that incorporated Afrodescendant and Indigenous populations.

### 2.3 Organizing as Black

On 14 to 16 March 1997, local activists held the first Encuentro de Pueblos Negros (EPN) in El Ciruelo, Oaxaca.<sup>87</sup> The principal organizer of the event was Glynn Jemmott, an Afro-Trinidadian priest with a parish in that community. While in Trinidad and Tobago, Jemmott

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<sup>86</sup> Ruiz Hernández, interview; also see Lara, "Las organizaciones afromexicanas," 13.

<sup>87</sup> For an image of the poster of the first Encuentro de Pueblos Negros see

<https://memoricamexico.gob.mx/swb/memorica/Cedula?oId=c6d-7XoBllHHOaFdc5s1>. For an article retroactively looking back on that event also see Juan Carlos Zavala, "Pueblos negros, reconocimiento solo de papel," *El Universal Oaxaca*, May 5, 2018, <https://oaxaca.eluniversal.com.mx/especiales/09-05-2018/pueblos-negros-reconocimiento-solo-de-papel#:~:text=Es%20marzo%20de%201997%2C%20Glynn,y%20su%20presencia%20en%20M%C3%A9xico>.

Translation: Conference of Black Towns.

entered the seminary in 1966, when Liberation Theology was beginning to gain strength following the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). Jemmott arrived in Mexico in the 1980s. His first parish assignment was in the affluent neighborhood of San Ángel in Mexico City. Aware that there was a Black population in Oaxaca, Jemmott successfully requested to be transferred to that state's Costa Chica region.<sup>88</sup> Initially, he was placed in the majority-Black village of Santo Domingo de Armenta. However, upon his arrival, the community was suspicious of a Black man claiming to be a Catholic priest, having only ever seen white priests.<sup>89</sup> Rejected by the community, Jemmott relocated to the village of El Ciruelo in the neighboring municipality of Pinotepa Nacional.<sup>90</sup> The rejection that Jemmott experienced in Santo Domingo de Armenta indicated that Black locals likened authority figures to whiteness/white mestizaje and that internalized anti-Blackness was widespread in the community. Such signs were apparent to Jemmott, whom activists and scholars have since identified as the founder of the Afro-Mexican movement.

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<sup>88</sup> See Marco Polo Hernández Cuevas "African Mexicans and Father Glyn Jemmott," YouTube, 12 April 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5VrMWH5FDP8&list=WL&index=1>; Bobby Vaughn, "Los negros, los indígenas y la diáspora: una perspectiva etnográfica de la costa chica," in *Afroméxico el pulso de la población negra en México ; una historia recordada, olvidada y vuelta a recordar* 1a ed, by Ben Vinson III and Bobby Vaughn, trans. Clara García Ayuardo (México, D.F: Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas, 2004), 90.

<sup>89</sup> According to a state report, the municipality is majority Black with 91 percent identifying as Afro-Mexican. See Gobierno de México: Secretaría de Bienestar, *Informe anual sobre la situación de pobreza y rezago social 2022*, 2022, [https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/697743/20\\_507\\_OAX\\_Santo\\_Domingo\\_Armenta.pdf](https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/697743/20_507_OAX_Santo_Domingo_Armenta.pdf).

<sup>90</sup> Zavala, "Pueblos negros." Also see Elena Ruiz Salinas, interview by author, 15 May 2021.



When Jemmott arrived in the Costa Chica, local activism was transitioning from “colorblind mobilizing” to organizing around an ethno-racial identity. In 1990, a group of activists in the state of Guerrero created the Guerrero Council of 500 Years of Indigenous, Black, and Popular Resistance (hereafter referred to as the GC-500). The collective was a local iteration of the broader Latin American campaign that started in 1989 in response to the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the European-American encounter. Referencing Blackness was in all likelihood a first for collective organizing in the region and in Mexico more broadly. It is unclear how many Afro-Mexicans formed part of GC-500, but anecdotal evidence suggests that some Afro-Mexicans were active in the council. According to Bulmaro García Zabaleta, an Afro-Mexican activist from Guerrero, the participation of Afro-Mexicans in the GC-500 prompted “Blacks to be seen not only as *campesinos* or *ejidatarios* [...] but by joining members of Indigenous communities of Guerrero, made Blacks to identify as part of a specific people: the Afrodescendant people in Guerrero’s Costa Chica region.” Other activists in the Costa Chica of Guerrero and Oaxaca have referenced the movement as a predecessor to Afro-Mexican collective organizing. Some of those activists have also stated that Afro-Mexicans participated in making demands on the state for developmental projects.<sup>91</sup> One of those demands was the construction of a highway that would

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<sup>91</sup> Though a few activists told me that Afro-Mexicans participated in the Guerrero council, I did not speak with any of those actors. In a report by the Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas, Bulmaro García Zabaleta stated that the Guerrero Council of 500 Years helped make Afro-Mexicans socially visible as an ethno-racial group in Mexico. See Bulmaro García Zabaleta, interview by Liliana Garay Cartas, 10 November 2011, Cuajinicuilapa, Guerrero, México. The interview can be found in Liliana Garay Cartas, “Informe final de la Consulta para la Identificación de Comunidades Afrodescendientes de México” (México DF: Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas, 2012), 62; América Nicté-Ha López Chávez, “La movilización

connect the city of Tlapa, in the mountain region, to Marquelia, a city and municipality in the Costa Chica.<sup>92</sup>

Around the same period that the GC-500 was making demands on the federal and regional governments, activists in Oaxaca were forming the organization Etnia Negra. It is unclear who exactly founded the organization and if it was dedicated to serving Black communities, as the name suggests.<sup>93</sup> Based on anecdotal evidence, Etnia Negra was founded by a group of Indigenous activists who met with communities of the San José Estancia Grande municipality in 1994. Manuel Avila, a local from San José Estancia Grande, noted that the municipality was mostly Black. The reason for the gathering was to introduce Etnia Negra and its objectives to locals, establish a local committee, and elect a committee president. Avila, who had previous involvement with the CCA, was elected president. In his capacity, Avila received annual funding from the organization, which he then redistributed in the municipality in the form

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etnopolitica afromexicana de la Costa Chica de Guerrero y Oaxaca: logros, limitaciones y desafíos,” *Perfiles Latinoamericanos* 26, 52 (2018), 9.

<sup>92</sup> The highway was completed in 1995. In 2022, nearly half of that Marquelia’s population identified as Afro-Mexican. For a discussion on the Guerrero council and its legacy in the state see Susan Nistal and Iñigo Prieto, “Human Rights Defenders in the State of Guerrero: Cases of resistance and initiatives from civil society regarding defense and promotion of fundamental human rights in Mexico” (San Francisco, CA: Peace Brigades International – Mexico Project, 2007), 14-15 and 47-48, [https://pbi-mexico.org/fileadmin/user\\_files/projects/mexico/files/Defenderes Guerrero PBI Mexico ENG.pdf](https://pbi-mexico.org/fileadmin/user_files/projects/mexico/files/Defenderes_Guerrero_PBI_Mexico_ENG.pdf). For a state report on the population of Marquelia see “Informe annual sobre la situación de pobreza y rezago social 2022,” [https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/699265/12\\_077\\_GRO\\_Marquelia.pdf](https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/699265/12_077_GRO_Marquelia.pdf).

<sup>93</sup> I was unable to find information or documentation about Etnia Negra in Jamiltepec’s governmental offices. The information provided here is based on oral histories.

of small personal loans to local community members for development projects. Etnia Negra likely received the funds from a government program for Indigenous communities, which were then administered by the organization's Indigenous director.<sup>94</sup> Etnia Negra was active in the region for three years. By 1997, funding for the organization had dried up, and Etnia Negra stopped working with local communities.

Also, in the early 1990s, the Comité de la Cultura de la Casa del Pueblo (hereafter referred to as Casa del Pueblo) was established in José María Morelos, Oaxaca. Israel Reyes Larrea, who became one of the leaders of the Afro-Mexican movement, formed part of the coordinating committee. In 1991, the Casa del Pueblo started organizing cultural events that were held annually with the intent of rescuing and promoting the region's Black culture. These events also sought to infuse appreciation and pride in the region's Black heritage.<sup>95</sup> Reyes Larrea created and circulated educational pamphlets that highlighted the region's Afro-Mexican history and culture. He also used music and *danza* (traditional/folkloric dance) to celebrate Afro-Mexican culture in the village and later traveled regionally to showcase those dances.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Manuel Avila, interview by author, 30 Oct 2021. According to Manuel Avila, the organization was legally registered in Oaxaca. However, as of this writing I have found no legal documents about the organization. As Gloria Lara has noted, social organizations were often formed informally prior to the twenty-first century, it was not until the government began providing resources to civic organizations that those entities registered with the state. Lara, "Las organizaciones afromexicanas," 13-15. Translation: The Peoples' House Culture Committee.

<sup>95</sup> See Selma Jazmín Vásquez Bracamontes, "El proceso organizativo afromexicano: El análisis de la lucha por el reconocimiento constitucional de la Costa Chica de Oaxaca" (MA thesis, FLACSO Ecuador, 2020), 44-45. Also see Juliana Acevedo Ávila, interview by author, 23 December 2021; Ruiz Hernández, interview.

<sup>96</sup> Acevedo Ávila, interview.

In 1994, Reyes Larrea presented the *Danza de la Tortuga*, a dance easily recognized in the Costa Chica, at the first Festival Costeño de la Danza in Puerto Escondido, Oaxaca. The Instituto Oaxaqueño de las Culturas and CONACULTA organized the festival after communities in the Costa Chica petitioned to create a regional cultural event. The festival aimed to “strengthen cultural identities through songs, music, dress, and dance.”<sup>97</sup> Performers in the festival showcased the cultural traditions of Afrodescendants, Indigenous, and Mestizos. In addition to the *Danza de la Tortuga*, groups from different Black communities performed other traditional dances like the *Danza de los Diablos* (Santiago Collantes, Oaxaca), *Danza del Toro Petate* (Santiago Collantes, Oaxaca), and the *Sones de Artesa* (San Nicolás Tolentino, Guerrero).<sup>98</sup>

In 1996, Israel Reyes Larrea and a group of local youths in José María Morelos established the radio program *Radio Cimarrón: La Voz de los Afromestizos*. Receiving support from the Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas (CDI) and the Casa del Pueblo, *Radio Cimarrón* was a thirty-minute program focused on Afro-Mexicans’ cultural traditions in the Costa Chica.<sup>99</sup> The program played the region's traditional music linked to Afro-Mexicans, like “*chilenas, corridos, and boleros costeños.*” The program also shared Afro-

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<sup>97</sup> Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, *34 Testimonio Musical de México*, 2a edición (México: INAH, 2002), 3. <https://mediateca.inah.gob.mx/repositorio/islandora/object/disco:28/datastream/PDF/view> (last accessed 7 September 2023). Translation: Oaxacan Institute of Culture.

<sup>98</sup> For a detailed description of those dances see INAH, *34 Testimonio Musical de México*, 22-24; 26-27; 29-31; and 23-37, <https://mediateca.inah.gob.mx/repositorio/islandora/object/disco:28/datastream/PDF/view>; Anita González. *Afro-Mexico: Dancing Between Myth and Reality* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010).

<sup>99</sup> Israel Reyes Larrea, interview by author, 7 May 2024; Lopéz Chávez, “La movilización etnopolítica afromexicana,” 10. Translation: National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples (CDI).

Mexican “stories, legends and histories.” According to Reyes Larrea, the program had four objectives: to make visible the cultural work of Black communities of Oaxaca’s Costa Chica; raise awareness of the region’s African roots; establish the active participation of Afrodescendants in bringing dignity to the Afromestizo culture; and promote and disseminate the cultural diversity of Black communities through “dance, music, *versos*, and oral histories.”<sup>100</sup> *Radio Cimarron* operated on and off between 1996 and 2012, with its longest off-air gap between 2000 and 2006.

Meanwhile, in Cuajinicuilapa, Guerrero, a group of young professionals established the Asociación de Profesionistas de Cuajinicuilapa (APC). The organization's main objective was to work with the municipality to stimulate its cultural, economic, and social development. The APC then created the Comité Pro-Museo Cuaji, (CPMC) to oversee the founding of a local museum that celebrated the municipality’s archeological past and cultures.<sup>101</sup> The museum project later evolved into the Museo de las Culturas Afromestizas Vicente Guerrero Saldaña, established on 17 March 1997 with support from the Nuestra Tercera Raíz program.<sup>102</sup> One of the APC and

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<sup>100</sup> Israel Reyes Larrea, "La presencia africana en México: esfuerzos por el reconocimiento constitucional de los derechos del pueblo negro en México," *Oaxaca Población Siglo XXI* (Oaxaca: Dirección General de Población del Estado de Oaxaca, n.d.), 15-17,

<https://www.nacionmulticultural.unam.mx/reconocimientopueblosnegros/docs/150.pdf> (last accessed 7 September 2023). Translation: Association of Professionals of Cuajinicuilapa (APC); Cuaji Museum Committee (CPMC).

<sup>101</sup> Sergio Peñaloza Pérez, interview by author, 31 Oct 2020. Also, according to Vásquez Bracamontes, the ACP was founded in 1996. Vásquez Bracamontes, “El proceso organizativo afromexicano,” 46.

<sup>102</sup> See Sistema de Información Cultural, Museo de las Culturas Afromestizas Vicente Guerrero Saldaña, Comité Pro-Museo Cuaji,

CPMC members was Sergio Peñaloza Pérez, who later served as president of the organization México Negro. It was in those circles that he met Donají Méndez Tello, who also would take a leadership role in México Negro.<sup>103</sup>

The efforts of the Casa del Pueblo and the APC/CPMC were centered on celebrating local cultures without much regard for the external world or the systemic discrimination and inequality that local Black communities had been experiencing. Sergio Peñaloza Pérez recalls that social or political issues around Blackness were not on his or the APC's radar. He admitted that while he and other locals were aware of their Blackness, they lacked knowledge of their African heritage and were unaware that they formed part of an African diaspora within and outside Mexico.<sup>104</sup>

The shift to include racism and inequality in the individual and collective efforts of Peñaloza Pérez and Reyes Larrea resulted from their interaction with people outside their communities. For Reyes Larrea, the transition to infuse the social with culture in the organization's events occurred after he and a group of young dancers began leaving their villages to perform in other parts of the country. In those travels, Reyes Larrea witnessed discrimination against members of the Casa del Pueblo because of their phenotype and regional accent. As a

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[https://sic.cultura.gob.mx/ficha.php?table=museo&table\\_id=835](https://sic.cultura.gob.mx/ficha.php?table=museo&table_id=835). Araceli Reynoso Medina, "Museo de las culturas afroestizas Vicente Guerrero y Saldaña," *REDE-A* 1, 2 (2011): 142-146,

[http://www.revista.universo.edu.br/index.php?journal=4revistaafroamericanas4&page=article&op=view&path%5B%5D=823&path%5B%5D=pdf\\_12](http://www.revista.universo.edu.br/index.php?journal=4revistaafroamericanas4&page=article&op=view&path%5B%5D=823&path%5B%5D=pdf_12) (last accessed 8 September 2023); Velázquez and Iturralde, "Afromexicanos," 235; Bobby Vaughn, "Race and Nation: A Study of Blackness in Mexico" (PhD diss., Stanford University, 2001), 152-155. Translation: Museum of Afromestizo Cultures Vicente Guerrero Saldaña.

<sup>103</sup> Donají Méndez Tello, interview by author, 06 January 2022.

<sup>104</sup> Peñaloza Pérez, interview; Reyes Larrea, interview.

result, he and the Casa del Pueblo went from a “festive to a reflective” agenda in their community-building activities.<sup>105</sup> Meanwhile, Peñaloza Pérez became interested in the discrimination affecting Afro-Mexicans after meeting Jemmott. According to Peñaloza Pérez, when Jemmott became aware of the CPMC’s work, Jemmott requested a meeting with the committee. Jemmott briefed the CPMC about an event he was organizing and invited them to participate. While the CPMC declined the invitation to join the organizing committee, Peñaloza Pérez accepted. For Peñaloza Pérez, it was through his collaborative work with Jemmott that he acquired a deeper understanding of racism and discrimination that existed in Mexico against Afro-Mexicans.<sup>106</sup> In addition to Peñaloza Pérez, Donají Méndez Tello, who was not officially part of the CPMC but often participated in their meetings, also joined the organizing committee for the first Encuentro de Pueblos Negros.<sup>107</sup>

Through the Encuentro de Pueblos Negros, Jemmott played a central role in connecting the various community-building efforts in the Costa Chica’s Black villages. In addition to approaching the CPMC to recruit its members, Jemmott employed a similar strategy with other locals, primarily men. Manuel Avila, who, as noted previously, had been involved in the CONASUPO local councils and Etnia Negra, met Jemmott through the church.<sup>108</sup> Jemmott

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<sup>105</sup> See Vásquez Bracamontes, “El proceso organizativo afromexicano,” 45.

<sup>106</sup> Peñaloza Pérez, interview.

<sup>107</sup> Méndez Tello, interview.

<sup>108</sup> For the role of the Catholic Church in Black mobilizing efforts in Latin America see, Tianna S. Paschel, *Becoming Black Political Subjects: Movements and Ethno-Racial Rights in Colombia and Brazil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 68-71; George Reid Andrews, “Black Movements in Latin America, 1970-2000,” in *Black Power in Hemispheric Perspective: Movements and Cultures of Resistance in the Black Americas*, ed. Wilfried Raussert and Matti Steinitz (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2022), 164-65; and Kiran

traveled from El Ciruelo to Avila's village to give mass. Jemmott convened a meeting with locals of La Estancia to announce his intention to organize an event. Avila arrived at that meeting as a representative of Etnia Negra and left as a member of the organizing committee of the Encuentro de Pueblos Negros.

In addition to Avila, Juan Serrano Mariche worked closely with Jemmott to deliver social services to Black communities. Years before the Encuentro de Pueblos Negros, Serrano Mariche met Jemmott at a CONASUPO warehouse, where Serrano Mariche worked. Jemmott went to the CONASUPO to purchase goods for an event he was organizing. Serrano Mariche and Jemmott developed a friendship after that initial meeting. Through their conversations, Jemmott introduced Serrano to the topic of Black identity, and Serrano Mariche started to assist Jemmott in different community-based projects. At that time, Jemmott was organizing art workshops for local youth and horticulture workshops for the general public. He also formed community savings cooperatives for women and distributed resources to poverty-stricken families. Jemmott and Serrano Mariche then began incorporating conversations about Blackness in those community spaces. Serrano Mariche recalls that he and Jemmott would ask community members if they “felt Black, half Black, or not Black.” They introduced that question to stimulate pride in being Black and thus combat internalized anti-Blackness that seemed to have plagued the region.<sup>109</sup>

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Asher, *Black and Green : Afro-Colombians, Development, and Nature in the Pacific Lowlands* (Durham N.C: Duke University Press, 2009), 37.

<sup>109</sup> Juan Ángel Serrano Mariche, interview by Lucila Cristal Laredo Domínguez, 18 March 2023. Author provided interview questions to Lucila Laredo, who conducted, recorded, and transcribed the interview. Author has the recorded and transcribed versions of the interview.



The presence of Jemmott and Serrano Mariche in different Black communities and their work in those villages helped establish their names in the region, especially Jemmott's name. As a Catholic priest, Jemmott had greater social capital than Serrano Mariche, who barely had a primary-school education and lacked the social networks that Jemmott had access to through the church. In fact, it was through that reputation that Jemmott was building that Israel Reyes Larrea first heard about him. Reyes Larrea's introduction to Jemmott came through Santiago Lin, an anthropology graduate student conducting fieldwork in the region. The two men eventually visited Jemmott, who suggested they collaborate to hold an event for the local communities.<sup>110</sup>

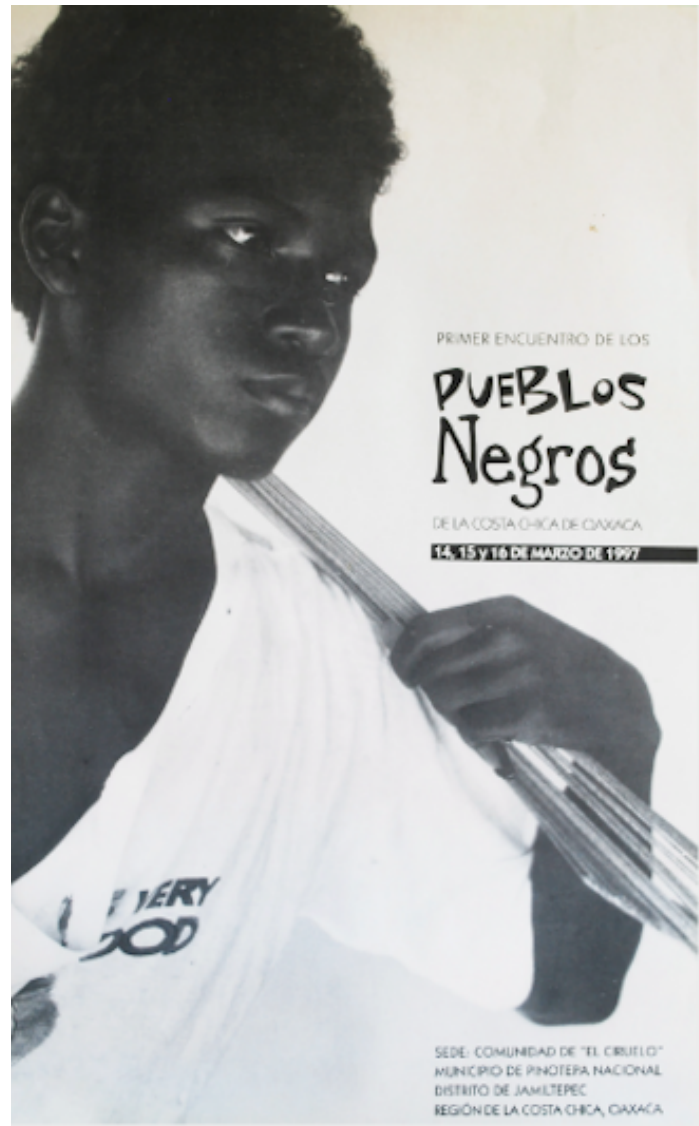
In 1997, after Jemmott had gained a solid standing in the Costa Chica and secured the participation of young locals and activists, he held the first Encuentro de Pueblos Negros in El Ciruelo, Oaxaca. Those involved in organizing the event were: Juan Serrano Mariche, Manuel Avila, Sergio Peñaloza Pérez, Donají Méndez Tello, and Israel Reyes Larrea, among others.<sup>111</sup> To promote and advertise the event, Jemmott appealed to his parishioners to attend the Encuentro. Also, organizers distributed and plastered posters with the image of a young Black man with a dark complexion and densely packed curls. The image showed a young man wearing a white t-shirt and standing in front of a white backdrop, accentuating his dark skin tone.

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<sup>110</sup> Reyes Larrea, interview; Vásquez Bracamontes, "El proceso organizativo afromexicano," 46.

<sup>111</sup> Donají Méndez Tello also credits the following as forming part of the first planning committee for the first Encuentro de Pueblos Negros: Cristina Diaz (an academic), Mabel Arango, and Pedro Baños. See Méndez Tello, interview.

Viewers saw him holding what appears to be a rod over his shoulder, resembling a fisherman or fieldworker of the coast.<sup>112</sup>



**Figure 1. Poster of the first Encuentro de Pueblos Negros.**

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<sup>112</sup> México Negro, “Primer Encuentro de Pueblos Negros de la Costa Chica de Oaxaca,” 1997, photograph, Memoria: México, haz memoria, <https://memoricamexico.gob.mx/swb/memorica/Cedula?oId=c6d-7XoBIIHHOaFdc5s1>.

The three-day event drew over 350 people and has been held annually ever since.<sup>113</sup> Jemmott's mission with the event was to affirm the human dignity and cultural value of Black people and raise awareness in local Black communities of their ancestral African heritage, believing that Afro-Mexicans would engage in social action through a collective cultural identity. Thus, from the outset, EPN events became a cultural affair that was both festive and didactic. The event was replete with presentations on traditional foods, music, dances, and *versos* (oral tradition). EPN organizers also included educational workshops to complement cultural performances and present African links to Afro-Mexican histories, foods, and traditions. In so doing, EPN organizers were also positioning Afro-Mexican culture as an integral part of Mexico's multicultural heritage. The event set the tone for the Afro-Mexican movement: social and cultural visibility.<sup>114</sup>

The 1997 EPN event was organized three years after the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) uprising in the neighboring state of Chiapas.<sup>115</sup> The EZLN uprising, comprised of Indigenous peoples, shed light on the inequality Indigenous populations experienced in Mexico. Since Oaxaca, like Chiapas, had a majority Indigenous population, large gatherings of

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<sup>113</sup> Vaughn, "Race and Nation," 156; According to Juan Serrano Mariche, the event drew over 700 people, see Serrano Mariche interview. To this author's knowledge, there is no written record saved by México Negro.

Participants of this project have stated that documents of the Encuentros and the organization's early years were held by Jemmott, who likely took those documents with him when he returned to Trinidad and Tobago.

<sup>114</sup> Heladio Reyes Cruz, interview by author, 03 Nov 2021. Also see López Chávez, "La movilización etnopolítica afromexicana," 10; "Radio Cimarron," *AFRICA* (blog), June 30, 2010.

[http://colectivoafrica.blogspot.com/2010\\_06\\_01\\_archive.html](http://colectivoafrica.blogspot.com/2010_06_01_archive.html) (last accessed 7 September 2023).

<sup>115</sup> Translation: Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN).

working-poor racialized peoples likely generated anxieties among Oaxaca's state and local authorities. They feared that similar actions could unfold in their home state. In addition to fears of an Afro-Mexican uprising, PRI officials confronted the possibility of losing its monopoly on electoral politics. In fact, during the 1990s, Mexico, like other Latin American countries, was undergoing a shift toward democracy. Though the PRI was successful in the 1994 elections, the 1994-1995 financial crisis deepened the cracks in PRI's legitimacy. Thus, the 1997 mid-term elections were critical for local PRI officials to keep their congressional seats at the state and federal levels. Though government officials had previously ignored Afro-Mexicans, they presumably saw a gathering of racialized Mexicans as a potential threat to their monopoly on local offices.

Despite the EPN's celebratory tone, the event raised the concerns of state and local-level government officials. In 1997, armed forces appeared at the first EPN event to monitor its activities and the people in attendance. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that law enforcement continued to monitor Glyn Jemmott's activities in the years following the first EPN event. Some activists have linked the regional government to the Archdiocese of Antequera's decision to reassign Jemmott from El Ciruelo to other municipalities in the Costa Chica until he retired and returned to Trinidad and Tobago.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Vaughn, "Race and Nation," 159; Serrano Mariche, interview. Note: Serrano Mariche suspects that the Oaxacan government colluded with the bishop in Oaxaca City to transfer Jemmott to other municipalities in the Costa Chica because the state and local government feared Jemmott would help produce political opposition to the PRI.

However, it needs to be clarified when the transfers actually occurred. I visited Jemmott at his parish in El Ciruelo in July 2009, leading me to suspect that his transfer from El Ciruelo to the other communities (de Soto and Huaxpaltepec) likely happened in the early 2010s. In addition to Serrano Mariche, other activists like Néstor Ruiz Hernández have expressed similar suspicions, even claiming that the Mexican government had Jemmott expelled

Despite the presence of armed forces at the first EPN, activists saw the event as a success in bringing together locals from multiple villages in the Costa Chica. It was in the first EPN event, in fact, that Jemmott and the planning committee founded México Negro, the first Black organization created by Afro-Mexicans for Afro-Mexicans. Jemmott's consolidating efforts proved to be a significant achievement. He created an opportunity for local activists to discuss anti-Black racism in Mexico and organize an event for and about Afro-Mexicans. Donají Méndez Tello recalls that committee members already had individual concerns about racism in Mexico. However, it was Jemmott who introduced them to a language that helped them articulate and express those anxieties.<sup>117</sup> This was the moment that initiated Mexico's first known Afro-Mexican collective organizing efforts for social and cultural visibility in Mexico, and the Costa Chica specifically.

After the success of the first EPN event, México Negro became the default organizer of subsequent EPN events. The committee elected Sergio Peñaloza Pérez as the organization's first president. However, due to Peñaloza Pérez's professional demands, Juan Serrano Mariche took up the presidency, and Manuel Avila became treasurer.<sup>118</sup> México Negro's first test as the leading Black organization occurred when a hurricane struck the region. Hurricane Pauline made landfall on the coast of Oaxaca on 08 October 1997 and then traveled northwestward along the coastline

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from the country. Others, like UNAM professor Nemesio Rodríguez, have discussed Jemmott's transfers but claimed that El Ciruelo locals pressured the bishop to relocate Jemmott. However, Rodríguez's claims contradict most activists' claims about Jemmott and his time in El Ciruelo.

<sup>117</sup> Méndez Tello, interview.

<sup>118</sup> Sergio Peñaloza Pérez would later retake his role as president of the organization and would remain in this post until 2020, at which point he was elected as national deputy for the state of Guerrero. Donají Méndez Tello would then be named president of México Negro.

of Oaxaca and Guerrero, affecting the entire Costa Chica region. Through his extensive networks, Jemmott received contributions to support the recovery of the battered region.<sup>119</sup> As a result, México Negro began locating and distributing resources to villages and communities affected by the hurricane.

Following the first EPN event, the attendance of the local population began to decline while the presence of academics and foreigners (especially from the United States) steadily increased. Lucila Mariche, an activist from Charco Redondo, Oaxaca, recalled attending her first EPN event in Juchitán, Guerrero, during the mid-2000s and expected to see “a multitude” of other Afro-Mexicans. However, she was disappointed that most people in attendance were white and not from the region. She also remembered experiencing a confrontation with a white man from the United States whom she felt was attempting to impose a leadership role during one of the event’s workshops.<sup>120</sup>

## **2.4 Forging Connections**

Since the first EPN event and the establishment of México Negro, activists began creating links with academics in Mexico. The connections forged between scholars and Black activists would increase in the decade of the 2000s and help shape the tone of the Afro-Mexican movement. Academics were a critical reference point for historical expertise on Mexico’s

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<sup>119</sup> Serrano Mariche, interview.

<sup>120</sup> Lucila Mariche, interview by author, 27 October 2021. Academic Gloria Lara also noted the lack of attendance of local Afro-Mexicans at EPN and other similar cultural events during her fieldwork. See Gloria Lara, interview by author, 7 July 2023.

Afrodescendant population, and their social capital procured connections for Afro-Mexicans to Mexico's academic and public state institutions. As a result, Black activists were gaining symbolic and material support from academic institutions.<sup>121</sup> Thus, academics became influential intermediaries for Black activists in building relationships outside their communities. However, as will be shown later in the dissertation, the participation of multiple academics with varying ideologies would intensify differences and divisions among Black activists in the Afro-Mexican movement.

One of the most prominent scholars to align with the Afro-Mexico movement has been María Elisa Velázquez Gutiérrez. Her research trips in the 1990s to the Costa Chica helped her build connections with locals and stay current on information about local happenings. Through those links Velázquez Gutiérrez learned about the first Encuentro de Pueblos Negros scheduled for March 1997. At the time she was organizing an Afro-Mexican studies seminar at INAH, which took place on the same dates as the EPN event. The overlapping dates precluded her from attending the EPN event and also prevented Glyn Jemmott and Sergio Peñaloza Pérez from attending Velázquez's seminar. However, after the first EPN event, Velázquez became a regular attendee at the EPN and other Black events in the Costa Chica.<sup>122</sup>

During the 2000s, Odile Hoffman and Gloria Lara from CIESAS began traveling to the Costa Chica to attend events organized by Black activists.<sup>123</sup> Sagrario Cruz Carretero, at the Universidad Veracruzana, began her relationship with Black activists somewhat later than

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<sup>121</sup> Lara, interview. Also see, Gloria Lara, "Las organizaciones afromexicanas, 17; Hoffman and Lara Millán, "Revinidicacion afromexicana," 42.

<sup>122</sup> María Elisa Velázquez Gutiérrez, interview by author, 17 March 2022.

<sup>123</sup> Odile Hoffman, interview by author, 29 June 2023; Lara, interview.

Velázquez Gutiérrez, Hoffman, and Lara. During the 1990s, her work was primarily academic and with a regional focus in Veracruz. However, in the 2000s, Cruz Carretero joined Cesáreo Moreno, museum curator for Chicago's National Museum of Mexican Art, to develop *The African Presence in Mexico: From Yanga to the Present* exhibit, which traveled to multiple cities in the United States and Mexico between 2006 and 2011. It was not until the 2010s that Cruz Carretero began establishing relationships with Afro-Mexican activists from the Costa Chica, especially women.<sup>124</sup>

While most academics working with and alongside Afro-Mexican activists were Afro-Mexicanists, a minority of them researched and published on topics concerning Indigenous populations. Such was the case for anthropologist Nemesio J. Rodríguez. Originally from Chile, Rodríguez had a professorial position at UNAM. While there his work focused on Mexico's Indigenous peoples and he offered workshops in their communities in the Costa Chica region. During one of those workshops, Rodríguez met and befriended Israel Reyes Larrea (AFRICA) and Francisco Ziga Gabriel (Purpura). In 2007, the two men invited Rodríguez to participate in the Foro Afromexicanos in the village of José María Morelos, Oaxaca.<sup>125</sup> Following the 2007 Foro Afromexicanos, Rodríguez brought on a fellow UNAM academic and lawyer, Elia Avendaño, to assist in developing a legal framework to make demands for constitutional

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<sup>124</sup> On Afro-Mexican regional differences between the Costa Chica and Veracruz see Odile Hoffmann & Christian Rinaudo, "The Issue of Blackness and Mestizaje in Two Distinct Mexican Contexts: Veracruz and Costa Chica," *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies* 9:2, (2014): 138-155. On the exhibit see Claudia Herrera, *The African Presence in México: From Yanga to the Present* (Chicago: Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum, 2006), Exhibition catalog.

<sup>125</sup> Nemesio J. Rodríguez, interview by author, 7 June 2021.



recognition at the federal and state level. Like Rodríguez, Avendaño's previous work and legal experience was with the Indigenous population.

In addition to forging connections with academics, Afro-Mexican activists began building international networks with Afro-Latin American and African American activists. In 2000, Glyn Jemmott secured funding for Juan Serrano Mariche and Manuel Avila to attend the 2000 Regional Conference of the Americas in Santiago, Chile (Santiago Conference hereafter).<sup>126</sup> The regional gathering, in which government officials and activists from Latin America were present, was held to prepare the region for the 2001 Third World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in Durban, South Africa (Durban Conference hereafter). Though Avila and Mariche attended as the only representatives on behalf of Mexico's Black population, their participation was limited to a spectator role. According to Serrano Mariche, he and Avila felt no need to speak at the conference. They reasoned that there were more qualified orators at the conference articulating the needs of Afrodescendants for the region as a whole.<sup>127</sup>

Scholars have argued that the 2000 Santiago Conference was a watershed moment for Afro-Latin American activism. Afro-Uruguayan activist Romero Rodríguez has been widely quoted as saying that he and other activists "entered the conference as Black but left as Afrodescendants." According to Tianna Paschel, "Because the Santiago conference was specific to the Latin American experience, and because of the actual language in the document, many Afro-Latin American activists saw, and continue to see, the Santiago Declaration as even more important than the Durban Action Plan." Alejandro de la Fuente declared the event to be

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<sup>126</sup> Manuel Avila, interview by author, 30 Oct 2021; Serrano Mariche, interview.

<sup>127</sup> Avila, interview.

foundational. “Never before had so many activists concerned with issues of race and justice in Latin America come together to discuss their experiences and to chart new agendas for the future. Never before had racism and racial inequality been so visible, so central in Latin America.”<sup>128</sup> However, the 2000 Santiago Conference failed to have any apparent impact on Black activists in Mexico.

According to some activists, the next year Jemmott attended the 2001 Durban Conference. However, like the Santiago Conference, Durban had minimal impact on local organizing in the Costa Chica.<sup>129</sup> Unlike other Latin American countries with larger Afrodescendant populations, Black mobilization in Mexico was just finding its footing at the time of the conferences. Only three years had passed since the first Encuentro de Pueblos Negros when the Santiago Conference was held in Chile. Up to that point, the EPN events were the only Black gatherings organized by Black activists in the Costa Chica and Mexico more broadly.

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<sup>128</sup> Romero Jorge Rodríguez, “Entramos Negros; salimos afrodescendientes. Breve evaluación de los resultados de la III CMCR-en América del Sur,” Archivo Sociedades en Movimiento, <https://asm.udelar.edu.uy/files/original/868b5dd0ef9014bd22c1dff02aa8b678.jpg> (last accessed 7 September 2023); Roberto Rojas Dávila, “Palabras de Apertura para el Lanzamiento del Decenio de Afrodescendientes en las Américas,” The Organization of American States, [http://www.oas.org/es/sla/ddi/docs/Decenio\\_Afrodescendientes\\_Americas\\_Desafios\\_Oportunidades\\_palabras\\_apertura\\_Roberto\\_Rojas.pdf](http://www.oas.org/es/sla/ddi/docs/Decenio_Afrodescendientes_Americas_Desafios_Oportunidades_palabras_apertura_Roberto_Rojas.pdf) (last accessed 7 September 2023); Alejandro de la Fuente, “The Rise of Afro-Latin America,” *ReVista: Harvard Review of Latin America* 18 (January 2017), <https://revista.drclas.harvard.edu/the-rise-of-afro-latin-america/> (last accessed 7 September 2023); Paschel, *Becoming Black Political Subjects*, 128.

<sup>129</sup> Avila, interview; Peñaloza Pérez, interview.

Also, Afro-Mexicans were just beginning to come to terms with and developing a language to articulate their own experiences with racism in Mexico.<sup>130</sup>

However, during those early years, a limited number of Black activists began traveling internationally to events organized for Afrodescendants. Glyn Jemmott was encouraging Afro-Mexican activists to attend conferences in Latin America, and Sergio Peñaloza Pérez and Elena Ruiz Salinas were among those activists who attended conferences in Brazil, Ecuador, and Venezuela.<sup>131</sup> Israel Reyes Larrea attended an event in Nicaragua in support of the titling and protection of the lands of the Garifuna and Miskito communities of Honduras.<sup>132</sup> On that trip, Reyes Larrea met Afro-Colombian activist Carlos Rúa Angulo, a former advisor and team member driving Colombia's Law 70 of 1993. Reyes Larrea would later invite Rúa Angulo to an event in Mexico to share the Afro-Colombian experience with Afro-Mexicans. Jemmott also traveled internationally in representation of Mexico's Black population.

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<sup>130</sup> Méndez Tello, interview; Peñaloza Pérez, interview.

<sup>131</sup> Ruiz Salinas, interview; Peñaloza Pérez, interview.

<sup>132</sup> Reyes Larrea, interview; Carlos Rúa, "La experiencia del Pueblo Afrocolombiano en torno del reconocimiento de los derechos embarcados en la Ley 70," in *De Afromexicanos a Pueblo Negro* eds. Israel Reyes Larrea, Nemesio J. Mitchell Rodríguez y José Francisco Ziga Gabriel (México DF: UNAM, 2014), 2, [https://www.nacionmulticultural.unam.mx/afromexicanos/cap\\_3.html](https://www.nacionmulticultural.unam.mx/afromexicanos/cap_3.html) (last accessed 7 September 2023). Though Rúa does not specify the name of the event, it is likely he referred to the 2005 Cumbre Garifuna. For more details on the event see "Finaliza en Corn Island, Nicaragua, la Cumbre Garífuna," Secretaría General del Sistema de la Integración Centroamericana, 12 November 2005, <https://www.sica.int/consulta/Noticia.aspx?Idn=4407&idm=1> (last accessed 7 September 2023); Doriam Díaz, "Centroamérica y el Caribe se preparan para Cumbre Garífuna," *La Nación*, 9 November 2005, <https://www.nacion.com/archivo/centroamerica-y-el-caribe-se-preparan-para-cumbre-garifuna/32YFMHWCSEFG6TJO2KXNU34QKFY/story/> (last accessed 7 September 2023).

Costa Chica activists also began forging connections with activists and academics in the United States. According to Manuel Avila, Jemmott was at the forefront of establishing transnational networks to help raise awareness of Mexico's Black population to the outside world. In 1997, Jemmott invited U.S. academics and activists to the first Encuentro de Pueblos Negros.<sup>133</sup> It is unclear how many foreigners attended that event. However, a small group of people from the United States consistently attended subsequent EPN events. Since Jemmott was bilingual in English and Spanish, a skill that most Afro-Mexican activists lacked, he became an intermediary between English-speaking foreigners and Afro-Mexicans.

In 1998, Felix Valbuena of Detroit, Michigan, attended the second Encuentro de Pueblos Negros. Originally from Colombia, Valbuena began traveling to the United States in the early 1960s. During those visits, Valbuena began working with African American civil rights activists like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Reverend Jesse Jackson. By the early 1970s, Valbuena settled in Michigan and became Director of Bilingual Education at Detroit Public Schools.<sup>134</sup> After traveling to Mexico in 1998 to attend an EPN event, Valbuena invited Jemmott and two dance groups from the Costa Chica to Detroit. There, the dance groups performed traditional Afro-Mexican dances and Jemmott spoke at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History and several of Detroit's public schools.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Avila, interview.

<sup>134</sup> Obituary, Félix Mario Valbuena Báez, *The Detroit News*, 27 May 2022, <https://www.detroitnews.com/obituaries/det114113> (last accessed 7 September 2023); Also see Obituary, Félix Mario Valbuena Báez, Casterline Funeral Home, <https://www.casterlinefuneralhome.com/obituary/felix-valbuena-baez> (last accessed 7 September 2023).

<sup>135</sup> Aneb Kgositsile, "Africa in Mexico," *Michigan Citizen*, 10 April 1999. Aneb Kgositsile is the pen name of Gloria House, poet and professor emerita of Wayne State University.

Following Valbuena's trip to the second Encuentro de Pueblos Negros, he formed a small group from Michigan to travel to the third Encuentro in 1999. Aneb Kgositsile, who was part of that group, wrote for the *Michigan Citizen* newspaper about her visit to Cuajinicuilapa, Guerrero. In her article, titled "Africa in Mexico," Kgositsile highlighted the cultural aspect of the event by noting traditional Afro-Mexican dances and music. She also wrote, "We Detroiters are convinced that the movement of African Mexicans is definitely underway. As it thrives, more people will become aware, and hopefully lend their support." According to Kgositsile, African Americans from other parts of the United States were present at that same event. They came from San Francisco, Boston, Chicago, and Washington D.C. Those who attended the 1999 Encuentro discussed establishing a transnational support network with Afro-Mexicans. It appears that only the folks from Detroit brought those plans to fruition. With the network in place, Detroiters aimed to offer Afro-Mexicans "periodic support activities" and establish cultural exchanges.<sup>136</sup>

The connections forged at the EPN events between Detroiters and the Costa Chica's Afro-Mexicans continued well into the 2010s. In 2011, México Negro's Donají Méndez Tello joined Patricia Ann Tally and the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Task Force, Inc. to create the *Pathways to Freedom in the Americas: Shared Experiences Between Michigan, USA, and Guerrero, Mexico* exhibit. The project was a collaborative effort between museums, academic institutions, and civic organizations in Michigan and Guerrero. The *Pathways* exhibit showcased Afro-Mexican history and culture, its ties to African Americans, and the African diaspora more broadly. The exhibit emphasized three historical processes that linked Afrodescendants from Guerrero and Michigan: the Middle Passage, enslavement and emancipation, and modern

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<sup>136</sup> Vaughn, "Race and Nation," 179; Kgositsile, "Africa in Mexico."

struggles for social justice. The exhibit opened in 2012 at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History and then in Zihuatanejo, Guerrero.<sup>137</sup>

In addition to collaborations with Detroiters, Afro-Mexican activists took part in an earlier transnational collaboration, which created another opportunity for them to raise awareness about Afro-Mexicans in the United States. In 2006, the National Museum of Mexican Art in Chicago opened *The African Presence in Mexico: From Yanga to the Present* exhibit, which showcased Afro-Mexican history, culture, and art. After spending most of 2006 in Chicago, *The African Presence in Mexico* exhibit traveled to Mexican and U.S. cities for another four years. This was a collaborative project between the museum's curator, Cesáreo Moreno, and the Universidad de Veracruz's Sagrario Cruz Carretero. In addition to Moreno and Cruz Carretero, a steering committee comprised of Mexican-Americans and African Americans contributed to the execution of the project.<sup>138</sup> However, it is unclear whether Afro-Mexicans in Mexico participated in developing the exhibit and if so to what degree they contributed to the organizing process. What is certain is that their art was showcased at the exhibition and many were invited speakers to academic and public gatherings held for the traveling exhibit. Glyn Jemmott and other

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<sup>137</sup> *Pathways to Freedom*, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Task Force, Inc., 2016, <https://www.mlktaskforcemi.org/about-us> (last accessed 7 September 2023); "Poca gente conoce la importancia de la raza negra en México," *Noticias ABC*, <https://abcdezihuatanejo.com/poca-gente-conoce-la-importancia-de-la-raza-negra-en-mexico/> (last accessed 7 September 2023); Juan Francisco Barrios Valverde, "Buscan hacer intercambio cultural y turístico entre Michigan y Guerrero," *El Diario de Zihuatanejo* (Blog), 18 September 2012, <http://www.diariodezihuatanejo.mx/2012/09/buscan-hacer-intercambio-cultural-y.html> (last accessed 7 September 2023).

<sup>138</sup> Carlos Tortolero, "Acknowledgements," in *The African Presence in Mexico*, coord. Claudia Herrera (Hammond, IN: Sheffield Press, 2006), 10.

activists like Sergio Peñaloza Pérez and Israel Reyes Larrea were often invited to those gatherings as speakers.<sup>139</sup> Moreover, in 2007 Jemmott traveled to the University of Wisconsin, Madison's history department, where he held a Tinker visiting professorship, which helped increase his efforts to raise awareness of Mexico's contemporary Black population.<sup>140</sup>

## 2.5 Conclusion

By the 1990s, Mexico, like the rest of Latin America, had adopted an official multicultural rhetoric that led the state to reframe the nation as multicultural and multiethnic. International conventions and campaigns based on protecting and promoting Indigenous peoples' human rights largely drove that transformation. The International Labor Organization's 1989 adoption of the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (ILO 169) specifically, helped steer the "multicultural turn" in Mexico and Latin America more broadly. During this period, which promoted and celebrated cultural difference, scholars and Afro-Mexican activists found an opening to raise awareness of the nation's African heritage and the cultures of contemporary Afro-Mexicans, especially in the Costa Chica region.

For most of the twentieth century, Afro-Mexicans in the Costa Chica organized around a class identity rather than an ethno-racial one. However, that began to change by the 1990s during

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<sup>139</sup> Laurence E. Prescott, "Revisiting the Third Root: Linking Afro-Latin America's Past and Future in the 21st Century," *Connections*, 14 July 2006, <https://www.connections.clio-online.net/event/id/event-56283> (last accessed 7 September 2023); Reyes Larrea, interview.

<sup>140</sup> See "Tinker Visiting Professors," Tinker Foundation, <https://tinker.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Past-Tinker-Visiting-Professors.pdf>.

Mexico's multicultural turn. The ethno-racial term "Black" began to appear in organizations of the Costa Chica. The Guerrero Council of 500 Years of Indigenous, Black, and Popular Resistance emerged from an international campaign that protested against state-sponsored celebrations of the fifth centennial of the European encounter of the Americas. In Oaxaca, the Encuentros de Pueblos Negros activated a regional movement for Afro-Mexican inclusion and recognition. Stemming from that event was México Negro, which has been at the forefront of the Afro-Mexican movement.

During this period, Afro-Mexican activists established networks with non-Black academics, who also had a significant role in raising awareness of Mexico's African heritage and Black population. Academics acted as advisors and intermediaries between Afro-Mexican activists and academic and state institutions. International activists and allies were also part of the network that helped raise Afro-Mexican visibility.

As Tianna Paschel has argued, during the 1980s and 1990s, largely driven by the ILO 169, global trends for ethno-racial justice identified Indigenous populations as the primary subjects. By the 2000s, as part of the 2001 Durban Plan of Action, global efforts for social justice shifted from a multicultural approach to a racial equality one. In so doing, Afrodescendants became the principal subjects of international campaigns that sought to combat racial discrimination and social exclusion.<sup>141</sup> Thus, the early years of the twenty-first century became a critical period in which Afro-Latin Americans received support from multilateral institutions to make demands on their governments for recognition and inclusion. However, the 2001 Durban Plan of Action had minimal impact on Afro-Mexican organizing. It did, however, lead the Mexican government to enact anti-discrimination legislation and establish an institution to

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<sup>141</sup> Paschel, *Becoming Black Subjects*, 20-21.



implement it. The next chapter examines the process of how that law and institution were created and how they addressed anti-Black racism in Mexico.

### **3.0 Mexico's Evolving Anti-Discrimination Policy and Acknowledgement of Its Black Population, 1994-2010**

In 1994, Mexico told the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) that the nation was a non-racist society and therefore anti-racist legislation was unnecessary. In its periodic report submitted to CERD, Mexico claimed that since the nation was comprised of 90 percent mestizos, “a result of the mixing of Spaniards and indigenous inhabitants,” the ideology of racial supremacy never entered the national consciousness, “unlike other countries where miscegenation did not take place.” The state claimed that mestizaje precluded the promotion of racial hatred to support claims of racial superiority of one race. As a result, Mexico did not have national or international complaints of racism or racial discrimination. "The phenomenon does not arise in our country, nor is it even a subject of national debate.”<sup>142</sup>

By 2004, Mexico reversed its stance on racism, acknowledging the presence of racism and racial discrimination within the nation. It also recognized that discrimination had a longstanding history of permeating all aspects of Mexican society. In the country's report submitted to CERD in December 2004, Mexico asserted its commitment to preventing and eliminating all forms of discrimination in the country. It presented the enactment of the 2003 Ley Federal para Prevenir y Eliminar la Discriminación (LFPED) and the founding of the Consejo Nacional Para Prevenir la Discriminación (CONAPRED) as evidence of the nation's

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<sup>142</sup> CERD/C/260/Add.1, March 30, 1995, 36-37.

commitment.<sup>143</sup> Though most of that report addressed discrimination against Indigenous peoples, on 20 February 2006, Mexican delegates to CERD's meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, told the committee that Mexicans of African ancestry too "were socially and economically disadvantaged, and particularly vulnerable to racial discrimination."<sup>144</sup>

What transpired between those reports that compelled Mexico to reverse its stance on racism in Mexican society, and what triggered the state to enact policies designed to prevent and eliminate all forms of discrimination? This chapter examines national and international developments to answer that question. It demonstrates the ways in which those levels converged to press the Mexican government to acknowledge that discrimination and racism were as much a part of the Mexican social fabric as *mestizaje*. This chapter shows that a small group of academics and state actors were largely responsible for developing Mexico's anti-discrimination and anti-racist discourse. Seeing that those conversations were being had at the top echelons of Mexican society, anti-discrimination policies in Mexico tended to be reactive and shaped by similar policies of other nations. The influence of international institutions and Mexico's mission to secure its reputation as a modern nation became the impetus for change in the state's anti-discrimination efforts.

However, even as the Mexican state admitted that racism and other forms of discrimination were serious problems in the country, the experiences of Afro-Mexicans were largely excluded from those early conversations. Mexican policymakers and knowledge producers omitted Afro-Mexicans from the *mestizo* identity and instead reinforced the national

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<sup>143</sup> CERD/C/473/Add.1, May 19, 2005, 6-8. Translation: Federal Act to Prevent and Eliminate Discrimination (LFPED); National Council for the Prevention of Discrimination (CONAPRED).

<sup>144</sup> CERD/C/SR.1731, February 24, 2006, 2.

myth that mestizaje was a result of Spanish and Indigenous miscegenation. In so doing, the nation suggested that, at best, Afro-Mexicans had been culturally and socially absorbed into the mestizo identity. At worst, that erasure implied that being Black or Afrodescendant was incongruent with being Mexican. However, the nation was pressed to reckon with the existence of its Afro-Mexican population and the anti-Black attitudes that permeated Mexican society after international observers accused Mexico of racism following remarks made by President Vicente Fox and the commemoration of a Black character from a children's comic. In the aftermath of those controversies Mexico went from omitting Afro-Mexicans and their experiences from official documents to incorporating their experiences in those documents and addressing their social conditions in international spaces.

### 3.1 Origins of Anti-Racism in Mexico

In 1990, Mexico became the first country to ratify ILO 169, and in 1992 Congress amended Article 4 of the constitution to declare the nation's multicultural composition "originally based on indigenous peoples."<sup>145</sup> In doing so, Mexico positioned itself as a progressive nation insofar as it addressed the promotion and protection of Indigenous peoples' cultural rights. That political move coincided with the government's mission to bolster the country's international image following 1988's tumultuous presidential election. In a period

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<sup>145</sup> "Decreto por el que se reforma el Artículo 4o. de la Constitución Política de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos," *Diario Oficial de la Federación*, 28 January 1992, [https://www.dof.gob.mx/nota\\_detalle.php?codigo=4646755&fecha=28/01/1992#gsc.tab=0](https://www.dof.gob.mx/nota_detalle.php?codigo=4646755&fecha=28/01/1992#gsc.tab=0) (last accessed 08/01/2022).

when authoritarian governments in Latin America were leaving power, the presidential victory of Carlos Salinas de Gortari of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) seemed to send Mexico's national politics down a different path. The election results were largely considered undemocratic. Opponents accused the party of tampering with votes to secure Salinas de Gortari's presidency and maintain the PRI regime in power. Presidential candidate Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas challenged the legitimacy of the election results when he demanded an official investigation to look into voter fraud allegations. As the nation and international community paid close attention to the election, protests against the PRI regime broke out in Congress and the streets. In the aftermath of the election controversy, Mexican leaders set out to legitimize Salinas de Gortari's government at home and abroad and bring the country to "first world" status by entering a free trade agreement with the Canada and United States (NAFTA) and gaining admission to the Organization for Economic-Co-operation and Development (OECD). Ratifying ILO 169 in 1990 and the 1992 constitutional reform became strategies to legitimize Salinas de Gortari's government and quell the grievances of Indigenous peoples.<sup>146</sup>

Mexican efforts to silence the grievances of indigenous groups proved unsuccessful when on 1 January 1994 the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) declared war on the Mexican government. On the day that Mexico's participation in NAFTA came into effect, the EZLN took over multiple municipal offices in the state of Chiapas. The Mexican government

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<sup>146</sup> Hector Ortiz Elizondo and Rosalva Aida Hernández Castillo, "Constitutional Amendments and New Imaginings of the Nation: Legal Anthropological and Gendered Perspectives on 'Multicultural Mexico'," *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropological Review* 19 (1996): 59-62; José Israel Herrera, "The Challenge of the Cultural Diversity in Mexico Through the Official Recognition of Legal Pluralism," *The Age of Human Rights Journal* 4 (June 2015): 69-70.

responded to the EZLN uprising with violence, which drove national and international support for the Zapatistas. The EZLN uprising highlighted Mexico's fragile democracy and challenged the government's constitutional claims of multiculturalism and commitment to protecting Indigenous peoples' rights. Initially a class-based cause, the EZLN soon evolved into an ethno-racial movement that centered Indigenous rights and autonomy. This position gave Zapatistas a platform to accuse the Mexican government of marginalizing and oppressing Indigenous peoples.<sup>147</sup>

In the wake of the Zapatista uprising, academics started to examine the existence of racism in Mexico and how it operated in a nation that for decades denied its presence through a discourse of mestizaje. Owing to Mexico's large Indigenous population and history of Indigenous movements, initial studies on racism focused on that population's experiences and largely omitted Afro-Mexicans from their analysis. Still, those early studies were the first to interrogate mestizaje by situating racism as an existing social problem and analyzing the effects it had on Mexican society. Racism in Mexico as a topic, however, was studied by a small group of academics. Olivia Gall, a political historian, was among those pioneering scholars like Rodolfo Stavenhagen and Alicia Castellanos Guerrero. In 1991, Gall moved from Mexico City to Chiapas. During her time there she observed that interpersonal and structural racism against Indigenous peoples was pervasive. Upon embarking on a study that asked how social inequality

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<sup>147</sup> Todd A. Eisenstadt, *Politics, Identity, and Mexico's Indigenous Rights Movements* (New York: Cambridge University, 2011), 1-27; María Inclán, *The Zapatista Movement and Mexico's Democratic Transition* (New York: Oxford University, 2018), 1-21.

manifested itself in Chiapas, Gall was shocked to find that no one was asking questions about racism in the region or Mexico overall, especially when it was so brazenly present.<sup>148</sup>

According to Gall, the small group of academics who did examine racism in Mexico was largely comprised of immigrants and first-generation Mexicans like Rodolfo Stavenhagen, Tomás Pérez Vejo, Marta Saade, and Daniela Gleizer. Likely influenced by their status, their research evolved from studying xenophobia in the country. Since their work questioned Mexican post-racial ideology, they encountered resistance and pushback from other Mexican intellectuals. Mexico's intellectual elites insisted that there could be no racism in the country because it was a mestizo nation. Mestizaje, they maintained, thwarted racism from establishing itself in Mexico in the same way it had overtaken the United States. These Mexican thinkers argued that the immigrant background of that small cohort limited their understanding of mestizaje. Some even questioned their patriotism and reproached them for being "*mal agradecidos*" (ungrateful). Academic and state institutions denied funding for projects that examined racism in the nation and excluded those researchers from certain scholarly events. The Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) went as far as challenging the academic credentials of one of its researchers and reportedly pushed her out of the institution due to the nature of her work on racism in Mexico.<sup>149</sup>

By the end of the 1990s, however, international efforts to promote and protect indigenous peoples' rights, and the attention garnered by the Zapatista movement, pressured Mexico to seriously engage in conversations about racism and discrimination. In 1997, the government acknowledged that ethnic discrimination did indeed exist in Mexico, especially as it pertained to

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<sup>148</sup> Olivia Gall, interview by author, April 28, 2021.

<sup>149</sup> Gall, interview.

Indigenous peoples.<sup>150</sup> However, the issue of racism in Mexico was still in its embryonic stages at the turn of the twenty-first century. The deeply engrained and persistent mestizaje ideology remained a hindrance for the topic of racism to gain substantial traction in Mexico. By 2000, Mexico began to publicly address different forms of discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, sex, disability, sexual preference, and other types. Yet the nation's post-racial ideology precluded the topic of racial discrimination from entering official and popular discourses on discrimination.

### **3.2 The 2000 Presidential Election**

The 2000 presidential election marked a watershed moment in Mexico's transition to democracy and held significant implications for anti-discrimination policy making. Presidential candidate Gilberto Rincón Gallardo y Meltis, an activist and career politician, was a vocal anti-discrimination proponent.<sup>151</sup> Born in 1939 to a prominent family, Rincón Gallardo lived with Holt-Oram syndrome. The condition affected the development of his arms and hands, which became the impetus for his anti-discrimination activism. In 1958, Rincón Gallardo began his political career campaigning for Luis H. Alvarez's presidential bid, who ran an unsuccessful campaign under the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), a conservative political party. Though having started his political career with the PAN, Rincón Gallardo's political views shifted to the left in the 1960s after working with the railroad workers union. Thereafter he became actively

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<sup>150</sup> CERD/C/SR.1207, May 5, 1997, 2-3.

<sup>151</sup> [CONAPRED, "Décimo Aniversario Luctuoso de Don Gilberto Rincón Gallardo y Meltis," 20 August 2018, https://www.gob.mx/conadis/articulos/decimo-aniversario-luctuoso-de-don-gilberto-rincon-gallardo-y-meltis?idiom=es](https://www.gob.mx/conadis/articulos/decimo-aniversario-luctuoso-de-don-gilberto-rincon-gallardo-y-meltis?idiom=es) (last accessed September 5, 2022). Translation: National Action Party (PAN)



involved in labor and social struggles that were influenced by leftist ideologies. By the late 1960s, Rincón Gallardo's activism got him arrested multiple times and he was imprisoned in 1968 for three years.<sup>152</sup>

In 1972, after his release from prison, Rincón Gallardo entered the Communist Party. By 1977, a legislative political reform to the constitution made it possible for the Communist Party of Mexico (PCM) to secure congressional seats. In 1981, the party evolved into the Unified Socialist Party of Mexico and in 1987 rebranded itself as the Mexican Socialist Party (PMS), with Rincón Gallardo as its general secretary. By 1988, Rincón Gallardo once again found himself part of a presidential campaign, this time for Cuauthémoc Cárdenas as the candidate of the multi-party National Democratic Front (FDN). After being defeated by the PRI's Carlos Salinas de Gortari, Cárdenas went on to establish the Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD).<sup>153</sup>

In 1995 Rincón Gallardo left the PRD and four years later founded the Social Democracy (SD) party. In addition to being the founder of the SD, Rincón Gallardo was the party's presidential candidate for the 2000 elections. During the first presidential debate on 25 April 2000, presidential candidates in opposition to the PRI underscored the need for Mexico's transition to democracy. Rincón Gallardo did too, but while most of the presidential hopefuls hinged their arguments on accusations of the PRI's corruption and authoritarianism, Rincón Gallardo made discrimination central to his presidential campaign. He argued that it was not only the seventy-one years of the PRI's uninterrupted rule that compromised Mexican democracy, but also Mexico's long history of systemic oppression of its population because of their ethnicity,

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<sup>152</sup> Jesús Rodríguez Zepeda, "In Memoriam: Gilberto Rincón Gallardo, The *Decent* Bolshevik," *Voices of Mexico* 83 (2008), 111-112.

<sup>153</sup> Zepeda, "Gilberto Rincón Gallardo," 113.

sex, age, religious affiliations, sexual preferences, and disabilities. In the debate Rincón Gallardo stated:

Since I was a child I had to overcome physical disadvantages. Like millions of Mexicans, I managed to overcome adversity. I had to fight to be treated the same as others. Perhaps for this reason, the calling to confront any type of discrimination soon arose in me. That is why my deep faith in democracy arose, because I know that only under that system can individuals achieve equality and opportunities. I am addressing this message especially to young people, who want to change because their future is being stolen, to the women tired of being marginalized, today as yesterday. I come to speak to those who are discriminated against because of their class origin, their sexual orientation, for religious reasons, for being Indigenous, for being disabled, for suffering from an illness or for simply being considered old. I represent Social Democracy, a party of young people who want to do politics in a different way, which is the result of a fortunate encounter of experience of social fighters, and the critical and renewing capacity of that young generation that today is building the new democratic left. Today the change must be with everyone, with respect for plurality and without caudillismo.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> “Debate presidencial 25 abril 2000,” Comunicación Política y Ciudadanía, video, 1:30:57, 20 November 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9QRHDVrgSw4> (last accessed 30 May 2022).

Prior to the 2000 debate, the topic of discrimination rarely entered the national discourse and was largely overlooked in political debates. The issue was also understudied in Mexico. The few times when Mexican academics studied discrimination as a Mexican issue, they tended to focus on gender. Racism was a topic that a small group of academics were only just beginning to examine within a Mexican context after the Zapatista uprising. However, their research was seen as niche and deemed unpatriotic by other Mexican intellectuals.<sup>155</sup> Moreover, Mexicans at all levels understood racism as a problem of the United States.<sup>156</sup> To be sure, Rincón Gallardo's discourse did not contest Mexico's non-racism and post-racial ideology; however, he presented discrimination as a pervasive issue that affected most Mexicans and hindered Mexican democracy.

The April debate was the only one in which Rincón Gallardo was a participant. As a presidential candidate from a recently formed political party, Rincón Gallardo lacked the same

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<sup>155</sup> For a review of the scholarship on racism in Mexico see Mónica G. Moreno Figueroa, "El archivo del estudio del racismo en México," *Desacatos* 51 (May-August 2016): 92-107. Also see Oliva Gall, "Identidad, exclusión y racismo: reflexiones teóricas y sobre México," *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* 66, 2 (April – June 2004): 221-259; María Elisa Velázquez Gutiérrez, ed., *Estudiar el racismo: afrodescendientes en México* (Ciudad de México: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2019); Gabriela Iturralde, "Obstáculos al reconocimiento constitucional de los pueblos y comunidades afromexicanas: ¿Objeciones del racismo?" *Revista Antropologías del Sur* 4, 8 (2017): 127-147; Oliva Gall et al. ed., *El racismo: Recorridos conceptuales e históricos* (Ciudad de México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2022); Citlali Quecha Reyna, "Experiencias intergeneracionales sobre el racismo: un estudio entre afromexicanos de la Costa Chica de Guerrero y Oaxaca," *Boletín de Antropología* 35, 59 (2020): 35-59.

<sup>156</sup> Christina A. Sue, *Land of the Cosmic Race: Race Mixture, Racism, and Blackness in Mexico* (New York: Oxford University, 2013), 145-176.

support as the PAN, PRD, and PRI candidates. According to one Mexican scholar, the candidates of those three political parties blocked Rincón Gallardo from participating in subsequent debates for fear that he would gain popular support.<sup>157</sup> It is unclear if those candidates did indeed impede Rincón Gallardo's participation in the second and third debates. Still, his absence from those debates certainly limited his exposure to a broader audience, resulting in considerably low electoral support for him.

In July 2000, Vicente Fox Quesada of the PAN secured the presidential vote and ended seventy-one years of PRI rule, signaling Mexico's transition to democracy. But as Rincón Gallardo posited during the presidential debate, democracy hinged on both a peaceful transition of power and on the eradication of discrimination against millions of Mexicans. He insisted that true democracy would continue to elude Mexico until the state respected the rights of all marginalized groups and fully integrated them in the social, economic, and political fabric of the nation.<sup>158</sup> Rincón Gallardo's exposing of Mexican discrimination left an undeniable mark in Mexican politics that the country had to reckon with, especially as Mexico proclaimed its transition to democracy.

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<sup>157</sup> Zepeda, "Gilberto Rincón Gallardo," 111-112.

<sup>158</sup> "Debate presidencial 25 abril 2000," Comunicación Política y Ciudadanía, YouTube video, 1:30:57, 20 November 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9QRHDVrgSw4> (last accessed September 5, 2022).

### 3.3 Institutionalizing Anti-Discrimination

After the elections, the Social Democracy party was dissolved and Rincón Gallardo shifted his focus to raising attention to discrimination as a national issue. In March 2001, he became chair of the Citizen Studies Commission against Discrimination (CCECD), which was constituted of 161 people from Mexico's academic, civic, and political spheres. The commission's report was one of the first studies to analyze how discrimination operated in Mexico and to provide recommendations to the state on how to develop anti-discrimination policies. Rincón Gallardo posited that though there had previously been a small number of anti-discrimination efforts in Mexico, they were limited in scope, under resourced, beholden to governing administrations, and lacked institutional and public interest.<sup>159</sup> By the 2000s, however, governmental interest on the topic in Mexico was increasing, largely due to Indigenous mobilization, the 2000 presidential debate, and international events that addressed the issue head-on like the Regional Conference of the Americas held in Santiago, Chile in December 2000 and the UN World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance held in Durban, South Africa in September 2001.

On 14 August 2001, as the CCECD was working on its study, the Official Journal of the Federation published new constitutional reforms that prohibited all forms of discrimination. Congress added a paragraph to Article 1 that made discrimination illegal and included a list of motives for discrimination that included ethnicity, gender, age, different abilities, religion,

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<sup>159</sup> Gilberto Rincón Gallardo, "Presentación al Informe General de la Comisión Ciudadana de Estudios contra la Discriminación intitolado La discriminación en México: por una nueva cultura de igualdad," *Revista Mexicana de Ciencias Políticas* vol. XLIV, 183 (2001): 296.

preferences, or “any other that violates human dignity and is intended to annul or undermine the rights and freedoms of individuals.” Racism as a form of discrimination was absent from that list, which was emblematic of the nation’s persistent post-racial ideology. That belief became the foundation for addressing discrimination in Mexico as a general issue, which created an opening to center the grievances of several interest groups but strategically evaded the issue of race and racial discrimination.<sup>160</sup>

The August 2001 reforms were also key in transforming Indigenous affairs. Congress abrogated the paragraph in Article 4 that declared Mexico multicultural and recognized its Indigenous population. Congress then reformed Article 2, which maintained the nation’s multicultural make up but also recognized Indigenous peoples as communities and pueblos. In so doing, the law entitled Indigenous peoples and communities to a series of collective rights that were absent from the 1992 reform, like the right to self-determination, right to autonomy, and environmental rights. That reform also put in place a set of obligations for all levels of government to “promote equal opportunities for Indigenous peoples and eliminate any discriminatory practices.”<sup>161</sup> The reforms were largely a response to the Zapatista uprising and subsequent San Andres Accords that were negotiated and signed between 1994 and 1996 by the Mexican government and the EZLN. In September 1996, however, Zapatistas ended dialogue

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<sup>160</sup> DOF, “DECRETO,” 14 August 2001,

[https://www.dof.gob.mx/nota\\_detalle.php?codigo=762221&fecha=14/08/2001#gsc.tab=0](https://www.dof.gob.mx/nota_detalle.php?codigo=762221&fecha=14/08/2001#gsc.tab=0) (last accessed August 15, 2022).

<sup>161</sup> DOF, “DECRETO,” 14 August 2001,

[https://www.dof.gob.mx/nota\\_detalle.php?codigo=762221&fecha=14/08/2001#gsc.tab=0](https://www.dof.gob.mx/nota_detalle.php?codigo=762221&fecha=14/08/2001#gsc.tab=0) (last accessed August 15, 2022).

with the Mexican government after President Ernesto Zedillo's administration failed to introduce legislation from those agreements to Congress. This impasse reignited tensions between the government and EZLN for the next four years, and the latter also halted publications of their communiqués. As a result, the EZLN retreated from the national stage and instead shifted its attention to regional activities after the 2001 constitutional reforms, which they deemed to be a weakened version of the San Andrés Accords. That silence precluded their participation in national conversations about discrimination, just as the topic began to gain ground in the early 2000s.<sup>162</sup>

International conventions and agreements also affected the way the Mexican government addressed discrimination. Their influence was seen in plenary sessions and in the CCECD report, which was published shortly after the Durban Conference. During a plenary session held shortly after the 2001 constitutional reform and one week before the Durban Conference, Senator Leticia Burgos Ochoa of the PRD praised the reform to Article 1 but also noted that secondary legislation was needed to make the anti-discrimination law enforceable. She argued that doing so would comply with the UN's International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination, which Mexico signed in 1966 and ratified in 1975.<sup>163</sup> Like Ochoa, the CCECD pressed for secondary legislation and cited Mexico's commitment to the aforementioned convention. It also noted that Mexico had signed fifty-eight multilateral agreements, which committed the country to promote and protect democracy and human rights. In the CCECD

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<sup>162</sup> María Inclán, *The Zapatista Movement*.

<sup>163</sup> Mexico, *Diario de los debates de la Comisión Permanente del Congreso de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos*, LVIII Legislatura, Año 1, Segundo Receso Comisión Permanente, Sesión Núm. 18, 22 de Agosto de 2001, [https://www.senado.gob.mx/64/diario\\_de\\_los\\_debates/documento/1212](https://www.senado.gob.mx/64/diario_de_los_debates/documento/1212) (last accessed on September 05, 2022).

report, Rincón Gallardo, who attended the Durban Conference as president of the Mexican delegation, wrote that Mexico must not ignore the significance of that specific event and the resulting Durban Declaration. He added that giving close attention to international conventions and anti-discrimination legislation of other countries would give Mexico an advantage in developing its own anti-discrimination policies.<sup>164</sup>

In the CCECD report, Rincón Gallardo asserted that discrimination impacted the nation as much as it affected vulnerable groups. These practices were embedded in all corners of the nation's cultural, economic, political, and social spheres. As a result, he argued, discrimination limited human development and thwarted democracy in Mexico. "A society cannot consider itself a full democracy if it is unable to offer effective protection of inalienable rights of the person [...] the struggle against discrimination is part of the struggle for the consolidation of democracy."<sup>165</sup> With this in mind, the commission put forth recommendations to create the Federal Law to Prevent and Eliminate Discrimination (LFPED) and encouraged the state to establish the National Council to Prevent Discrimination (CONAPRED) to oversee the law's implementation. In an effort to ensure CONAPRED's efficacy, the commission noted that exemplary institutions from other countries prioritized prevention and compensation over a mere monitoring role, as in the cases of the United States, Canada, South Africa, and Australia.<sup>166</sup>

In the report, the CCECD incorporated an analysis of other countries' anti-discrimination policies to provide a blueprint for Mexican legislation. It cited laws and constitutional clauses that prohibited discrimination in nations like Argentina, Costa Rica, Germany, South Africa,

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<sup>164</sup> Rincón Gallardo, "Presentación al Informe General," 288.

<sup>165</sup> Rincón Gallardo, "Presentación al Informe General," 264.

<sup>166</sup> Rincón Gallardo, "Presentación al Informe General," 279.



Spain, and Trinidad and Tobago, among others.<sup>167</sup> This strategy was meant to show that other countries had already enacted anti-discrimination policies while Mexico lagged behind, and to support the commission's claims that the LFPED and CONAPRED were critical for eradicating discrimination and, by default, securing Mexican democracy. In the report, the CCECD took a special interest in affirmative action policies and punishments for acts of discrimination. For affirmative action, they praised the efforts of countries like the United States for their Americans with Disability Act; Costa Rica and Argentina for creating a pathway to increase the number of women in electoral politics; Colombia, Ecuador and Guatemala for providing Indigenous peoples with legal resources that protected their access to equal opportunities; and they especially celebrated the affirmative action policies for Indigenous peoples in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.<sup>168</sup> In addition to examining those policies, the CCECD also paid attention to how the state treated discriminatory practices. Using Argentina's prison sentences for convicted acts of discrimination and Costa Rica's fines, it indicated that if discrimination was criminalized, suitable punishment might help reduce and ultimately eliminate discriminatory behavior.

In its analysis of Paragraph 3, Article 1, the CCECD argued that the new proposed law would benefit from a clearer legal definition of discrimination. Referencing the countries analyzed, it also recommended that the secondary law be explicit about the vulnerable groups it would protect. It stressed that countries that included a comprehensive list of those specific groups "corresponded to democratic constitutions with higher levels of human development, abundance of opportunities, and the general enjoyment of liberty."<sup>169</sup> With respect to how the

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<sup>167</sup> Rincón Gallardo, "Presentación al Informe General," 275.

<sup>168</sup> Rincón Gallardo, "Presentación al Informe General," 276-279.

<sup>169</sup> Rincón Gallardo, "Presentación al Informe General," 277.

2001 constitutional reform was worded, Rincón Gallardo wrote that it suffered from “inconsistencies.” He stated, “The fact that concepts such as “different abilities” have been used instead of “disability” or [...] “preferences”, in general, without specifying [...] the adjective “sexual”, as other constitutions of the world do, or does not include language, are undoubtedly deficiencies.”<sup>170</sup> The commission then identified a list of Mexico’s vulnerable groups due to their “sex, age, ethnic origin, disability, religious affiliation, and sexual preference.”<sup>171</sup> Absent from the list, again, was racial discrimination, likely a result from Mexico’s post-racial ideology. Seeing that the list provided met international standards without disrupting the post-racial ideology of the state, the Vicente Fox government took the CCECD’s recommendations and included a legal definition of discrimination with clear wording and naming of specific groups in its initiative: “all distinction, exclusion or restriction that, based on ethnic or national origin, sex, age, disability, social or economic condition, health conditions, pregnancy, language, religion, beliefs, sexual preferences, marital status, or any other, has the effect to prevent or deny the recognition or exercise of fundamental rights and the actual equal opportunities of the people [...] discrimination will also be understood as xenophobia in any of its manifestations.”<sup>172</sup>

In November 2002, President Fox presented to Congress the Federal Law to Prevent and Eliminate Discrimination (LFPED), which made Article 1 of the 2001 constitutional reform enforceable. As noted earlier, that article prohibited all forms of discrimination in Mexico. On 29 April 2003, Congress unanimously passed the LFPED and ratified it into the constitution in June

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<sup>170</sup> Rincón Gallardo, “Presentación al Informe General,” 290.

<sup>171</sup> Rincón Gallardo, “Presentación al Informe General,” 293.

<sup>172</sup> Cámara de Senadores del Congreso de la Unión, *Proyecto de decreto por el que se expide la ley federal para prevenir y eliminar la discriminación*, LVIII Leg., 2da secc, Núm 207, 2003, 3-4.

of the same year. To ensure that the proposed law would indeed be enforced, the initiative concurrently created an institution to oversee its enforcement. Thus the National Council to Prevent Discrimination (CONAPRED) was born and established in Mexico City. The institution was designated the hefty task of preventing and eliminating discrimination in Mexico. As a public “decentralized body with legal personhood and its own assets,” CONAPRED enjoyed legal autonomy and freedom from any form of state subordination.<sup>173</sup> As a result, CONAPRED could independently carry out investigations and make resolutions on claims and complaints of discrimination through a restorative-justice approach. The institution, however, did not have the power to recommend convictions or sanctions for discriminatory behavior.<sup>174</sup>

With the passing of the LFPED, Fox appointed Rincón Gallardo as president of CONAPRED. Rincón Gallardo accepted the appointment and started working to ensure the efficacy of the institution he helped establish and to keep the topic of anti-discrimination on the political agenda, especially as it came into existence under a conservative government.<sup>175</sup> However, from the outset, Rincón Gallardo encountered challenges getting the institution off the ground. After Congress reduced funding for CONAPRED in 2004, Rincón Gallardo expressed his frustrations in an article he wrote for the newspaper *Reforma*. He argued that the 2004 budget

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<sup>173</sup> Camara de Senadores del Congreso de la Unión, *Proyecto de decreto por el que se expide la ley federal para prevenir y eliminar la discriminacion*, LVIII Leg., 2da secc, Núm 207, 2003, 6.

<sup>174</sup> Ana Marin Urdapilleta, “Buscan educar, no castigar,” *Reforma*, 28 June 2003; Luis Campo, “Piden castigo real a la discriminacion,” *Reforma*, 25 January 2005.

<sup>175</sup> José Luis Gutiérrez Espínola, “A Non-Discrimination Policy: Gilberto Rincón Gallardo’s Contribution,” *Voices of Mexico* 83 (2008): 117.

“mutilated” the newly established CONAPRED by reducing its operating budget, which made it impossible to hire personnel to carry out its most basic obligations.<sup>176</sup>

Still, CONAPRED officially began operating in March 2004. Though the institution functioned at a limited capacity due to its reduced budget, it was able to develop anti-discrimination campaigns. Those efforts were designed to introduce and educate the general public on the issue of discrimination more generally, as well as how it affected certain vulnerable groups. Information from some of these campaigns was disseminated through multiple mediums like newspapers, television, radio, and the internet. Likely due to a lack of resources, and a degree of bias, CONAPRED’s anti-discrimination campaigns prioritized some groups while overlooking others. Rincón Gallardo’s personal interest in discrimination against people living with a disability ensured that that group was prioritized in its anti-discrimination campaign. Other groups CONAPRED prioritized in its first year included LGBTQ+ folks, women, and the youth. The institution, however, was silent on the issue of ethno-racial discrimination against Indigenous peoples and Afro-Mexicans.<sup>177</sup> During the first few years it became a CONAPRED pattern to omit Afro-Mexicans from the institution’s studies, educational initiatives, and communication campaigns. As we will see in chapter three, Afro-Mexican activists played a key role in pressuring CONAPRED to address the issues that affected them.

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<sup>176</sup> Gilberto Rincon Gallardo, “Las Prisas,” *Reforma*, 10 January 2004.

<sup>177</sup> Consejo Nacional para Prevenir la Discriminación, *Informe anual de actividades y ejercicio presupuestal 2004 del CONAPRED* (Mexico: CONAPRED, 2005).

### 3.4 Anti-Discrimination ≠ Anti-Racism

In 2005 CONAPRED developed and executed the first National Survey on Discrimination in Mexico (ENADIS). It became the first institutional study of its kind to collect data on discrimination in the country. Researchers worked with a sample size of 5,608 participants to offer a much-needed glimpse into how Mexicans understood and experienced discrimination. Researchers found that ninety percent of their respondents believed they had been discriminated against for being women, Indigenous, homosexuals, elderly, or belonging to a religious minority group. The report also elucidated Mexico's deeply engrained anti-Indigenous sentiments. The data showed that 43 percent of respondents believed Indigenous peoples would encounter social limitations because of their "racial" characteristics; thirty-four percent believed that to alleviate poverty for Indigenous people, that group would have to stop "behaving like Indigenous peoples"; and forty percent stated they would campaign against Indigenous peoples acquiring residence near their community. It is no wonder then that nearly ninety-one percent of Indigenous people polled believed they were discriminated against because of their ethnicity, with just about six percent claiming no discrimination existed against them. Absent from this report was the issue of anti-Black racism and racial discrimination.<sup>178</sup>

In collaboration with multiple state and academic institutions, CONAPRED published subsequent ENADIS reports. Its studies and reports shed considerable light on the issue of discrimination and its various manifestations to the general Mexican public. Those publications were accessible to all, especially those with internet access, which suggests that the institution

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<sup>178</sup> Consejo Nacional para Prevenir la Discriminación, *Primer Encuesta Nacional sobre Discriminación en México* (Mexico: CONAPRED, 2005).

was indeed working toward disseminating information about discrimination to the general population. But in regard to acknowledging and addressing the experiences of Afro-Mexicans, the institution had a long ways to go. It would take another twelve years for CONAPRED to include data about racism against Afro-Mexicans in its ENADIS report.<sup>179</sup>

As Mexico pledged to eliminate all forms of discrimination, its leaders engaged in anti-Black discourse and defended racist imagery. Two 2005 events illustrate Mexico's paradox of anti-discrimination theory and praxis: first, President Vicente Fox's comments on immigration and race in the United States; and second, the commemoration of the comic Memín Pinguín. On 13 May 2005, Mexican president Vicente Fox Quesada gave a speech in Puerto Vallarta to a group of businesspeople from Texas, in which he denounced the growing xenophobia against Mexican immigrants in the U.S. He stated that Mexican immigrants were making substantial contributions to the U.S. economy and that they were doing jobs that "not even blacks were willing to do."<sup>180</sup> Fox's remark concerning Black folks drew immediate attention from major

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<sup>179</sup> In 2012, CONAPRED published another ENADIS report, see Consejo Nacional para Prevenir la Discriminación, *Encuesta Nacional sobre Discriminación: ENADIS 2010. Resultados sobre diversidad cultural* (Mexico: CONAPRED, 2012). CONAPRED also collaborated with the Project on Ethnicity and Race in Latin America (PERLA) to collect and analyze data concerning ethno-racial inequality and discrimination. See Consejo Nacional para Prevenir la Discriminación, *Encuesta Nacional sobre Discriminación 2017: Principales Resultados* (Mexico: CONAPRED, 2017), 35. For PERLA findings see Edward Telles, *Pigmentocracies: Ethnicity, Race, and Color in Latin America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

<sup>180</sup> Rosa Elvira Vargas, "Realizan mexicanos trabajos que ni los negros quieren: Fox Espera que Bush "ahora sí cumpla" apoyo a migrantes," *La Jornada*, 14 May 2005, <https://www.jornada.com.mx/2005/05/14/index.php?section=politica&article=008n1pol> (last accessed 16 May 2022).

Mexican and U.S. news outlets, as well as criticism among African American leaders and U.S. diplomats.<sup>181</sup> State Department spokesperson Richard Boucher called the remark “very insensitive and inappropriate” and said that the U.S. Embassy in Mexico had raised the issue with the Mexican government. However, Mexico’s presidential spokesperson denied claims that the State Department had made any formal complaints to the Mexican government.<sup>182</sup>

Though it is unclear if the State Department did indeed make a formal complaint, Fox’s government was certainly under pressure to address his remarks and meet with African American leaders. News outlets in Mexico and the U.S. reported that the Mexican government invited Reverends Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton to Mexico to discuss the issue with President Fox. On 17 May 2005, Jackson arrived in Mexico, where he gave a press conference stating that he accepted the invitation to Mexico to “establish a mutually beneficial dialogue with President Fox and leaders in Mexico.”<sup>183</sup> The next day, Jackson met with Fox at Los Pinos, the official presidential residence, to discuss Fox’s remarks. The Mexican newspaper *El Universal* reported that Jackson departed Mexico satisfied with Fox’s “sincere apology.”<sup>184</sup>

For figures like President Fox and other Mexican leaders, the prevailing image of Mexican migrants in the United States consisted of non-Black mestizas/os and Indigenous

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<sup>181</sup> “Mexican Leader Criticized for Comments on Blacks,” *CNN*, 15 May 2005, <https://edition.cnn.com/2005/US/05/14/fox.jackson/> (last accessed 16 May 2022).

<sup>182</sup> “Fox: Race Remarks ‘Misinterpreted’,” *CBS News*, 17 May 2005, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/fox-race-remarks-misinterpreted/> (last accessed 16 May 2022).

<sup>183</sup> “Jesse Jackson arrives to meet Fox and quash tensions,” AP Archive, video, 21 July 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O-ZzvnyDpRE> (last accessed 18 May 2022).

<sup>184</sup> Natalia Gómez, “Vicente Fox dio disculpa sincera, dice Jesse Jackson,” *El Universal*, 19 May 2005, <https://archivo.eluniversal.com.mx/nacion/125241.html> (last accessed 18 May 2022).

persons, while overlooking Afro-Mexicans and their migration patterns. Fox reinforced that image when he stated that Mexican immigrants in the U.S. took the jobs that “not even Blacks” wanted. Meanwhile Black Mexican immigrants in the U.S. were likely working in those very same jobs. During that time Afro-Mexicans were migrating in significant numbers to the United States and large cities in Mexico. Their migration reflected a general migration pattern that followed the enactment of NAFTA, which had a negative effect on Mexico’s rural population.<sup>185</sup> By the late 1990s, at least one third of San Nicolás’ residents, an Afro-Mexican community in the coastal region of Guerrero, were living in the United States.<sup>186</sup> Thus, the controversy surrounding Vicente Fox’s remarks, while primarily centered on U.S. immigration policies, underscored Mexico's systemic omission of Afro-Mexicans.

A few months after Fox made his controversial remarks, the Mexican Postal Service released five commemorative stamps to celebrate Memín Pinguín, a fictional character of a children’s comic that dated back to the 1940s. Physically, Memín Pinguín came across as a caricature of Blackness, which parodies the character’s black skin, broad nose, and thick red lips; a reproduction of blackface that was popular in the United States during the early twentieth century. He is also depicted as “imprudent and funny, impetuous and smug; lazy, ignorant, naïve, nosy, selfish, tough, accessible, and kind.”<sup>187</sup> In Mexico the release of the stamps was met with

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<sup>185</sup> On Afro-Mexican migration, especially from the Costa Chica community of San Nicolás during the 1990s and 2000s, see Laura A. Lewis, *Chocolate and Corn Flour: History, Race, and Place in the Making of “Black” Mexico* (Durham: Duke University, 2012), 265-273; Bobby Vaughn, “Race and Nation: A Study of Blackness in Mexico” (PhD diss., Stanford University, 2001), 171-178.

<sup>186</sup> Lewis, *Chocolate and Corn Flour*, 11.

<sup>187</sup> Mónica G. Moreno Figueroa and Emiko Saldívar Tanaka, “‘We Are Not Racists, We Are Mexicans’: Privilege, Nationalism, and Post-Race Ideology in Mexico,” *Critical Sociology* 42 (2016): 517.



little attention from the general public. In the United States, however, Black activists, as well as state actors, deemed the stamps profoundly racist and condemned Mexico's decision to commemorate, produce, and distribute them. The international attention that those stamps garnered ignited another controversy for Mexico concerning anti-Black racism, which state actors were pressured to publicly address.

Unlike Fox's remarks a few months earlier that seemed indefensible to many, most Mexicans defended the commemoration of Memín Pinguín. Renowned members of Mexico's intellectual elite from opposite ends of the political spectrum joined in taking a nationalist stance against the accusations coming from the United States. Mexican writer and thinker Carlos Monsiváis denounced the United States' allegations of racism and accused the US of intervening in Mexican affairs. While denying the racist connotations of Memín Pinguín, Monsiváis wrote that the U.S. was projecting its own issues with racism onto Mexico. He added, "Memín Pinguín never was, not even from afar, a great comic, but how could the United States government miss the opportunity to scold Fox?"<sup>188</sup> Novelist Elena Poniatowska used a discourse of racial innocence to defend the nation against US accusations that Memín Pinguín was emblematic of anti-Black racism in Mexico.<sup>189</sup> She characterized Memín Pinguín as an innocuous and lovable character, and stated that no Mexican ever felt offended by the comic. Moreover, she wondered

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<sup>188</sup> Carlos Monsiváis, "Memín Pinguín," *El Universal*, 10 July 2005,

<https://archivo.eluniversal.com.mx/editoriales/29632.html> (last accessed September 5, 2022).

<sup>189</sup> Tanya Katerí Hernández uses the term "racial innocence" to describe the Latin American stance that differentiated itself from Jim Crow United States. See Tanya Katerí Hernández, *Racial Subordination in Latin America: The Role of the State, Customary Law, and the New Civil Rights Response* (New York: Cambridge University, 2013), 3.

why people in the United States did not find Aunt Jemima offensive and asserted that Afrodescendants have been treated better in Mexico than the United States.<sup>190</sup> Mexican historian Enrique Krauze showed his support for Memín Pinguín by celebrating the country's history of race mixture, which in turn produced a non-racist nation. He also explained that during the colonial period enslaved Blacks in Mexico could more easily attain their freedom than in the United States, and as a result they found more opportunities for advancement.<sup>191</sup> For those public figures then, it was impossible for Mexico to be anti-Black when the nation historically treated Blacks with "kindness" and socially integrated them through the process of mestizaje.

Most striking, however, was Rincón Gallardo's defense of Memín Pinguín as a harmless popular comic, during his time as president of CONAPRED and responsible for leading the nation's anti-discrimination efforts. In the newspaper *Reforma*, Rincón Gallardo wrote an article in which he showed his support for the comic and expressed consternation over the accusations of racism coming from the United States. According to the article, Rincón Gallardo sent a letter to the U.S. president, George W. Bush, on behalf of CONAPRED. In that letter, Rincón Gallardo condemned all forms of discrimination and insisted that people in the United States misunderstood and decontextualized Memín Pinguín. He argued that the controversy was counterproductive to anti-discrimination efforts in Mexico by focusing on a popular character that in no way excluded or discriminated against Afrodescendants. He then reminded Mexicans that even though the Memín Pinguín comic and stamps were not racist, that did not mean that anti-Black racism in

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<sup>190</sup> "Memín Pinguín 'no es el icono popular del racismo en México,'" *La Jornada*, 1 July 2005, <https://www.jornada.com.mx/2005/07/01/index.php?section=cultura&article=a04n1cul> (last accessed September 5, 2022).

<sup>191</sup> Moreno Figueroa and Saldívar Tanaka, "We Are Not Racists," 519-520.

Mexico did not exist.<sup>192</sup> Rincón Gallardo made no mention about the Afro-Mexican population, how they might perceive Memín Pinguín or how to address and eliminate anti-Black racism in Mexico. Moreover, the topic of racism against Afro-Mexicans was largely neglected during Rincón Gallardo's tenure as president of the institution.

There were a few dissenting voices that denounced Memín Pinguín and the postal office's decision to commemorate the comic, but their voices were largely muffled by an overpowering number of Memín Pinguín apologists. One of those dissenting voices belonged to Gustavo Ortiz-Millán, a US-trained academic who argued that the character of Memín Pinguín was inherently racist and that supporters of the comic "lacked an immense disposition to understand" African Americans' grievances.<sup>193</sup> Though Ortiz-Millán was one of few people explaining why that caricature was deeply offensive and racist, he neglected to discuss how that image affected Afro-Mexicans. Missing from the general public debate was Mexico's African heritage, and most notably, Afro-Mexican voices. Though the Black organization México Negro demanded an apology from Vicente Fox, there is nearly no other information available that elucidates the participation of Afro-Mexicans in the Memín Pinguín debate as it unfolded.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Gilberto Rincón Gallardo, "Las lecciones de Memín," *Reforma*, 9 July 2005.

<sup>193</sup> Gustavo Ortiz-Millán, "Memín Pinguín, estereotipo racista," *Reforma*, 7 July 2005.

<sup>194</sup> Moreno Figueroa and Saldívar Tanaka, "'We Are Not Racists,'" 520.

### 3.5 International Pressures for Institutional Recognition of Afro-Mexicans

The Vicente Fox and Memín Pinguín controversies occurred in a post-Durban Conference world, in which international concerns around racial discrimination were intensifying. It is unsurprising then that the international community started to inquire about Mexico's Afrodescendant population. In December 2004, months before Fox made his widely-criticized remarks, Mexico submitted its fifteenth periodic report to the UN's Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), in which it offered an overview of the government's efforts to eliminate racial discrimination. The report highlighted the 2001 constitutional reforms and Congress's unanimous approval of the LFPED. Absent in the report, however, was any information about Afro-Mexicans or how the LFPED and CONAPRED would benefit them. Rather, the report underscored the government's actions taken to address discrimination against Indigenous peoples.<sup>195</sup> On 20 February 2006, Rincón Gallardo attended the CERD meeting held in Geneva as head of the Mexican delegation. Likely due to the attention the Vicente Fox and Memín Pinguín controversies received outside the country, Rincón Gallardo acknowledged the Afro-Mexican population and provided some insights into their demographics. That information, however, was limited due to the state's lack of demographic data on Afro-Mexicans as a distinct ethno-racial group. Thus, the details he did provide were based strictly on estimates: he explained that in Mexico there were approximately 450,000 Afrodescendants and that the majority lived in the southern states of Guerrero, Oaxaca, and Veracruz.<sup>196</sup> It is unclear what sources Rincón Gallardo or his team consulted to deliver those estimates, but it seems

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<sup>195</sup> CERD/C/473/Add.1, 19 May 2005, 5-8.

<sup>196</sup> CERD/C/SR.1731, February 24, 2006, 3.

likely that they relied on a book that two U.S. Black scholars published in Mexico that offered the same estimates and was published in 2004.<sup>197</sup>

After Rincón Gallardo's testimony, two CERD members noted the lack of information that had been presented about Afro-Mexicans. One of those members requested additional information on the situation of Afro-Mexicans and if any institutions existed in the country to address their needs. The other member inquired about the three states where most Afro-Mexicans supposedly lived and whether those states had made efforts to address any discrimination that Afrodescendants might encounter. After three hours of dialogue between the CERD and the Mexican delegation, the meeting concluded with no responses from the Mexican delegation to any of the committee's questions. When the meeting resumed the next day, one CERD member expressed that "not enough information was provided by [Mexico] regarding the status of persons of African descent, and more specifically, about the effects of the discrimination against them in education and housing for their level of poverty." Another CERD representative expressed curiosity about Afro-Mexicans' access to land tenure. Mexican delegates responded to those inquiries by stating that CONAPRED was in the process of reviewing three proposals from the Mexican Association of African Descendants to include a question in the 2010 national census to capture data on Mexico's Afrodescendants as a separate ethnic group. Obtaining such information, those delegates reasoned, would advance the process for the federal state to

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<sup>197</sup> Ben Vinson III and Bobby Vaughn, *Afroméxico el pulso de la población negra en México: una historia recordada, olvidada y vuelta a recordar*, by Ben Vinson III and Bobby Vaughn (México, D.F: Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas, 2004), 11.

recognize Afro-Mexicans as a distinct ethnic group, which would in turn produce the necessary tools to examine the conditions of that population.<sup>198</sup>

In CERD's concluding observations, it found the report's omission of Mexico's Afrodescendant population troubling and noted with concern the delegation's vague information about Afro-Mexicans at the Geneva meeting. Independent of the population count that Rincón Gallardo presented at the meeting, discussion of Afro-Mexicans was largely in tandem with Indigenous peoples' experience of discrimination. The committee stated that it was crucial for Mexico to collect and produce data on the nation's demographic composition. This would help CERD evaluate the country's implementation of the 1969 convention and observe how state policies affected Mexico's ethno-racial minorities. At the top of its recommendations for Mexico, the committee wrote, "the State party should provide information on communities of African descent, which are numerically small and vulnerable and should enjoy all the guarantees of protection in the Convention."<sup>199</sup> A year later, in response to that recommendation, Mexico reported to CERD that CONAPRED was tasked to collect as much information possible on Afro-Mexicans. In addition, that institution and the National Institute of Geography and Statistics (INEGI) were assessing the possibility of including a question in the 2010 national census that would provide information on Afro-Mexicans as a distinct ethnic group.<sup>200</sup>

By December 2006, CONAPRED, in collaboration with the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), published the institution's first study on Afro-Mexicans, entitled *Afrodescendants in Mexico: Recognition and Antidiscrimination Proposals*. The project was part

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<sup>198</sup> CERD/C/SR.1732, May 7 2007, 4-7.

<sup>199</sup> CERD/C/MEX/CO/15, April 4 2006, 2.

<sup>200</sup> CERD/C/MeX/CO/15/Add.1, June 29, 2007, 2-5.

of the second phase of a study developed in 2003 at UNAM and published in 2005 under the name *Legitimidad, gobernabilidad, y cohesión social: municipios de usos y costumbres y competencia partidista en Oaxaca*.<sup>201</sup> Juliana Isabel Flores, UNAM academic, was involved in that project. CONAPRED reached out to her requesting she and a team develop a similar project for the institution. While the 2005 study focused on Indigenous communities, data collection led researchers to Afro-Mexican communities along the coastal region of Oaxaca. As a result, Flores and other researchers began forging relations with Oaxaca's Black communities and activists like Father Glyn Jemmott. Thus when CONAPRED approached Flores about a follow-up study to the 2005 project, she suggested a project that centered on Afro-Mexicans.<sup>202</sup>

CONAPRED's 2006 publication was the first study in Mexico to examine the living conditions of Afro-Mexicans through an anti-discrimination lens. To be sure, a small group of scholars had published studies about Afro-Mexicans but they were cultural examinations that

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<sup>201</sup> Consejo Nacional para Prevenir la Discriminación, *Los afrodescendientes en México: Reconocimiento y propuestas para evitar la discriminación*, Dirección General Adjunta de Estudios y Políticas Públicas, Documento de Trabajo No. E-19-2006 (Mexico, 2007), 18; Julio Labastida and Flores Julia ed., *Legitimidad, gobernabilidad y cohesión social: municipios de usos y costumbres y competencia partidista en Oaxaca* (México: IISUNAM, 2005).

<sup>202</sup> Juliana Isabel Flores, interview by author, 30 June 2023. According to Sergio Peñaloza Pérez, Glyn Jemmott was lobbying CONAPRED to develop a demographic study on the Afro-Mexican population during the early years of the institution's existence. He added that Jemmott had a meeting with Ricón Gallardo to propose the project, which the latter supported and took steps to make happen. Peñaloza Pérez did not recall the name of the study but I suspect that he was referring to to 2006's *Los Afrodescendientes en México: Reconocimiento y propuestas para evitar la discriminación*. See Sergio Peñaloza Pérez, interview by author, 16 April 2021.

overlooked or left unexplored issues of inequality and racism.<sup>203</sup> Thus, the importance of the study cannot be overstated, especially seeing that it was the first known instance that the Mexican government took an interest in Afro-Mexicans beyond their cultural contributions to the nation. To collect quantitative data, researchers relied on the 2000 and 2005 census documents for the states of Guerrero, Oaxaca, and Veracruz, as well as surveys designed for fieldwork data collection. Seeing that the Mexican government had yet to recognize Afro-Mexicans as an ethno-racial group, information from those census documents came from state and municipal-level aggregated data. Consequently, researchers could only infer information about Afro-Mexicans based on the perceived ethno-racial make-up of certain towns and municipalities. They found that while the national illiteracy rate for persons fifteen years of age and older in 2005 was at 8.5 percent, that number increased significantly in municipalities with large Afro-Mexican populations. Illiteracy in Veracruz's Yanga municipality was at 12 percent, Guerrero's Cuajinicuilapa was at 28 percent, and in Oaxaca's Santiago Tapextla illiteracy was at 37 percent. According to the 2000 census, the national infant mortality rate was at 10.66 percent. The number for Yanga was 11.59 percent, Cuajinicuilapa was at 14.66 percent, and Santiago Tapextla was at 14.26 percent. The available data also revealed Black municipalities in Guerrero and Oaxaca experienced lower-quality housing and lower access to basic services than the rest of the country.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> For example, Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra de México, 1519–1810: Estudio etnohistórico* (Mexico City: Ediciones Fuente Cultural, 1946); Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *Cuijla: Esbozo etnográfico de un pueblo negro* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1958); Guitierre Tibón, *Pinotepa Nacional: Mixtecos, negros y triques* (Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma de México, 1961).

<sup>204</sup> CONAPRED, *Los afrodescendientes en México*, 58-65.



Quantitative data showed that Afro-Mexican communities experienced profound structural inequality and marginalization. Qualitative data, through interviews, revealed how Afro-Mexicans understood and experienced racial discrimination. Colorism was present in how respondents answered questions about discrimination. Light-skinned Afro-Mexicans reported that there was no discrimination against Afrodescendants, whereas darker-skinned respondents claimed that anti-Black discrimination did indeed exist in the region. Internalized racism was evident in the responses of the interviewees. One woman from the town of Collantes stated that it looked bad for a “moreno” to be next to a white person. She said, “we think we will look bad next to a white person and that they will feel bad.”<sup>205</sup> Afro-Mexicans’ internalized anti-Blackness extended beyond physical appearance to cognitive abilities. A schoolteacher told interviewers that “children of the Black race are slow in learning and learning comes easier to the Indigenous race.”<sup>206</sup> The government, many of the respondents stated, perpetuated discrimination against Afro-Mexicans. They cited Fox’s anti-Black remarks and the Memín Pinguín stamps as evidence of the state’s complicity in racial discrimination.<sup>207</sup>

The interviews that researchers conducted also elucidated the lack of a cohesive ethno-racial identity among Afrodescendant Mexicans. At the institutional level too there was no official ethno-racial term applied to Black Mexicans. Seeing that in post-colonial Mexico the category of race had been eliminated and ethnicity was bound to language, the state had no way of distinguishing Afro-Mexicans from the mestizo identity. In the Costa Chica, Black Mexicans called themselves *negras/os* or *morenas/os*. These terms carried different meanings. While some

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<sup>205</sup> CONAPRED, *Los afrodescendientes en México*, 85.

<sup>206</sup> CONAPRED, *Los afrodescendientes en México*, 87.

<sup>207</sup> CONAPRED, *Los afrodescendientes en México*, 86.

identified as *negra/o* because of their phenotype and culture, others rejected the term because they found it offensive. The latter group preferred the term *morena/o*, a term that like *negra/o* was deeply linked to skin tone and hair texture, as well as culture. Meanwhile, those with a higher degree of education self-identified as *Afro-Mestizas/os*. This term was also used among white/mestizx intellectuals to identify Afro-Mexicans; it originated in the 1950s with the publication of Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán's works on Afro-Mexicans. Those with higher levels of education had access to Aguirre Beltrán's work and most likely adopted the term from that literature. Thus, there seems to have been a class component that undergirded the *Afro-Mestiza/o* identity. Moreover, given their advanced education, this group had deeper knowledge of their ancestral connections to Africa, their history as Afrodescendants in Mexico, and their belonging to an African diaspora.

Though *Afrodescendants in Mexico* was the first study that systematically analyzed the conditions of Afro-Mexicans, it did not produce recommendations for the official recognition of Afro-Mexicans as a distinct ethno-racial group or to prevent racism, as suggested in the project's title. Seeing that the project was limited in scope, its findings did not contradict the official estimate of Mexico's Afrodescendant population. As Rincón Gallardo had claimed a year earlier at the CERD meeting, the report suggested that the Afro-Mexican population for the decade of the 1990s was 450,000 persons. The authors of this report cited U.S. scholars Bobby Vaughn and Ben Vinson's estimate from an earlier historiography and anthropological examination on the history and culture of Afro-Mexicans. Owing to the lack of official documentation of Mexico's Black population, however, their estimate too lacked a rigorous demographic analysis to reach their conclusion. Moreover, as noted above, there existed no cohesive or collective ethno-racial identity among Mexico's Afrodescendant population. As will be discussed in the next chapter,

the absence of an official ethno-racial term for this group created a logistical problem for INEGI to count Afro-Mexicans as a distinct ethno-racial group for the 2010 census.

### 3.6 Conclusion

Mexico's inclusive policy reforms emerged at the height of Mexican neoliberalism and under authoritarian and conservative governments during a period of transition to democracy. Those policies were part of state efforts to enhance Mexico's international reputation as a modern nation. The 1992 constitutional reforms, which declared Mexico a multicultural nation "originally based on indigenous peoples," was part of a state effort to legitimize the PRI government at home and abroad after the party was accused of voter fraud.<sup>208</sup> Creating a veneer of political stability and protector of Indigenous rights positioned Mexico as a modern and progressive state that helped secure trade agreements like NAFTA.

The LFPED came into existence due to a convergence of international, national, and local pressures. Supporters of the LFPED invoked international conventions and declarations to pressure the government to pass and ratify the LFPED. They especially pointed to ILO 169, UN's International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination, and the Durban Conference as Mexico's commitment to ending discrimination. CERD also played a critical role in pressing the Mexican government to acknowledge its Afro-Mexican population.

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<sup>208</sup> [https://www.dof.gob.mx/nota\\_detalle.php?codigo=4646755&fecha=28/01/1992#gsc.tab=0](https://www.dof.gob.mx/nota_detalle.php?codigo=4646755&fecha=28/01/1992#gsc.tab=0) (last accessed 08/01/2022).

Moreover, the 1994 Zapatista uprising in Chiapas put into question Mexico's international commitment to promote and protect indigenous rights. The EZLN contradicted the state's claims that there was no racism in Mexico by exposing to the racism and discrimination Indigenous peoples experienced. No longer able to use its non-racism discourse, Mexico was compelled to abandon those claims and develop anti-discrimination legislation. Amid that transition, intellectuals and state actors began to give more attention to the topic of racism and discrimination in Mexico.

No other state actor or activist did more to ensure that the LFPED be enshrined in the constitution than Gilberto Rincón Gallardo. He not only introduced the issue of discrimination in national debates but also chaired the commission responsible for developing the LFPED and recommending the creation of CONAPRED, of which he was president until his death in 2008. However, during his tenure, Afro-Mexicans were largely excluded from CONAPRED's agenda.

In December 2008, following Rincón Gallardo's death, President Felipe Calderon (PAN) appointed Perla Bustamante Corona as president of CONAPRED.<sup>209</sup> Like Rincón Gallardo, Bustamante Corona, an engineer and a medalist of the 2004 and 2008 Summer Paralympics, lived with a physical disability.<sup>210</sup> In contrast to Rincón Gallardo, her work on anti-

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<sup>209</sup> CONAPRED, "Perla Bustamante Corona, nueva presidenta del Conapred," *CONAPRED*, 11 December 2008, [https://www.conapred.org.mx/index.php?contenido=noticias&id=2074&id\\_opcion=&op=448](https://www.conapred.org.mx/index.php?contenido=noticias&id=2074&id_opcion=&op=448) (last accessed 7 September 2023); Guadalupe Gómez Quintana, "Perla Bustamante, titular de Conapred designada por Calderón," *Cimanoticias*, 11 December 2008, <https://cimanoticias.com.mx/noticia/perla-bustamante-titular-de-conapred-designada-por-calderon/#gsc.tab=0> (last accessed 7 September 2023);

<sup>210</sup> Bustamante Corona lived with a physical disability due to a tragic accident in 1999 that resulted in her left leg being amputated.

discrimination was significantly limited.<sup>211</sup> While her presidency was expected to be three years, she held the position for less than a year. Nevertheless, it appears that Bustamante Corona was one of the first state actors to publicly call on INEGI to count Afro-Mexicans as an ethnic group in the national census.<sup>212</sup>

By December 2009, Ricardo Bucio Mújica was the new president of CONAPRED. Bucio Mújica's professional trajectory aligned more with social justice efforts than his predecessor. Prior to his leadership at CONAPRED, Bucio Mújica had worked at the international NGO Caritas, the Instituto Nacional del Desarrollo Social (INDESOL), and the Comisión de Derechos Humanos del Distrito Federal (CDHDF).<sup>213</sup> Black activists were able to establish a working

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<sup>211</sup> CONAPRED, "Perla Bustamante Corona, nueva presidenta del Conapred," *CONAPRED*, 11 December 2008, [https://www.conapred.org.mx/index.php?contenido=noticias&id=2074&id\\_opcion=&op=448](https://www.conapred.org.mx/index.php?contenido=noticias&id=2074&id_opcion=&op=448) (last accessed 7 September 2023).

<sup>212</sup> CONAPRED, "Necesario integrar en Censo 2010 a población afro-mexicana: Conapred," 15 March 2009, [https://www.conapred.org.mx/index.php?contenido=registro\\_encontrado&tipo=1&id=138](https://www.conapred.org.mx/index.php?contenido=registro_encontrado&tipo=1&id=138) (last accessed 7 September 2023). It is unclear what led her to make that claim. According to Néstor Ruiz Hernández, activist from Oaxaca, Bustamante Corona was uninterested in including Afro-Mexicans in CONAPRED's agenda. According to him, Bustamante Corona reinforced the national claim that "In Mexico, there are no Blacks" to justify CONAPRED's inaction and inattention regarding Afro-Mexicans. At a meeting with activists, Bustamante Corona clarified that while there might be a small Afro-Mexican population, they constituted a numerically marginal minority of the Mexican population. Based on my conversation with Ruiz Hernández, it appears that she may have attended a gathering in the Costa Chica after making those remarks. See Néstor Ruiz Hernández, interview by author, 19 May 2021.

<sup>213</sup> Senado de la República LXII, "Audiencia 4: Combatir la violencia en el entorno escolar, una responsabilidad compartida," [https://www.senado.gob.mx/comisiones/educacion/Escuela\\_Libre\\_Violencia/semblanzas/RicardoBucio.pdf](https://www.senado.gob.mx/comisiones/educacion/Escuela_Libre_Violencia/semblanzas/RicardoBucio.pdf) (last

relationship with Bucio Mújica. During his tenure as CONAPRED's president (2009-2015), the institution increased its outputs and resources promoting Afro-Mexicans' visibility. Also, those outputs coincided with the UN's increased attention to protecting and promoting the rights of Afrodescendants, especially with the 2011 International Year for People of African Descent. Between 2011 and 2015, CONAPRED published three works that celebrated Afro-Mexican history and devoted extensive attention to recognizing Afro-Mexicans as an ethnic group. In 2016, the institution also published a report for Congress that advocated for legislation for developing Indigenous and Afro-Mexican communities.<sup>214</sup>

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accessed 7 September 2023). Also see Bucio's LinkedIn CV <https://mx.linkedin.com/in/ricardo-bucio-m%C3%BAjica-89746550> (last accessed 7 September 2023).

<sup>214</sup> Consejo Nacional para Prevenir la Discriminación, *Los Afrodescendientes en México: Reconocimiento y propuestas para evitar la discriminación*, Dirección General Adjunta de Estudios y Políticas Públicas, Documento de Trabajo No. E-19-2006 (Mexico, 2007); Juan Manuel de la Serna Herrera, Gina Chacón Frago, and Ingrid Ebergenyi Salinas, *Exploración antropológica para formulación de la pregunta sobre las personas afromexicanas en el censo nacional de población y vivienda y en encuestas relacionadas* (México, DF: CONAPRED, 2010); CONAPRED, *Guía para la acción pública: Afrodescendencia. Población Afrodescendiente en México* (México, DF: CONAPRED, 2011); CONAPRED, *Legislar sin Discriminación 07 Derechos Colectivos y Reconocimiento Constitucional de las Poblaciones Afromexicanas* (México, DF: CONAPRED, 2015); María Elisa Velázquez y Gabriela Iturrilade Nieto, *Afrodescendientes en México. Una historia de silencio y discriminación* (México, DF: CONAPRED, 2016); CONAPRED, *Legislar sin Discriminación 09: derecho a la consulta de los pueblos y comunidades indígenas y afromexicanas en torno a proyectos de desarrollo y explotación de recursos naturales* (México, DF: CONAPRED, 2016).

#### **4.0 U.N. Campaigns, Mexico's Black Movement, and Institutional Recognition, 2005-2015**

On 26 and 27 September 2012, the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE) and the Consejo Nacional para Prevenir la Discriminación (CONAPRED) held the Primer Foro Nacional sobre Poblaciones Afrodescendientes en México at the SRE headquarters in Mexico City. The event gathered Black activists, representatives from Afro-Mexican civic organizations, public servants at all levels of government, academics, and international actors. At one of the Forum's panels, Alejandro Negrín, representative of the SRE, stated that the objective of the event was to generate visibility for Mexico's Afrodescendant population and present public policies for "a population that has not had the visibility that it deserves in [Mexico]." Ricardo Bucio, president of CONAPRED, added that with the event, the agency aimed to develop a "concrete action plan" to work toward the official recognition of Afro-Mexicans as an ethnic group and inclusion in public policies and censuses.<sup>215</sup>

In 2010, before the Primer Foro Nacional sobre Poblaciones Afrodescendientes en México was held in Mexico City, the United Nations had designated 2011 as the International Year for People of African Descent. That campaign helped embolden Afro-Mexican activists and legitimize their demands for recognition. The International Year also served to reinforce

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<sup>215</sup> For CONAPRED's press release on the Forum see "Se presentó el Foro Nacional sobre Poblaciones Afrodescendientes en México 2012," CONAPRED, 2012, [https://www.conapred.org.mx/index.php?contenido=noticias&id=2864&id\\_opcion=&op=447](https://www.conapred.org.mx/index.php?contenido=noticias&id=2864&id_opcion=&op=447). For Alejandro Negrín's and Ricardo Bucio's comments see "Foro Nacional: Poblaciones Afrodescendientes en México 2012," Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, YouTube video, 24 September 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qi30do7ybtI&list=WL&index=19>.

recommendations from the UN Committee to Eliminate Racial Discrimination (CERD) to Mexico, urging the government and its agencies to recognize its Afrodescendant population.

In response to pressures from the UN campaign and from CERD, CONAPRED began to not only include Afro-Mexicans in its program but made them a priority in the agency's agenda. In preparation for the event, CONAPRED representatives met with Afro-Mexicans and Black civic organizations in Guerrero, Oaxaca, and Veracruz. In those meetings, Afro-Mexican activists and locals called for a national gathering to engage in dialogue with Mexican state actors to ensure the latter took steps toward recognizing Afro-Mexicans as an ethnic group in the national constitution and censuses. In their remarks at the 2012 Forum, Negrín and Bucio pointed out Mexico's participation in multilateral human rights organizations and emphasized their recent actions to comply with CERD's recommendations.

This chapter examines what was happening at the local level with Afro-Mexican activism leading up to the 2011 International Year for People of African Descent. It then asks, to what degree did the 2011 International Year help advance their demands for recognition? What direction was the Afro-Mexican movement taking during the 2010s? In addition to CONAPRED and SRE, what other state agencies joined them in recognizing Afro-Mexican? What concrete achievements were gained between 2010 and 2015?

#### **4.1 The Vanguard Organizations**

During the 2000s, five civic organizations from Oaxaca's Costa Chica were leading the way to demand federal and state government to recognize Afro-Mexicans as a distinct ethnic group. All but two were founded in the 2000s. México Negro was established in 1998 and was at



the forefront of the movement. Ecosta Yutu Cuii was established in 1994 but it was not until 1998 that it incorporated Afro-Mexicans into its agenda. The remaining three organizations were created in the 2000s: Enlace de Pueblos y Organizaciones y Comunidades Autónomas (EPOCA), Alianza para el Fortalecimiento de las Regiones Indígenas y Comunidades Afromexicanas (AFRICA), and Purpura.<sup>216</sup>

Heladio Reyes Cruz, a self-identifying Black and Mixtec-Indigenous local, founded Ecosta Yutu Cuii with the aim of promoting environmental awareness and preserving traditional knowledge related to the use of natural resources. Established in 1994 in Santa Rosa de Lima, Ecosta initially focused on conservation efforts in the region through projects like forest nurseries and the cultivation of food free of agrochemicals. Reyes Cruz recalls that while the organization also addressed human rights issues, as well as women's and children's rights, Afro-Mexicans as a distinct group were not initially included in its agenda. However, this changed in 1998 when Jemmott reached out to Reyes and invited Ecosta to the Encuentros de Pueblos Negros (EPN). Subsequently, Ecosta incorporated Afro-Mexicans into its agenda and actively participated in the Afro-Mexican movement's efforts for recognition and inclusion.<sup>217</sup>

In 2002, Néstor Ruiz Hernández, from Pinotepa Nacional, created the Enlace de Pueblos y Organizaciones y Comunidades Autónomas (EPOCA). As noted in a previous chapter, in 1992

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<sup>216</sup> On these organizations, see Heriberto Ruiz Ponce, “Organización civil de pueblos negros en Oaxaca,” *Acta Sociológica* 74 (Septiembre-Diciembre 2017), 122-124; María Elisa Velázquez y Gabriela Iturralde, “Afromexicanos: reflexiones sobre las dinámicas del reconocimiento,” *Anales de Antropología* 50 (2016), 237-239; Gloria Lara, “Las organizaciones afromexicanas: recursos, cambios y regulación institucional en los albores del siglo XXI,” *Cuadernos de Antropología* 30, 2 (Julio-Diciembre 2020): 1-26.

<sup>217</sup> Heladio Reyes Cruz, interview by author, 3 November 2021.

Ruiz Hernández played a pivotal role in establishing the Comisión Regional de Derechos Humanos de la Costa (CRDHC) alongside members from the Consejos Comunitarios de Abasto (CCA) of the Compañía Nacional de Subsistencias Populares (CONASUPO). While the CRDHC theoretically worked on behalf of all communities in Costa Chica region, Ruiz Hernández asserted its commitment was primarily to the Indigenous population.<sup>218</sup> In 1999, Ruiz Hernández coordinated the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional's (EZLN) visit to the region as part of its "Consulta Nacional" campaign, during which approximately five thousand EZLN members toured the country to garner popular support.<sup>219</sup>

After the CRDHC was disbanded in 2001, Ruiz Hernández became involved with the Afro-Mexican movement at the behest of Glynn Jemmott. Ruiz Hernández recalled receiving a call from Jemmott in 2002, during which Jemmott sternly asked him, "When are you going to make a commitment to your Black people?" At the time of that call, Ruiz Hernández was in the process of forming EPOCA. Following the call, Ruiz Hernández increased his participation with the Afro-Mexican movement. However, as he recalled, "I'm Black [...] but we [EPOCA] did

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<sup>218</sup> Néstor Ruiz Hernández, interview by author, 25 November 2020.

<sup>219</sup> See Ruiz Hernández, interview; Bobby Vaughn, a US anthropologist conducting doctoral research in the coastal town of Collantes at the time, witnessed the arrival of an EZLN delegation. Vaughn observed that the visit stirred concerns among locals in Collantes, who feared that the masked Indigenous rebels might incite unrest in the region. Some residents even worried about the safety of their children, fearing potential kidnappings by EZLN members. Vaughn wrote that despite efforts by local leaders to introduce the EZLN delegation and explain the reasons behind their mobilization, these actions did little to assuage fears or increase Afro-Mexican involvement in the burgeoning Afro-Mexican movement. To be sure, Vaughn observations were limited to Collantes. See Bobby Vaughn, "Race and Nation: A Study on Blackness in Mexico" (PhD diss., Stanford University, 2001), 169-170.

not have that mission” for Afro-Mexican recognition. It was not until 2008 that EPOCA’s activist efforts shifted its attention almost exclusively to the region’s Black population.

In 2003, Israel Reyes Larrea, who self-identifies as Afro-Mixteca and previously served as a committee member of the Casa del Pueblo in the José María Morelos community, established the Colectivo Cultural AFRICA. His central focus with the Colectivo was to promote and celebrate local Afro-Mexican culture. By 2007, the Colectivo Cultural AFRICA evolved into Alianza para el Fortalecimiento de las Regiones Indígenas y Comunidades Afromexicanas (AFRICA). According to the organization's stated objectives, AFRICA aimed to foster sustainable development and preserve the cultural heritage of Afro-Mexican and Indigenous communities in the Costa Chica region. Additionally, a key mission of the organization was to advocate for the constitutional recognition of Afro-Mexicans at both state and federal levels. Despite its inclusion of Indigenous peoples in its name and agenda, AFRICA primarily directed its efforts toward supporting the recognition and rights of Afro-Mexican communities. In so doing it became one of the leading organizations advancing the movement’s campaign for inclusion and recognition.<sup>220</sup>

A year later, in 2008, a group of artists and academics from Jamiltepec formed the organization Purpura. Among its founders was José Francisco Ziga Gabriel, a non-Black rural sociologist. Unlike other local organizations developing actions, Purpura was mainly an Indigenous organization created to lend support to local initiatives in the Costa Chica, meaning that it addressed various topics concurrently with different groups. Purpura’s presence in the Afro-Mexican movement was due to Ziga Gabriel’s long-established networks with Black

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<sup>220</sup> Israel Reyes Larrea, interview by author, 7 May 2024. For activities that AFRICA participated in and organized see <https://colectivoafrica.blogspot.com/>.

activists. Like Ruiz Hernández, Ziga Gabriel met Jemmott in the early 1990s during his time with the CCA. Due to his work with the Afro-Mexican movement, Ziga Gabriel automatically became Purpura's representative in matters concerning the region's Black population.

Most of these organizations operated as one-person operations, with activists shouldering multiple responsibilities. They relied on support from volunteers, typically comprising family and friends. Seeing that most organizational leaders were professionals juggling a full day's work alongside family obligations, that support was essential for their organizations' survival. México Negro and Purpura appear to have been the exception during this period. México Negro had a small committee driving the organization, while six people made Purpura.

During the late 1990s and early 2000s, all these organizational leaders had been collaborating to raise racial awareness in the Costa Chica. Up to this point, Glyn Jemmott had been the driving force of the Afro-Mexican movement. Most activists credit Jemmott for structuring the movement and directing it toward uplifting the region's African heritage and instilling pride in locals' African ancestry – a mission of the EPN gatherings. By the 2000s, as attendance from local communities was decreasing and participation from external actors was increasing, activists like Reyes Larrea and Ziga Gabriel were becoming increasingly critical of the annual EPN events. They claimed that the annual gatherings were largely cultural celebrations lacking a tangible agenda to compel the Mexican government to recognize Afro-Mexicans and substantially address inequality and discrimination. Up to this point, EPN events were publicly denouncing racism and inequality. However, they failed to catalyze a formal campaign to make demands outside the parameters of the events.<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>221</sup> As many scholars have noted, Latin America's unequal distribution of wealth and income is the highest globally. Furthermore, many have shown that Afrodescendants and Indigenous peoples are disproportionately affected by the

In the mid-2000s, as the number of participating organizations steadily increased, the Afro-Mexican movement began showing signs of fragmentation. Internal disagreements and individual egos led to a proliferation of Black events in the Costa Chica. These divisions became apparent during public gatherings where local attendees witnessed the fracture firsthand. While México Negro's annual EPN events emerged as the most prominent, Colectivo AFRICA and EPOCA were also holding their own respective events. With time, the divisions deepened and splintered the movement in two. However, despite the fracture, collaboration among the

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region's inequality and discrimination. In the Mexican case, Afro-Mexican activists included discussions about inequality and discrimination in Mexico during EPN events. However, during the early years, they did so in the shadows of Afro-Mexican cultural celebrations. Michael George Hanchard found a similar pattern in Brazil's Black mobilization during the 1980s, see Michael George Hanchard, *Orpheus and Power: The Movimento Negro of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, Brazil, 1945-1988* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 99. For Latin American inequality and its effects on racialized peoples see Marcelo Paixão and Irene Rossetto, "The Labyrinth of Ethnic-Racial Inequality: A Picture of Latin America According to the Recent Census Rounds," in *Comparative Racial Politics in Latin America*, ed. Kwame Dixon and Ollie A. Johnson III (New York: Routledge, 2019), 288-317; Juliet Hooker, "Indigenous Inclusion/Black Exclusion: Race, Ethnicity and Multicultural Citizenship in Latin America," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 37 2 (May, 2005): 285-310; George Reid Andrews, "Inequality: Race, Class, Gender," in *Afro-Latin American Studies: An Introduction*, eds. Alejandro de la Fuente and George Reid Andrews (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 52-91; Edward Telles and René Flores, "A Comparative Analysis of Ethnicity, Race, and Color in Latin America Based on PERLA Findings," in *Pigmentocracies: Ethnicity, Race, and Color in Latin America*, ed. Edward Telles (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 218-236.

organizations and their leaders persisted. As we will see, at times they were able to momentarily set aside their differences to engage in collective public action.<sup>222</sup>

## 4.2 Foro Afromexicanos

On 11 November 2006, Israel Reyes Larrea of AFRICA A.C. and Francisco Ziga Gabriel, who at the time was a representative of the Comisión de Desarrollo Indígena (CDI) – Jamiltepec office, organized the Taller Construcción de una Iniciativa de Ley de Derechos y Cultura de los Pueblos Negros in Jamiltepec, Oaxaca. In a resulting proclamation, participants declared, “The constitutional recognition of Mexico’s Black peoples was necessary, as was recognition of their cultural contributions to the construction of the national identity.” Second, they exhorted all levels of government to attend to their needs in “education, health, nutrition, housing, and culture.” Third, they demanded the “immediate attention” of subsistence work like agriculture and fishing, which they recognized as the “reproduction” of material goods and the spirit of the local Black population. In the fourth and final point, they announced the beginning of a campaign to demand that the Mexican government recognize their “existence as a people, against systematic denial” and to accord them space in the “cultural map” of the nation.<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> For a public discussion of the rupture in the Afro-Mexican movement see “Foro Afromexicanos, 2007. Parte 3 de 4,” Afro México, YouTube video, 05:34, 6 August 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UsOPn8gl-wQ&list=WL&index=12> (last accessed 7 September 2023).

<sup>223</sup> Francisco Ziga Gabriel, interview by author, 7 April 2021; “Pronunciamiento del Taller Construcción de una Iniciativa de Ley de Derechos y Cultura de los ‘Pueblos Negros,’” in *De Afromexicanos a Pueblo Negro* eds.

A few months after the workshop, Reyes Larrea organized and held the Foro Afromexicanos: por el reconocimiento constitucional de los derechos del pueblo negro en México on 20 and 21 June 2007 in José María Morelos, Oaxaca.<sup>224</sup> The event was sponsored by federal, local, academic, and international institutions like the Programa de Apoyo a las Culturas Municipales y Comunitarias (PACMYC), Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes (CONACULTA), CDI – Jamiltepec, UNAM’s Programa Universitario México Nación Multicultural, and the Inter-American Foundation.<sup>225</sup> For Reyes Larrea and other activists, the Foro was a necessary step toward the constitutional recognition they so desired. The Foro’s mission was to develop a tangible action plan that activists and their allies could carry out and to take the first steps to draft a legal argument for Afro-Mexican recognition that could be delivered to the region’s federal legislators, whom activists anticipated would present to the Mexican Congress.<sup>226</sup>

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Israel Reyes Larrea, Nemesio J. Mitchell Rodríguez y José Francisco Ziga (México DF: UNAM, 2014), [https://www.nacionmulticultural.unam.mx/afromexicanos/cap\\_1.html](https://www.nacionmulticultural.unam.mx/afromexicanos/cap_1.html) (last accessed 7 September 2023).

<sup>224</sup> “AFRICA A.C.” *AFRICA A.C.* (Blog) January 2010, <http://colectivoafrica.blogspot.com/2010/01/> (last accessed 7 September 2023).

<sup>225</sup> Israel Reyes Larrea, “Reseña del video ‘Foro Afromexicanos’ Por el reconocimiento constitucional del Pueblo Negro de México,” in *De Afromexicanos a Pueblo Negro* eds. Israel Reyes Larrea, Nemesio J. Mitchell Rodríguez y José Francisco Ziga (México DF: UNAM, 2014), [https://www.nacionmulticultural.unam.mx/afromexicanos/cap\\_8.html](https://www.nacionmulticultural.unam.mx/afromexicanos/cap_8.html) (last accessed 7 September 2023).

<sup>226</sup> “Documentos del Foro Afromexicanos,” in *De Afromexicanos a Pueblo Negro* eds. Israel Reyes Larrea, Nemesio J. Mitchell Rodríguez y José Francisco Ziga (México DF: UNAM, 2014), [https://www.nacionmulticultural.unam.mx/afromexicanos/cap\\_2.html](https://www.nacionmulticultural.unam.mx/afromexicanos/cap_2.html) (last accessed 7 September 2023); Gloria Lara Millán, “Negro-Afromexicanos: Formaciones de alteridad y reconocimiento étnico América” *Revista de Estudios & Pesquisas Sobre as Américas* 8, 1 (2014): 167; Nicté-Ha López Chávez, “La movilización etnopolítica afromexicana

It is unclear how many people the organizers sought to attract to the event. In the end, they managed to bring together a small number of folks from the Costa Chica and attract some activists and academics from outside the region and Mexico. EPCOA, along with its founder Néstor Ruiz Hernández, was the only missing organization, while Purpura had yet to be founded. Meanwhile, local community presence was largely limited to José María Morelos residents, of whom only a minority attended.<sup>227</sup>

Despite drawing a relatively small crowd, the Foro Afromexicanos marked a significant shift in the Afro-Mexican movement, as the first public gathering in which activists prioritized strategic planning for constitutional recognition. The most pressing issue discussed at the event was how to get the Mexican government to recognize Afro-Mexicans as a distinct ethnic group and grant them specific rights. For that to happen, activists needed to collectively agree on the constitutional articles they would seek to reform. Ziga Gabriel, who attended the event as a speaker and representative of the CDI-Jamiltepec, proposed targeting Article 2 of the Mexican Constitution. In his talk, Ziga Gabriel quoted the first paragraph of Article 2, which stated, “The Nation has a multicultural composition originally supported by its Indigenous peoples, who are those who descend from populations that inhabited the current territory of the country when colonization began and who preserve their own social, economic, cultural, and political

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de la Costa Chica de Guerrero y Oaxaca: logros, limitaciones y desafíos,” *Perfiles Latinoamericanos* 26, 52 (2018):

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<sup>227</sup> “Relación de participantes Foro Afromexicanos,” in in *De Afromexicanos a Pueblo Negro* eds. Israel Reyes

Larrea, Nemesio J. Mitchell Rodríguez y José Francisco Ziga (México DF: UNAM, 2014),

[https://www.nacionmulticultural.unam.mx/afromexicanos/cap\\_9.html](https://www.nacionmulticultural.unam.mx/afromexicanos/cap_9.html) (last accessed 7 September 2023).



institutions, or part of them.”<sup>228</sup> He indicated that the article’s language of multiculturalism and recognition of Indigenous peoples as an ethnic group with specific rights was an opening for Afro-Mexicans to seek and gain equivalent status. Following this logic, however, necessitated evidence of Afro-Mexican ethnic difference and ancestral linkages to a pre-independent Mexico. As in other parts of Latin America, Afro-Mexicans would have to present themselves as “indigenous-like” to achieve an equivalent status and protection as Indigenous peoples.<sup>229</sup>

A significant obstacle to getting the Mexican government to recognize Afro-Mexicans was their social and statistical invisibility. Only a couple years prior to the Foro Afromexicanos, the president of CONAPRED, the leading state institution to eliminate discrimination, was unable to provide a reliable population estimate for Afro-Mexicans at a UN CERD periodic

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<sup>228</sup> For video of Ziga Gabriel’s presentation see:

<https://www.nacionmulticultural.unam.mx/afromexicanos/video.html> (last accessed 7 September 2023). For Article 2 of the Mexican Constitution see: <https://www.diputados.gob.mx/LeyesBiblio/pdf/CPEUM.pdf> (last accessed 7 September 2023).

<sup>229</sup> <https://www.nacionmulticultural.unam.mx/afromexicanos/video.html> and Francisco Ziga, “Elementos del marco legal para el reconocimiento de los derechos del Pueblo Negro en México,” in *De Afromexicanos a Pueblo Negro* eds. Israel Reyes Larrea, Nemesio J. Mitchell Rodríguez y José Francisco Ziga (México DF: UNAM, 2014), [https://www.nacionmulticultural.unam.mx/afromexicanos/cap\\_5.html](https://www.nacionmulticultural.unam.mx/afromexicanos/cap_5.html) (last accessed 7 September 2023). The topic of constitutional recognition at the federal and state levels will be expounded on chapter 5. For discussion on “indigenous-like” strategies see Juliet Hooker, “Indigenous Inclusion/Black Exclusion: Race, Ethnicity and Multicultural Citizenship in Latin America,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 37, 2 (May 2005): 285-310; Peter Wade, *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (New York: Pluto Pres, 2010), 119; and Tianna S. Paschel, *Becoming Black Political Subjects: Movements and Ethno-Racial Rights in Colombia and Brazil*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 81-116.

review in Geneva, Switzerland.<sup>230</sup> This lack of knowledge stemmed from the absence of demographical data on Afro-Mexicans as a distinct group in modern Mexico's censuses, as well as the niche status of Afro-Mexican studies.

Activists understood the importance of census data to help demonstrate the population number and demographic information of Afro-Mexicans inhabiting the region. During the gathering, Glyn Jemmott noted that since the 2010 national census was approaching, it was critical to begin working with the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI) to include a question that would count Afro-Mexicans as an ethnic group.<sup>231</sup> Seeking ideas from panelists, he asked how activists could go about persuading INEGI to include a question into the 2010 census to count Afro-Mexican and not need to wait for the 2020 census. Nemesio Rodríguez, an anthropologist from UNAM-PUMC with a history of working with Indigenous populations, replied that for the 2010 census it was too late. As he explained, INEGI had already formulated its questionnaire. Activists should have been in conversation with INEGI at least two years earlier. Any attempt to convince representatives to modify it would be a losing battle. To highlight this point, he added that Indigenous communities failed to convince INEGI to make revisions to the 2010 census because they acted too late in approaching the institution. Rodríguez concluded that social pressure was not enough to compel INEGI, an autonomous institution, to change how it designed its questionnaires and carried out its population count.<sup>232</sup>

In addition to addressing specifics of being recognized in the constitution and included in the national census, the gathering examined the case of Colombia's pathway toward Black

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<sup>230</sup> CERD/C/SR.1731, 24 February 2006, 3.

<sup>231</sup> Translation: National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI).

<sup>232</sup> <https://www.nacionmulticultural.unam.mx/afromexicanos/video.html>.

inclusion and recognition. Carlos Rúa Angulo from the ECOTAMBOR organization and former advisor and member of the team driving Colombia's Law 70 of 1993, attended the Foro as a guest speaker. Rúa Angulo began by clarifying that Law 70 did not emerge alongside the 1991 constitutional reforms in Colombia. Rather, it was a result of collective struggle, one that he linked to a legacy dating back centuries of Black resistance against oppression. He emphasized that collective action was how Afro-Colombians secured the right to be recognized as a different group, create ethnic municipalities, and struggle against racism. Drawing from his experience in Colombia, Rúa Angulo cautioned those in attendance that there would be opposition from unsympathetic governments. Unless profound governmental transformation occurred, he added, all their achievements would live only on paper and fail to generate the change they so desired.<sup>233</sup>

To ensure the sustainability and efficacy of their campaign for recognition, activists needed to address the recent fragmentation of the movement and find a way of working together. Ecosta's Heladio Reyes Cruz publicly criticized the division between México Negro and Colectivo AFRICA, specifically. He particularly reproached the rise of competing forums held by the two organizations. Others in attendance added that the fracture between those organizations weakened the movement and made it vulnerable to external actors with personal interests coming in to deepen the divide. Foro Afromexicanos then provided an opportunity for organizations and their leaders to set aside their differences and commit toward collective action. The attendance and participation of México Negro activists in Colectivo AFRICA's event signaled a willingness on their part to move forward collectively. That commitment was then cemented when two México Negro representatives publicly pledged to work alongside Colectivo

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<sup>233</sup> Rúa, "La experiencia del Pueblo Afrocolombiano," 2.

AFRICA. In 2009, following the event, local organizations and UNAM's PUMC-Oaxaca established the Red de Organizaciones de Pueblos Negros (ROPN).<sup>234</sup> The organizations comprising the ROPN were AFRICA, México Negro, and Purpura.<sup>235</sup>

Foro Afromexicanos concluded with organizers delivering public declarations and demands addressed to the Mexican nation. First, the declaration accused the Mexican government of ignoring and neglecting the Afro-Mexican population and being in “total opposition” to recognizing and appreciating Mexico’s African heritage. It denounced the absence of a “legal framework that recognizes [their] rights to an identity and cultural diversity, which has resulted in the application of public policies inadequate to the needs of [Black populations], who are in a state of marginalization and vulnerability.” Second, they delivered a list of demands. Among them was for the Mexican government to recognize Afro-Mexicans and their contributions to Mexican history, culture, and national identity. They also demanded implementing laws to eliminate racism, discrimination, and xenophobia, as well as the right to a “positive affirmation of [their] identity with a gender perspective.” The published declaration included all the organizations present, as well as those absent, like EPOCA, as signatories.<sup>236</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> Translation: Black Peoples Organizations Network.

<sup>235</sup> Afro México, “Foro Afromexicanos, 2007. Parte 3 de 4,” 6 August 2011, 05:34, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UsOPn8gl-wQ&list=WL&index=12> (last accessed 7 September 2023); “Foro Afromexicanos (a manera de Informe),” *AFRICA A.C.* (Blog), 19 June 2010, <http://colectivoafrica.blogspot.com/2010/06/foro-afromexicanos-manera-de-informe.html> (last accessed 7 September 2023); Lara Millán, “Negro-Afromexicanos”; López Chávez, “La movilización etnopolítica.”

<sup>236</sup> Documentos del Foro Afromexicanos,” in *De Afromexicanos a Pueblo Negro* eds. Israel Reyes Larrea, Nemesio J. Mitchell Rodríguez y José Francisco Ziga (México DF: UNAM, 2014), 13-14, [https://www.nacionmulticultural.unam.mx/afromexicanos/cap\\_2.html](https://www.nacionmulticultural.unam.mx/afromexicanos/cap_2.html) (last accessed 7 September 2023).

### 4.3 The 2010 Census

In modern Mexico's history of census data collection, questions about race have been notably absent. However, while Mexico refrained from incorporating racial categories into its censuses, census officials used cultural markers, like language and customs, to identify the Indigenous population. INEGI did not include any other categories, despite the diversity of ethno-racial identities held by most Mexicans. Consequently, the census only recognized Indigenous peoples, characterized by their adherence to traditional customs and use of native languages, as a distinct ethnic group. As for Afro-Mexicans, INEGI counted them as part of the general Mexican population.<sup>237</sup> In so doing, Mexico's omission of an Afro-Mexican category in the national census rendered that population socially invisible.

Thus, since the first Encuentro de Pueblos Negros in 1997, activists and allies began discussing the necessity to compel INEGI to include a question in national censuses to count Afro-Mexicans as a distinct group. Doing so would be a first step to make Afro-Mexicans visible to all levels of government and ensure they were explicitly included in public policies as

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<sup>237</sup> According to the Project on Race and Ethnicity in Latin America, Mexicans self-identified as either *mestizo/o* (64.3 percent), white (13 percent), Indigenous (11.9 percent), or Black (3 percent). See Regina Martínez Casas, Emiko Saldívar, René D. Flores, and Christina A. Sue, "The Difference Faces of Mestizaje: Ethnicity and Race in Mexico," in *Pigmentocracies: Ethnicity, Race, and Color in Latin America*, ed. Edward Telles and the Project on Ethnicity and Race in Latin America (PERLA) (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 52-53. On censuses in Latin America see Mara Loveman, *National Colors: Racial Classification and the State in Latin America*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), 232-247. Also see George Reid Andrews for his discussion on race and its appearance as a category in Latin American censuses: George Reid Andrews *Afro-Latin America: Black Lives, 1600-2000*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 21-29.

Afrodescendants. However, discussions and demands to being included in censuses were largely contained within the annual EPN events. México Negro's Sergio Peñaloza Pérez recalled that while they made public demands in those gatherings for INEGI to meet with them, activists failed to deliver formalized written requests to the agency.<sup>238</sup>

In early 2009, INEGI reached out to Costa Chica's Black organizations. It is unclear what compelled INEGI to take this step. According to INEGI representatives, the agency's full autonomy has kept it immune to external pressures from interest groups and international bodies.<sup>239</sup> Nevertheless, in April 2009, the agency met with the Red de Organizaciones de Pueblos Negros (ROPN) at the Museo de las Culturas Afromestizas Vicente Guerrero Saldaña in Cuajinicuilapa, Guerrero. During that meeting, INEGI representatives dismissed ROPN's requests for including a question that counted Afro-Mexicans as its own group. They reasoned that it was unnecessary for Afrodescendants to be included in the census as Blacks when there were already counted as Mexicans.<sup>240</sup>

INEGI representatives did, however, agree to a follow-up meeting with the ROPN. In the second meeting, INEGI pledged to research how other Latin American countries designed their census to count Afrodescendants as a different group. In the third meeting, the agency's representatives shared their results with the ROPN, including the questionnaires of countries like Colombia. INEGI representatives, however, made no commitment to include such a question for the 2010 census. According to Peñaloza Pérez, the folks from INEGI did assure the ROPN that

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<sup>238</sup> Sergio Peñaloza Pérez, interview by author, 24 November 2020.

<sup>239</sup> INEGI Representatives, Carole Odette Schmitz Basañez and Jorge Ricardo Alanis Serratos, interview by author, 27 May 2021.

<sup>240</sup> Peñaloza Pérez, interview.

the agency would develop and conduct a study that would help them determine whether it was feasible to include a question in the 2010 census.<sup>241</sup>

In 2009, the Consejo Nacional para Prevenir y Eliminar la Discriminación (CONAPRED) partnered with the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) to design and conduct a study that would help determine the feasibility of including a question in the national census to count Afro-Mexicans as an ethnic group.<sup>242</sup> It is unclear if INEGI reached out to the institutions to conduct the study. Spearheading the joint initiative was historian Juan Manuel de la Serna Herrera of UNAM, whose research focused on Afrodescendants in colonial Mexico and Central America and who also formed part of the AFRODESC (Afrodescendientes y Esclavitud: Dominación, Identificación, y Herencias en las Américas) project.<sup>243</sup>

At the outset of the study, de la Serna and his team acknowledged Mexico's long history of ignoring its Black population. They cited Mexican authorities negating the existence of an Afro-Mexican population, which was buttressed by their absence in national censuses. So fixed was the government's disregard of Afro-Mexicans that public and academic institutions lacked reliable estimates, grounded in adequate methodologies, on the population count of Blacks in

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<sup>241</sup> Peñaloza Pérez, interview.

<sup>242</sup> Translation: National Council to Prevent and Eliminate Discrimination (CONAPRED); National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM).

<sup>243</sup> AFRODESC was an academic project funded by the French National Institute for Research. The initiative was constituted by academic institutions in France, Mexico, and other Latin American countries. For more details see Carlos Agudelo, "Estudios sobre afrodescendientes en Centroamérica. Saliendo del olvido," *Tabula Rasa*, núm. 27, (2017), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25058/20112742.449>, <https://www.redalyc.org/journal/396/39654308009/html/>. Translation: Afrodescendants and Slavery: Domination, Identity, and Legacy in the Americas (AFRODESC).

Mexico. It was no wonder then that phrases like “there are no Blacks in Mexico” were pervasive among non-Black Mexicans and that they associated Blackness with foreignness. Such a degree of invisibility made Afro-Mexicans especially vulnerable to discrimination and inequality.<sup>244</sup>

The report also looked outward to the international sphere and its emerging trends in human rights. In particular, the authors invoked international declarations regarding discrimination and the recognition of Afrodescendants. De la Serna et al referenced the United Nations’ 1963 Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination and subsequent declarations, to legitimize the need to embark on projects that would help eliminate discrimination against Afro-Mexicans. Among the declarations mentioned in the report included those from the 2000 Chile Conference, the 2001 Durban Conference, and the 2009 Durban Review Conference in Geneva. The report also referenced recommendations from the United Nations and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean to develop measures that ensured the rights of Afrodescendants be protected and respected.<sup>245</sup> Moreover, the authors cited the growing number of Latin American countries that up to that point had included a question in their censuses to identify and count their Afrodescendant population.

During July, August, and September of 2009, de la Serna and his team visited three regions in Mexico which had at least one municipality housing a significant concentration of Afrodescendants: Costa Chica, Veracruz, and Coahuila.<sup>246</sup> Their fieldwork consisted primarily of

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<sup>244</sup> Juan Manuel de la Serna Herrera, Gina Chacón Fragoso, and Ingrid Ebergenyi Salinas, *Exploración antropológica para formulación de la pregunta sobre las personas afromexicanas en el censo nacional de población y vivienda y en encuestas relacionadas*, (México, DF: CONAPRED, 2010), 10-14.

<sup>245</sup> de la Serna Herrera, *Exploración antropológica*, 14-16;

<sup>246</sup> de la Serna Herrera, *Exploración antropológica*, 54.



interviews with locals and drew quantitative data from INEGI and the Consejo Nacional de Población (CONAPO) to find correlations between ethnicity/race and socioeconomic marginalization.<sup>247</sup> The study found that the four states – Guerrero, Oaxaca, Veracruz, and Chiapas – with the highest poverty rates in the nation also had the highest populations of Afrodescendants and Indigenous peoples.<sup>248</sup>

The report emphasized the diverse ethno-racial identities held by Afro-Mexicans, which demonstrated variation both within regions and across the nation. In the Costa Chica, researchers identified at least six Afrodescendant identity terms (*negra/o*, *morena/o*, *afromestiza/o*, *zambo*, *afroindia/o*, *afromexicana/o*, *mulata/o*) that locals associated with, while in Veracruz two additional terms were also used (*afromestiza/o* and *negra/o*). Meanwhile, in Coahuila’s Múzquiz municipality, most Afrodescendants identified as *negra/o Mascoga/o*. Such diversity led de la Serna and his team to conclude that it was unfeasible for INEGI to count Afrodescendants using only one or even two terms. Doing so would yield inaccurate population numbers and reduce the significance of their presence “in the composition of the totality of the national population.” Thus, they concluded that it was “precipitated” and “counterproductive” to include a category for Afro-Mexicans in the 2010 national census.<sup>249</sup>

De la Serna’s team understood that the census was an instrumental tool to make visible, address, and eliminate ethno-racial systemic discrimination. Therefore, despite arguing against including Afro-Mexicans as a group in the 2010 national census, they recommended for a comprehensive study that would yield an accurate population count and detailed demographic

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<sup>247</sup> Translation: National Population Council (CONAPO).

<sup>248</sup> de la Serna Herrera, *Exploración antropológica*, 36-38.

<sup>249</sup> de la Serna Herrera, *Exploración antropológica*, 142-143 (conclusions) and 53-119 (identity).

data that included Afro-Mexicans' social, cultural, and economic activities. The report particularly stressed the need for information concerning "their geographic location (and their territorial segregation) [and] their level of integration to Mexican society based on the exercise of their rights as citizens."<sup>250</sup> In so doing, they hoped to get a better understanding of the nation's Afrodescendant population and their living conditions.

Additionally, de la Serna and his team expected for that information to serve as a catalyst for research policies and procedures that would make visible and prevent discrimination against Afro-Mexicans. Therefore, the report's list of recommendations called for mixed-method studies that would identify issues concerning Afro-Mexicans. It also proposed developing a geo-referencing study to map out communities with a sizeable Black population and elucidate issues around their "integration" framed along the lines of their "civil and human rights." The report then advocated for "the creation of indicators for preventing and eliminating discrimination" that should "be incorporated into the design of public budgets that promote the fight against discrimination." Finally, de la Serna et al. suggested taking "concrete actions" to combat systemic and structural anti-Black racism and help make visible the Afro-Mexican population.<sup>251</sup>

Using the report's findings and conclusions, INEGI decided against including a question in the 2010 national census that would count Afro-Mexicans as an ethnic group. Ultimately, INEGI argued that the multitude of terms that Afro-Mexicans identified with precluded them from designing a clear and effective question that would gather data on Mexico's Black

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<sup>250</sup> de la Serna Herrera, *Exploración antropológica*, 144-145.

<sup>251</sup> de la Serna Herrera, *Exploración antropológica*, 144-145.

population. Thus, INEGI counted Afro-Mexicans as part of the general population in the 2010 census.<sup>252</sup>

#### 4.4 The Pilot Census

By the 2010s, most Latin American nations had included questions about race and ethnicity in their national censuses. George Reid Andrews notes that this period marked “the first time in a century or more” that many Latin American countries collected demographic data on Afrodescendant populations as ethno-racial groups.<sup>253</sup> Mexico, however, lagged behind those Latin American nations in counting Afrodescendants as a distinct demographic group. The unsuccessful efforts by Black activists and their allies to persuade INEGI to include Afro-Mexicans as a separate category in the 2010 national census underscored the persistent disinterest in recognizing the nation’s Black population.

After their unsuccessful attempt to have a question included in the 2010 national census that would count Afro-Mexicans as an ethnic group, the Red de Organizaciones de Pueblos Negros (ROPN) designed and carried out a pilot census for Oaxaca’s Costa Chica. Spearheading the project was UNAM anthropologist Nemesio Rodríguez, with support from PUMC-UNAM and funding from the United Nations Population Foundation (UNFPA). To conduct the pilot

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<sup>252</sup> INEGI Representatives, Carole Odette Schmitz Basañez and Jorge Ricardo Alanis Serratos, interview by author, 27 May 2021.

<sup>253</sup> Andrews, *Afro-Latin America: Black Lives*, 29.

census, the ROPN enlisted local youth and trained them to collect data.<sup>254</sup> The ROPN also organized workshops that went beyond basic training to offer local youth knowledge of their history as a racialized group, afford them a deeper understanding of the “economic, political, cultural, and social conditions and situation of the Costa Chica,” and equip them with legal arguments to be recognized as an ethnic group.<sup>255</sup>

Designing the questionnaire was a collaborative effort between local activists and Rodríguez. After having developed multiple drafts of the questionnaire, the final and approved version consisted of 27 questions that facilitated the collection of the following data: employment, income, education, household composition, healthcare (traditional and modern), migration patterns, discrimination, and village ethnic composition. Missing from the questionnaire, however, was a question asking how interviewees identified ethno-racially. Instead, volunteers asked whether Afro-Mexicans constituted the majority or minority population in the surveyed area in relation to the Indigenous and mestizo/white population.<sup>256</sup>

The pilot census was conducted between 22 May 2011 and 19 June 2011. The results indicated that the majority of households included in the study were situated in predominantly Afro-Mexican communities. Regarding family and labor, the findings showed that one family member participated in remunerated labor, and one-third of the family engaged in unpaid labor.

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<sup>254</sup> In charge of this responsibility were the civic organizations AFRICA, México Negro, and Purpura.

<sup>255</sup> Nemesio Rodríguez, *Avance de la encuesta piloto de la población negra en la Costa Chica oaxaqueña*, (México, D.F.: UNAM, 2012), 27-28; Also see Nemesio Rodríguez, *Avance de la encuesta piloto de la población negra en la Costa Chica oaxaqueña: Resultados Preliminares II*, UNAM-PUIC, [https://www.nacionmulticultural.unam.mx/portal/pdf/proyectos\\_academicos/encuesta\\_piloto.pdf](https://www.nacionmulticultural.unam.mx/portal/pdf/proyectos_academicos/encuesta_piloto.pdf) (last accessed 7 September 2023).

<sup>256</sup> Nemesio Rodríguez, interview by author, 7 June 2021; Rodríguez, *Avance*, 29-35.

The data also showed that 94 percent of those surveyed lacked an upper secondary education (grades 10-12). According to the project, while most interviewees were aware of traditional medicine (71 percent), they sought modern healthcare at local clinics (78 percent). The study also showed that 58 percent of those interviewed had a family member who had emigrated from the Costa Chica; of those, 89 percent migrated to the United States. Additionally, 16 percent of participants reported having experienced discrimination.<sup>257</sup>

Volunteers surveyed 24 percent of the region's population, which significantly exceeded INEGI's required seven percent sample size for initiating revisions to the national census. The study found that 97 percent of participants were in favor of INEGI recognizing Afro-Mexicans as an ethnic group in the national census. And while the pilot census did not inquire about participants' preferred ethno-racial term, the project seemingly challenged INEGI's assertions that the absence of clear ethno-racial term would hinder their ability to count Mexico's Afrodescendant population.<sup>258</sup>

#### **4.5 Institutional Recognition**

In 2001, following the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity,<sup>259</sup> the General Directorate of Popular Cultures of CONACULTA “convened a group of institutions

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<sup>257</sup> Rodríguez, *Avance*, 36-134.

<sup>258</sup> Rodríguez, interview; Rodríguez, *Avance*, 130.

<sup>259</sup> The declaration aspired to “greater solidarity based on recognition of cultural diversity, awareness of the unity of the human race and on the development of intercultural exchanges.” See <https://www.unesco.org/es/legal-affairs/unesco-universal-declaration-cultural-diversity> (last accessed 9 September 2023).

with the purpose of exchanging experiences on language policy and cultural diversity.” As a result of that meeting, the Grupo de Coordinación Interinstitucional (GCI) was formed with the objective of “analyzing, discussing and proposing unified actions” pertaining to the implementation of academic, training, and cultural initiatives, along with cultural outreach endeavors.<sup>260</sup> In 2005, CONAPRED joined the GCI, which at that point was constituted by the Dirección General de Culturas Populares (DGCP-CONACULTA), Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indígenas (INALI), Coordinación General de Educación Intercultural y Bilingüe (CGEIB-SEP), Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social (CIESAS), Instituto Nacional Indigenista (INI), and other public institutions.<sup>261</sup>

In 2010, the GCI changed its name to the Movimiento Nacional por la Diversidad Cultural de México (MNDCM). That change occurred around the same time that the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution proclaiming 2011 as the International Year for People of African Descent, which aimed to “advance the integration of people of African descent into all political, economic, social and cultural aspects of society.”<sup>262</sup> In Mexico, where the central government and its institutions had historically ignored its Afrodescendant population, the campaign served as a catalyst for bringing visibility to this population within the state’s purview. Thus, in 2011, the MNDCM began its efforts to promote the public visibility of Afro-

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<sup>260</sup> MNDCM, *Movimiento Nacional por la Diversidad Cultural de México (MNDCM): Informe Secretaría Técnica 2016-2018*, 4, <https://copred.cdmx.gob.mx/storage/app/uploads/public/5b4/ceb/24b/5b4ceb24b7828137593909.pdf> (last accessed 9 September 2023).

<sup>261</sup> For a full list of participating institutions see MNDCM, *Informe Secretaría Técnica*, 5.

<sup>262</sup> United Nations, General Assembly, A/RES/64/169, 19 March 2010; United Nations International Year for People of African Descent, Global Campaign, <https://www.un.org/en/events/iypad2011/global.shtml>.

Mexicans. In that year, the MNDCM organized five events for the recognition of Afro-Mexicans, its representatives participated in an event that Black activists organized in the Costa Chica, and it collaborated with CONAPRED to publish two studies about Mexico's Black population. Afro-Mexicans remained in the MNDCM agenda in subsequent years but not at the same capacity as in 2011.<sup>263</sup>

To be sure, before 2011, CONAPRED had been giving some attention to the social and economic conditions of Afro-Mexicans. Between 2006 and 2010, the institution published two studies on the population's demographics, how they identified, their living conditions, and their experiences with discrimination. However, in 2011, CONAPRED significantly increased its efforts to raise the visibility of Mexico's Black population. CONAPRED representatives started participating in and delivering speeches at national events promoting the recognition of Afro-Mexicans and advocated for the rights of Afrodescendants at international gatherings. In August 2011, María Vallarta Vázquez, CONAPRED's Director of Outreach, International Affairs and Compensatory Programs, attended the Primer Encuentro de Expresiones Culturales de la Población Afrodescendiente in Marquelia, Guerrero, which was an MNDCM-sponsored event. A primary goal of this gathering was to forge networks between institutional actors and local Afro-Mexicans to generate strategies that would lead to their recognition. That same month a CONAPRED representative attended the First World Summit of Afrodescendants in Honduras. Then, in September 2013, CONAPRED's president, Ricardo Bucio Mújica, attended and spoke at the Third World Summit of African and Afrodescendant Mayors and Leaders in Colombia. In his address at the summit, Bucio Mújica admitted Mexico's failure to count Afro-Mexicans as an ethnic group but reported that Mexico was committed to collecting demographic data on that

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<sup>263</sup> MNDCM, *Informe Secretaría Técnica*, 4-13.

population in 2015.<sup>264</sup> In addition to those events, CONAPRED was present at national gatherings. In September 2012, it was one of the organizers of the Primer Foro Nacional sobre Poblaciones Afrodescendientes en México, the event mentioned in the introduction of this chapter. In May 2013, the agency also participated in the Foro Los Pueblos Afromexicanos: La Lucha Actual por Su Reconocimiento.<sup>265</sup>

In 2011, the Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas (CDI), also a member of MNDCCM since 2010, began addressing the topic of Afro-Mexicans. The

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<sup>264</sup> Georgina Carrillo, Urgente generar políticas específicas de atención para comunidades afromexicanas,” 18 August 2011, [https://www.conapred.org.mx/index.php?contenido=registro\\_encontrado&tipo=2&id=893](https://www.conapred.org.mx/index.php?contenido=registro_encontrado&tipo=2&id=893) (last accessed 9 September 2023); CONAPRED, “Preservar cultura y valores propios, vía para dejar atrás exclusión de afrodescendientes,” 19 August 2011, [https://www.conapred.org.mx/index.php?contenido=noticias&id=895&id\\_opcion=291&op=448](https://www.conapred.org.mx/index.php?contenido=noticias&id=895&id_opcion=291&op=448) (last accessed 9 September 2023); CONAPRED, “Participa Conapred en Cumbre Mundial Afro en Colombia,” 13 September 2013, [https://www.conapred.org.mx/index.php?contenido=registro\\_encontrado&tipo=2&id=4341](https://www.conapred.org.mx/index.php?contenido=registro_encontrado&tipo=2&id=4341) (last accessed 9 September 2023); CONAPRED, “Trabaja México en reconocer derechos de población afro: Conapred,” 13 September 2013, [https://www.conapred.org.mx/index.php?contenido=registro\\_encontrado&tipo=2&id=4339](https://www.conapred.org.mx/index.php?contenido=registro_encontrado&tipo=2&id=4339) (last accessed 9 September 2023); CONAPRED, “Presenta México propuestas contra discriminación de pueblos afrodescendientes,” 16 September 2013, [https://www.conapred.org.mx/index.php?contenido=registro\\_encontrado&tipo=2&id=4342](https://www.conapred.org.mx/index.php?contenido=registro_encontrado&tipo=2&id=4342) (last accessed 9 September 2023).

<sup>265</sup> CONAPRED, “Convocatoria al Foro Los Pueblos Afromexicanos: la lucha actual por su reconocimiento,” Undated, [https://www.conapred.org.mx/index.php?contenido=registro\\_encontrado&tipo=2&id=3941](https://www.conapred.org.mx/index.php?contenido=registro_encontrado&tipo=2&id=3941) (last accessed 9 September 2023); CONAPRED, “Declaración. Primer Foro Nacional Población Afromexicana y Afrodescendiente en México,” Undated, [https://www.conapred.org.mx/index.php?contenido=registro\\_encontrado&tipo=2&id=2887](https://www.conapred.org.mx/index.php?contenido=registro_encontrado&tipo=2&id=2887) (last accessed 9 September 2023).



Mexican government established the institution in 1948 as the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (INI), to generate “cultural change in [Indigenous] communities” and their integration “into the economic, social and political life of the nation.”<sup>266</sup> In 2003, the Mexican government established the CDI to “guide, coordinate, promote, support, encourage, monitor and evaluate the programs, projects, strategies and public actions for integral and sustainable development of indigenous peoples and communities, in accordance with Article 2 of the Constitution,” which recognized and protected the collective rights of Indigenous communities.<sup>267</sup>

While Mexican lawmakers initially established the institution with Indigenous communities in mind, the International Year for People of African Descent campaign and pressure from CERD prompted the CDI to collect demographic data on the nation’s Afrodescendant population.<sup>268</sup> The CDI began by establishing the Consulta para la Identificación de Comunidades Afrodescendientes de México (CICAM). Drawing from their work with the Indigenous population, the CDI defined the Consulta “as a set of procedures and actions that allow knowing, promoting, enriching, registering, systematizing and reintegrating the opinions, suggestions, recommendations and decisions issued by indigenous peoples and communities on

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<sup>266</sup> <https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/32276/cdi-antecedentes-ini.pdf> (last accessed 9 September 2023). Also, see CDI, *Instituto Nacional Indigenista – Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas, 1948-2012*, (Mexico, D.F.: CDI, 2012), 7, <https://www.inpi.gob.mx/dmdocuments/ini-cdi-1948-2012.pdf> (last accessed 9 September 2023). The institution was an affiliate of the Instituto Indigenista Interamericana. See CDI, *Instituto Nacional*, 5.

<sup>267</sup> CDI, *Instituto Nacional*, 39. Also see [https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/288682/ley-de-la-cdi-261\\_220617.pdf](https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/288682/ley-de-la-cdi-261_220617.pdf) (last accessed 9 September 2023).

<sup>268</sup> Liliana Garay Cartas, “Informe final de la Consulta para la Identificación de Comunidades Afrodescendientes de México,” (México DF: Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas, 2012), 10-21.

various issues that concern them and on which the State must take public policy measures.” To realize the Consulta, the CDI established the Comité Técnico (technical committee), consisting of representatives from local civic organizations, public and academic institutions, and international agencies.<sup>269</sup>

After two meetings with the technical committee in the summer of 2011, the CDI formulated a study that was conducted in Guerrero, Oaxaca, Veracruz, and Coahuila.<sup>270</sup> The CDI began by organizing regional informational forums in local communities. The Comité Técnico held a total 153 informational meetings, with 141 taking place in Guerrero and Oaxaca, 11 in Veracruz, and 1 in Coahuila.<sup>271</sup> Those meetings were then followed by public gatherings that divided attendees into focus groups. The data collection process began in Oaxaca in August 2011 and concluded in 2012 in Michoacán and Chiapas.

In its final report, the CDI reported that self-identifying terms among Afrodescendants varied and were often linked to local communities and histories, reinforcing CONAPRED/UNAM 2009 observations. In Veracruz, participants primarily used the terms “Negra/o,” “Moreno/a,” and “Afromestiza/o.” In Guerrero popular terms included “Negra/o,” “Morena/o,” and “Costeña/o,” though participants in Guerrero were beginning to adopt terms with an Afro prefix like “Afromexicana/o,” “Afroguerrerense,” and “Afroindio.”<sup>272</sup> In Oaxaca,

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<sup>269</sup> Garay Cartas, “Informe final,” 25. Also see Velázquez and Iturralde, “Afromexicanos,” 240; López Chávez, “La movilización etnopolítica,” 16-17; Gloria Lara Millán, “Construcción del sujeto de derecho afrodescendiente en México. Reflexiones desde el Pacífico Sur mexicano,” *Diálogo Andino* 52 (2017): 57-76.

<sup>270</sup> Garay Cartas, “Informe final,” 26-28. The study also incorporated Michoacán and Chiapas, but those two states were added in 2012, see Garay Cartas, “Informe final,” 32, 153-166.

<sup>271</sup> Garay Cartas, “Informe final,” 33.

<sup>272</sup> Garay Cartas, “Informe final,” 75-78.

the four prevelant ethno-racial identities were “Negra/o,” “Morena/o,” “Afromestiza/o,” and Afromexicana/o,” with Negra/o and Moren/ao the most widely used.<sup>273</sup>

In the report’s closing arguments, its authors stated that while participants used different forms of self-recognition, they were aware of their African ancestry. They concluded that the majority of the communities consulted “complied with the constitutional criteria of community formation: they form a social, economic and cultural unit, they are settled in a territory and have organizational particularities according to their *usos y costumbres*.” The report also found that Afro-Mexicans presented “conditions of marginalization; social, economic and cultural exclusion; and suffer[ed] significant levels of discrimination and racism.” The Afro-Mexican case, the report indicated, shared similar circumstances with the nation’s Indigenous peoples.<sup>274</sup>

#### **4.6 Becoming Afro-Mexican**

As the CDI was carrying out its community meetings, local civic organizations in the Costa Chica were planning a public gathering that they hoped would generate a term that would facilitate an institutional categorization of Afro-Mexicans as a distinct group. The CDI and institutions participating in CICAM's Comité Técnico provided support to plan and organize the event. Heladio Reyes Cruz and Lucila Mariche of Ecosta took the lead in planning the Encuentro de los Pueblos Negros en Movimiento por su Reconocimiento. Mariche, a resident of Charco Redondo, noted that to host the event in her village required the entire community's assistance.

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<sup>273</sup> Garay Cartas, “Informe final,” 113-115.

<sup>274</sup> Garay Cartas, “Informe final,” 169-170.

Seeing that the Encuentro was a three-day event, organizers needed to provide meals and accommodations for visitors. Mariche and other Ecosta participants, primarily women like Rosa María Castro Salinas, held community meetings with local families to coordinate the event's logistics.<sup>275</sup>

On 21-23 October 2011, the Encuentro de los Pueblos Negros en Movimiento por su Reconocimiento was held in Charco Redondo, Oaxaca. The Encuentro took place after the Consulta completed its fieldwork in Oaxaca but before going to Guerrero.<sup>276</sup> The event hosted 570 registered participants. Among those in attendance were representatives from universities, civic organizations, regional and national institutions, and visitors from twenty-seven local communities. Also present were politicians, diplomats, and international actors.<sup>277</sup>

During the three-day event, the most powerful and consequential discussion was on terminology, particularly the terms “Afro-Mexican/Afrodescendant” and “Black.” Debate over those terms preceded the Charcho Redondo Encuentro. On 8 August 2011, Germany’s Heinrich Böll Foundation organized the “Afrodescendants in Mexico: An Unrecognized Minority” public debate in Mexico City, which brought together activists, scholars, and state representatives to discuss the history and living conditions of Afro-Mexicans. During the event, panelist Israel

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<sup>275</sup> Heladio Reyes Cruz, interview by author, 03 Nov 2021; Lucila Mariche, interview by author, 27 Oct 2021; Rosa María Castro Salinas, interview by author, 04 Dec 2020. Also see, Velázquez and Iturralde, “Afromexicanos,” 239; América Nicté-Ha López Chávez, “La movilización etnopolítica afromexicana de la Costa Chica de Guerrero y Oaxaca: logros, limitaciones y desafíos,” *Perfiles Latinoamericanos* 26, 52 (2018), 12.

<sup>276</sup> According to the CDI report, the meetings in Guerrero were held in November and December, they were also held in November in Coahuila, in July and July in Michoacán and Chiapas. There are no precise dates for when the Consulta held the meetings in Veracruz. See Garay Cartas, “Informe final,” 39-166.

<sup>277</sup> <http://mexiconegroac.blogspot.com/2012/02/breve-informe-los-pueblos-negros-en.html>.

Reyes Larrea of AFRICA asserted that people already identified as Black in the villages of Oaxaca's Costa Chica. He claimed that academics and state actors were complicating the terminology issue. Reyes Larrea added, "In the 1950s, it occurred to someone to name us Afro-Mixtecos, [then] the term Afro-Mestizo appears, more recently Afro-Mexicans, after Durban, Afrodescendants."<sup>278</sup> Reyes Larrea argued that terminology would eventually change again in response to academic and international trends. However, an academic on the same panel, who happened to work closely with México Negro, pointed out that the term Afrodescendant resulted from the "Durban conference but precisely because of Afrodescendant organizations."<sup>279</sup>

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<sup>278</sup> See "Ponencia Israel Reyes Larrea. Jour Fixe: Afrodescendientes en México," Fundación Heinrich Böll México y El Caribe, YouTube video, 09 August 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OhnXyiK1tHg>.

<sup>279</sup> See "Ponencia Maria Elisa Velázquez. Jour Fixe: Afrodescendientes en México," Fundación Heinrich Böll México y El Caribe, YouTube video, 09 August 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZJ7WcGGShxk>.

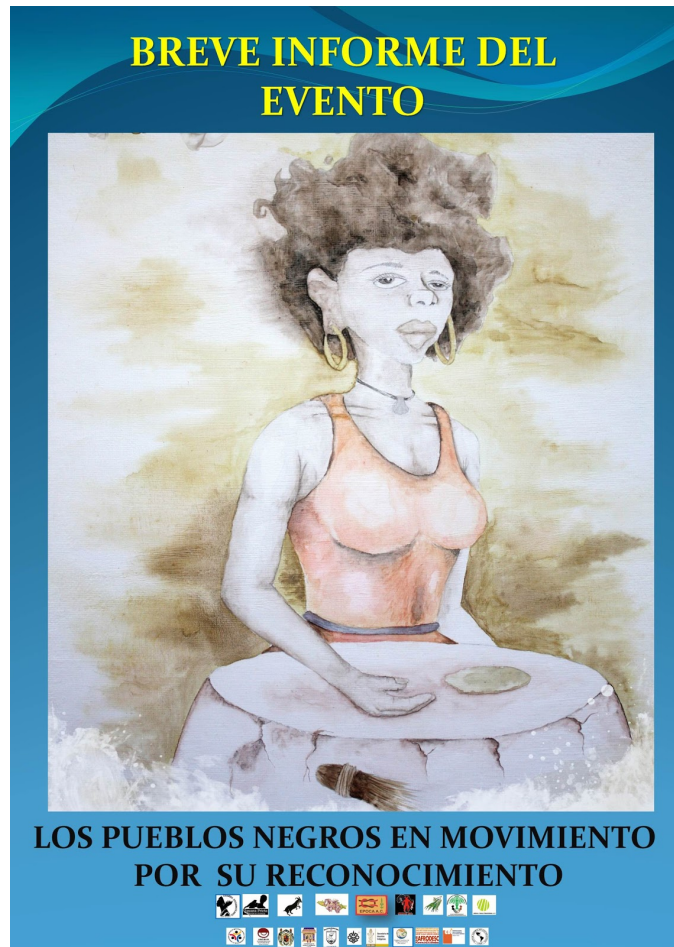


Figure 2. Poster for the 2011 Charco Redondo Encuentro

During the Charco Redondo event, the debate on terminology grew more intense. The group advocating for “Black” argued that term “Afro-Mexican” was foreign to most Mexicans, including Afrodescendants. Getting Black Mexicans to identify as “Afrodescendant” or “Afro-Mexican” would require an intensive national awareness campaign. Meanwhile, those in support of the term “Afro-Mexican” pointed out that the term “Black” was used regionally, particularly in the Costa Chica of Oaxaca. They also added that the term had long been used in Mexico as an insult. They feared that as a result Afro-Mexicans would refuse to identify as “Black.” Moreover,

scholars favoring the term “Afrodescendant” emphasized the international link the category had to other Afro-Latin Americans.<sup>280</sup>

In the end, those in attendance settled on making Afro-Mexican the official term to categorize Mexico’s Black population to seek institutional recognition.<sup>281</sup> That understanding was part of list of agreements that emerged from the Encuentro. Activists and their allies agreed to create a network of organizations and state and academic institutions. They also committed to organizing and delivering workshops to advocate for constitutional recognition of Afro-Mexicans at the state level. The remaining agreements were geared toward spreading national awareness of the Afro-Mexican population through multiple outlets, including academic institutions and mass media communications. Moreover, international actors agreed to write and send a report to the United Nations to explain the actual living conditions of Afro-Mexicans in the Costa Chica.<sup>282</sup>

Most activists and their allies have referenced the Encuentro as a watershed moment in the history of the Afro-Mexican movement. The decision to create and promote an official term for Afrodescendants helped articulate the demands of Afro-Mexican activists and their allies. However, that decision also fractured Mexico’s Black social movement, which had already seen

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<sup>280</sup> María Elisa Velázquez, interview by author, 17 January 2022; Francisco Ziga Gabriel, interview by author, 7 April 2021; Néstor Ruiz Hernández, interview by author, 19 January 2021; Sergio Peñaloza Pérez, interview by author, 16 April 2021.

<sup>281</sup> See Rodolfo Prudente, “Breve informe, los pueblos negros en movimiento por su reconocimiento,” *México Negro* (blog), 22 February 2012, <http://mexiconegroac.blogspot.com/2012/02/breve-informe-los-pueblos-negros-en.html>.

<sup>282</sup> See Luis Daniel Lagunes Marín, “Resolutivos del encuentro ‘Los pueblos negros en movimiento por su reconocimiento,’” *Cimarronaje, Africanías, Negritudes y Manumisiones* (blog), 23 November 2011, <http://cimarronajesss.blogspot.com/2011/11/resolutivos-del-encuentro-los-pueblos.html>.

its share of infighting and disagreements. After the event, representatives of the Red de Organizaciones de Pueblos Negros disbanded the network. In its place, activists created two separate collectives, deepening the movement's divide. Contributing to this divide was the contentious decision to make "Afro-Mexican" the official term. Those in favor of making Afro-Mexican the official classification reiterated that the name was only a tool to demand official recognition. They assured those in attendance that the term was not created to infringe on colloquial self-identifying terms used by local communities. Still, those reassurances did little to quell the opposition to the term Afro-Mexican. Opposing activists have since claimed that the category was an imposition from academics. However, a group of Black activists supporting the term continue to refute that claim and maintain that the decision was made collectively among those in attendance.<sup>283</sup>

#### **4.7 The 2015 Inter-Census**

In 1995, INEGI began conducting a mid-decade Population and Housing Count in response to the rapid changes that Mexico was experiencing, allowing the agency to provide estimates of the total population.<sup>284</sup> The mid-decade census was repeated in 2005 and was

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<sup>283</sup> Velázquez, interview; Ziga Gabriel, interview; Ruiz Hernández; Peñaloza Pérez, interview.

<sup>284</sup> INEGI, *Memoria del Censo de Población y Vivienda 1995*, IX

[https://www.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/productos/prod\\_serv/contenidos/espanol/bvinegi/productos/metodologias/est/702825000746.pdf](https://www.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/productos/prod_serv/contenidos/espanol/bvinegi/productos/metodologias/est/702825000746.pdf) (last accessed 9 September 2023).



scheduled to occur in 2015. By 2013, INEGI started preparations for the 2015 Population and Housing Count.<sup>285</sup>

By then, INEGI had conceded to demands from activists, state and academic institutions, and international bodies to count Afro-Mexicans as an ethnic group. From 5 to 16 August 2013, INEGI representatives and regional leadership conducted a pilot study in Cuajinicuilapa, Guerrero, to test questions about Afro-Mexican self-identification and assess the logistics of how the 2015 Population and Household Count would be applied.<sup>286</sup> Then from 7 to 11 October 2014, INEGI carried out an “Afrodescendant Test” to evaluate the functionality of a self-identification question for Afro-Mexicans in regions where the population was prevalent. INEGI representatives tested two different questionnaires in four municipalities: Tonalá, Chiapas; Los Múzquis, Coahuila, Cuajinicuilapa, Guerrero; and San Juan Bautista Lo de Soto, Oaxaca.<sup>287</sup>

In addition to conducting fieldwork, INEGI invited Black activists, academics, and institutional representatives to assist in formulating the self-identification question. During that process, the issue of identifying a category that Afrodescendants could understand and identify with re-emerged. This time, while all activists favored including “negra/o” alongside “afromexicana/o,” some non-Black state actors were reluctant do so. They argued that because the classification “negra/o” had historically been used as a pejorative term Afro-Mexicans would

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<sup>285</sup> INEGI, “Se valora procedimiento de importante operative,” August 2013, 25,

<https://intranet.inegi.org.mx/Aplicaciones/Informaticos/Notiteca/2013/Notas%20Notiteca%202013/Agosto2013.htm>

1 (last accessed 9 September 2023). Also see Gloria Lara Millán, “Visibilización en los censos. Afrodescendientes en la Encuesta Intercensal 2015 en México,” *Legajos Boletín del Archivo general de la Nación* 12 (2017): 95-129.

<sup>286</sup> INEGI, “Se valora procedimiento de importante operative,” August 2013, 25.

<sup>287</sup> INEGI, *Informe 2014: Actividades y Resultados*, (Aguscalientes: INEGI, 2015), 319,

<https://www.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/transparencia/contenidos/doc/inf2014.pdf> (last accessed 9 September 2023).

be disinclined to identify as such. According to some activists present, those same state actors also expressed uneasiness in using the term openly. Nevertheless, after much deliberation, the questionnaire was designed to ask, “According to your culture, history and traditions, do you consider yourself Black, meaning Afro-Mexican or Afrodescendant?” The respondent could answer “Yes, Yes In Part, No, Do not Know.”<sup>288</sup>

INEGI’s 2013 pilot test and collaborative work with external actors, like Black activists and their academic allies, was a major shift from its previous policy of not counting Afro-Mexicans as a distinct group. There were several reasons for that shift. First, the United Nations Committee to Eliminate Racial Discrimination (CERD) had intensified its appeals for Mexico to collect information on the nation’s Afrodescendant population. In its 2012 concluding report, CERD expressed concern that Mexico “provided no detailed information on people of African descent in its periodic report, despite the Committee’s request to that effect in 2006.”<sup>289</sup> In 2013 the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) members repeated CERD’s concerns and made similar requests to Mexico during the party-state’s Universal Periodic Review.<sup>290</sup>

The UN declaration making 2011 the International Year for People of African Descent, compounded by CERD’s and UNHRC’s requests, brought further legitimacy to Afro-Mexican demands for recognition. Refusing to count Afro-Mexicans was no longer feasible amidst the increasing attention Afrodescendants were receiving from international organizations.

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<sup>288</sup> INEGI, “Cuestionario Intercensal 2015,” 5

[https://www.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/programas/intercensal/2015/doc/eic2015\\_cuestionario.pdf](https://www.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/programas/intercensal/2015/doc/eic2015_cuestionario.pdf) (last accessed 9 September 2023); Millán, “Visibilización,” 114.

<sup>289</sup> CERD/C/MEX/CO/16-17, 4 April 2012.

<sup>290</sup> A/HRC/WG.6/17/MEX/2, 12 August 2013; A/HRC/25/7, 11 December 2013.

Meanwhile, members of Congress were also taking steps to pressure INEGI to count Afro-Mexicans. Between May 2013 and September 2014, two Congresswomen, Teresa de Jesús Mojica Morga (PRD-Deputy) and María del Rocío Pineda Gochi (PRI-Senator) presented Propositions for Point of Agreement to the Chamber of Deputies and Senate, respectively.<sup>291</sup> Congress approved both, urging INEGI to include Afro-Mexicans in the 2015 population count.<sup>292</sup> To be clear, those efforts were largely symbolic. First, it is important to note that those Propositions were not legally binding. Points of Agreements were merely indicative of Congress' stance on a particular issue and did not carry legal force.<sup>293</sup> And secondly, by the time those

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<sup>291</sup> For Mojica Morga see Gaceta Parlamentaria, Miércoles 29 de mayo de 2013 / LXII/1SPR-7-1374/41332, [https://www.senado.gob.mx/65/gaceta\\_del\\_senado/documento/41332](https://www.senado.gob.mx/65/gaceta_del_senado/documento/41332) (last accessed 9 September 2023). For Pineda Gochi see María del Rocío Pineda Chochi, Proposición con Punto de Acuerdo, 3 September 2013, Gaceta: LXII/3PPO-2/50012, [https://infosen.senado.gob.mx/sgsp/gaceta/62/3/2014-09-03-1/assets/documentos/PA\\_PRI\\_Gochi\\_IINEGI.pdf](https://infosen.senado.gob.mx/sgsp/gaceta/62/3/2014-09-03-1/assets/documentos/PA_PRI_Gochi_IINEGI.pdf) (last accessed 9 September 2023).

<sup>292</sup> For Mojica Morga see Gaceta Parlamentaria, Miércoles 05 de junio de 2013 / LXII/1SPR-9-1376/41580, [https://www.senado.gob.mx/65/gaceta\\_del\\_senado/documento/41580](https://www.senado.gob.mx/65/gaceta_del_senado/documento/41580) (last accessed 9 September 2023). For Pineda Gochi see Dictámenes a Discusión y Votación, 4 November 2014, Gaceta: LXII/3PPO-45/50092, [https://www.senado.gob.mx/65/diario\\_de\\_los\\_debates/documento/2659](https://www.senado.gob.mx/65/diario_de_los_debates/documento/2659) (last accessed 9 September 2023).

<sup>293</sup> On Propositions for Point of Agreement see “Proposición con punto de acuerdo,” <http://sil.gobernacion.gob.mx/Glosario/definicionpop.php?ID=194#:~:text=Proposici%C3%B3n%20con%20punto%20de%20acuerdo&text=Documento%20que%20presenta%20un%20legislador,una%20postura%20institucional%20al%20respecto> (last accessed 9 September 2023).

appeals were introduced and later passed, INEGI had already designed and begun testing a question for Afro-Mexicans for the 2015 inter-census.<sup>294</sup>

Be that as it may, INEGI must have felt some degree of pressure from local activism, support from national and regional institutions, and recommendations from the United Nations to include Afro-Mexicans in the 2015 inter-census. While some INEGI representatives have insisted that the institution was immune to external pressures, a 2022 INEGI report speaking on the 2010 national census indicated otherwise.<sup>295</sup> According to the report's author, UN recommendations were used for the design, methodology, and implementation of census exercises for the 2010 census and those preceding it.<sup>296</sup>

With a question in hand to count Afro-Mexicans as an ethnic group in the 2015 inter-census, the next step was to design an awareness campaign to ensure Afro-Mexicans checked the box identifying them as Afrodescendants. This step was not unique to Mexico. In Brazil, Black organizations drove a national campaign, which aimed to get as many Afro-Brazilians as possible to identify as Black using the slogan “Não deixe sua cor passar em branco,” for the 1991 census. In Colombia, the same process was implemented in 2005 with the *Beautiful*

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<sup>294</sup> Dictámenes a Discusión y Votación, 4 November 2014, Gaceta: LXII/3PPO-45/50092, [https://www.senado.gob.mx/65/diario\\_de\\_los\\_debates/documento/2659](https://www.senado.gob.mx/65/diario_de_los_debates/documento/2659) (last accessed 9 September 2023). INEGI, “Se valora procedimiento de importante operative,” August 2013, 25.

<sup>295</sup> INEGI Representatives, Carole Odette Schmitz Basañez and Jorge Ricardo Alanis Serratos, interview by author, 27 May 2021.

<sup>296</sup> INEGI, *Historia de los Censos de Población en México siglo XIX*, 2022, 207, [https://www.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/productos/prod\\_serv/contenidos/espanol/bvinegi/productos/nueva\\_estruc/889463907411.pdf](https://www.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/productos/prod_serv/contenidos/espanol/bvinegi/productos/nueva_estruc/889463907411.pdf) (last accessed 9 September 2023).

*Faces* campaign.<sup>297</sup> In Mexico, CONAPRED and the SEGOB designed the campaign, using “Soy Afro” as a slogan and “I Recognize Myself and I Count” as the theme. Those institutions then produced and disseminated posters with the campaign slogan and theme. Radio stations also ran thirty-second spots and a thirty-minute interview with CONAPRED’s president, Ricardo Bucio, to raise the campaign’s visibility in Afro-Mexican communities. However, there appears to have been a miscommunication between IENGI and the institutions responsible for the campaign regarding the ethno-racial categories that would appear in the inter-census. In addition to the “Soy Afro” slogan, CONAPRED and SEGOB used two other poster designs with “Soy Morena/o” and “Soy Mascoga/o” slogans. INEGI did not include the last two categories in the survey’s questionnaire. The inter-census included only Black, Afrodescendant, and Afro-Mexican.<sup>298</sup>

During the month of March 2015, INEGI conducted its inter-census and counted its Black population as a distinct group for the first time ever. In August of the same year, the agency reported that 1.4 million people self-identified as Black, Afrodescendant, or Afro-Mexican,

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<sup>297</sup> José Luis Petruccelli, “Ethnic/Racial Statistics: Brazil and an Overview of the Americas,” in *Everlasting Countdowns: Race, Ethnicity and National Censuses in Latin American States*, eds. Luis Fernando Angosto Ferrández and Sabine Kradolfer (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 289; Melissa Nobles, *Shades of Citizenship: Race and the Census in Modern Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 146-162; Tianna Paschel, “‘The Beautiful Faces of my Black People’: Race, Ethnicity and the Politics of Colombia’s 2005 Census,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36, 10 (2013): 1544-1563. Translation for (Não deixe sua cor passar em branco): “Don’t let your color pass as white.”

<sup>298</sup> INEGI, “Cuestionario Intercensal 2015,” 5, [https://www.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/programas/intercensal/2015/doc/eic2015\\_cuestionario.pdf](https://www.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/programas/intercensal/2015/doc/eic2015_cuestionario.pdf) (last accessed 9 September 2023); Millán, “Visibilización,” 107-108.

comprising 1.2 percent of the Mexican population.<sup>299</sup> Those figures dwarfed previous estimates suggesting that approximately 450,000 Mexicans were of African descent, making up less than one percent of the national population. Nevertheless, the 2015 count disappointed activists and some academics, who had expected Afro-Mexicans to make up 5 to 10 percent of the Mexican population. To explain the reported numbers, they cited the reduced scale of the inter-census and the lack of training census takers received to pose a question about self-identification. Activists hoped the 2020 national census would provide a more accurate count of the Afro-Mexican population.

#### 4.8 Conclusion

The early 2010s marked a significant period for Afro-Mexicans. Despite an unsuccessful attempt to add a question in the 2010 census to count Afro-Mexicans as a distinct group, INEGI began taking steps to include them in the 2015 inter-census. INEGI's dramatic turn was due in large part to a strengthening Afro-Mexican movement and growing institutional support for the agency to count Afro-Mexicans as a distinct group. Furthermore, the increasing institutional

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<sup>299</sup> INEGI, "Encuesta Intercensal 2015," 19 August 2021, <https://www.inegi.org.mx/rnm/index.php/catalog/214> (last accessed 9 September 2023); INEGI, *Historia de los Censos de Población en México siglo XIX*, 2022, 209, [https://www.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/productos/prod\\_serv/contenidos/espanol/bvinegi/productos/nueva\\_estruc/889463907411.pdf](https://www.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/productos/prod_serv/contenidos/espanol/bvinegi/productos/nueva_estruc/889463907411.pdf) (last accessed 9 September 2023); INEGI, "Presentación de la Encuesta Intercensal 2015: Principales resultados," [https://www.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/programas/intercensal/2015/doc/eic\\_2015\\_presentacion.pdf](https://www.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/programas/intercensal/2015/doc/eic_2015_presentacion.pdf) (last accessed 9 September 2023).

support was largely in response to the 2011 International Year for People of African Descent and CERD urging the Mexican government to recognize its Afro-Mexican population.

In addition to gaining institutional support, this period helped Afro-Mexicans to designate “Afro-Mexican” as the official category for Black Mexicans. It was a contentious process that deepened divisions among Afro-Mexican activists and their allies. Nevertheless, identifying an institutional term certainly seems to have streamlined their campaign for recognition and inclusion.

Finally, the early 2010s marked another shift in the Afro-Mexican movement. Not only was there a steady increase in the number of Black organizations emerging in the Costa Chica, but the roles of women were changing. As the next chapter will show, after 2011, a small group of Afro-Mexican women joined the movement and began carving out leadership roles for themselves. In so doing, they challenged the movement’s gendered hierarchy and began mobilizing women to address issues affecting them as Afro-Mexican women.

## 5.0 Gender and Women in the Afro-Mexican Movement, 1997-2020

On 1 December 2018, Elena Ruiz Salinas ascended onto a stage in front of the Metropolitan Cathedral in Mexico City's Centro Histórico. Thousands of people in the Zócalo and millions more watched from their tech devices as an Afro-Mexican woman from a small town on Oaxaca's coast appeared before them. Wearing a white dress with traditional Oaxacan embroidery and a matching African head wrap, she walked next to the newly elected President Andrés Manuel López Obrador. After waving at the crowd, López Obrador locked arms with Ruiz Salinas on one side and an Indigenous man on the other, who also wore traditional attire. Together the three walked across the stage to meet a group of Indigenous peoples, who waited to perform a *limpia* on the newly sworn-in president with the aromatic plant *copal*. The *limpia* marked the beginning of the historic Handing Over the Command Staff ceremony,<sup>300</sup> making López Obrador the first Mexican president ever to publicly receive this honor for the nation to

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<sup>300</sup> Handing Over the Command Staff ceremony is a symbolic gesture in which indigenous communities collectively recognize and show support for an incoming office holder. In Mexico, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador was the first president in Mexican history to receive this honor during the public inauguration. This symbolic gesture has been done in Indigenous communities and is practiced in other parts of Latin America. For more information on the 2018 ceremony see Miguel Camarena Agudo, "El bastón de mando," *UNIVA* (blog) *Universidad del Valle de Atemajac* December 05, 2018. <https://www.univa.mx/blog/el-baston-de-mando/> (accessed January 21, 2023). For regional examples in Mexico also see Milvet R. Alonso Gutiérrez, "Entrega del bastón de mando: simbología indígena y política en dos ceremonias," *Relaciones: Estudios de historia y sociedad* 40, 160 (dic. 2019) <https://doi.org/10.24901/rehs.v40i160.632>.



witness. The ritual symbolized the Indigenous communities' recognition of the new president and his commitment to that population.<sup>301</sup>

As the sole representative of the Afro-Mexican population, Ruiz Salinas's presence at the ceremony similarly indicated that community's recognition of López Obrador's presidency and his commitment to them. The event not only marked the first time that a woman who self-identified as Afro-Mexican took part in a national ceremony of this scale, but also López Obrador's government became the first to publicly commit to protecting the rights of Afro-Mexicans. Ruiz Salinas later told the Oaxacan newspaper, *El Imparcial de la Costa*, "It has not been easy to arrive to this place, to participate in the Handing Over the Command Staff ceremony to the president of the republic, considering that for many years we have worked, struggled against discrimination, for our rights and visibility."<sup>302</sup>

The inauguration ceremony began Ruiz Salinas's appearances in national public spaces. On 09 August 2019, she returned to Mexico City to attend the first National Forum for Indigenous Peoples and Afro-Mexicans at the National Museum of Anthropology. As the representative of the Afro-Mexican population, Ruiz Salinas told the crowd, "For us, it is a day of celebration... where Indigenous and Afro-Mexican communities are together for the first time interweaving knowledge and histories after so many years of struggles." She relayed to the

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<sup>301</sup> "AMLO recibe Bastón de Mando en Zócalo y da a conocer 100 compromisos," You Tube video, 3:39:15, posted by Nmas, December 1, 2018,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yMOQ7cMKGbI&t=73s> (accessed January 21, 2023).

<sup>302</sup> Mario Méndez, "Afro-mexicanos entregan bastón de mando a AMLO," *El Imparcial de la Costa*, December 4, 2018, <https://imparcialoaxaca.mx/costa/251599/afromexicanos-entregan-baston-de-mando-a-amlo/> (accessed January 21, 2023).

crowd the Afro-Mexican community's call to create a united front with the Indigenous communities to make demands on the state. She demanded that they be recognized as subjects of public law and be guaranteed their full rights. Ruiz Salinas concluded, "with this inclusion, never again will there be a Mexico that does not respect the rights of our Indigenous and Afro-Mexican communities, never again a *pueblo* without Indigenous or Afro-Mexicans."<sup>303</sup>

The presence of Elena Ruiz Salinas in those national public spaces coincided with the appearance of other women from the Afro-Mexican movement in international spaces. That degree of public visibility for Afro-Mexican women marked a critical change concerning their role in the movement. Since the beginning of the movement in 1997, women had organized from the shadows. In events organized by Afro-Mexican activists, like the annual Encuentros de Pueblos Negros (EPN), women were designated to the kitchen to prepare meals, serve them, and clean. Meanwhile, men became the faces of the movement as they took exclusive control of leadership roles. What then compelled women to take up supportive rather than leadership roles? How did men manage to monopolize leadership positions in the movement? What transpired between 1997 and 2018 that led women to move out of the shadows and into public view as activists and leaders?

Scholars of modern Afro-Latin America have examined the experiences of women in the region and their roles in Black social movements.<sup>304</sup> However, the experiences and histories of

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<sup>303</sup> "Inauguración del Foro Nacional de los Pueblos Indígenas y Afromexicano," YouTube video, 119:53, posted by Instituto Nacional de los Pueblos Indígenas México, August 6, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uoHNeNoAkdK> (accessed January 21, 2023).

<sup>304</sup> For literature on the experiences of Afro-Latin women see George Reid Andrews, "Inequality: Race, Class, Gender," in *Afro-Latin American Studies: An Introduction*, ed. Alejandro de la Fuente and George Reid Andrews

Afro-Mexican women are limited in the scholarship. Anthropologist Laura A. Lewis has addressed the topic of gender and the lives of Afro-Mexican women in the community of San Nicolas, Guerrero. Mexican scholar Itza Amanda Varela Huerta has produced ethnographic accounts of Afro-Mexican female activism.<sup>305</sup> Nevertheless, a historical approach to gender and Afro-Mexican organizing is absent from English and Spanish-language scholarship. This chapter will address this topic to examine how it was that women first took supportive roles in the Afro-

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(New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 52-91; Laura A. Lewis, *Chocolate and Corn Flour: History, Race, and Place in the Making of “Black” Mexico*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012). For women in Latin American Black movements see Kiran Asher, *Black and Green: Afro Colombians, Development, and Nature in the Pacific Lowlands*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009); Lucía Busquier, “Luchas y resistencias en la historia reciente protagonizadas por mujeres afrodescendientes: Red de Mujeres Afrolatinoamericanas, Afrocaribeñas y de la Diáspora en 1992,” *HiSTOReLo. Revista de Historia Regional y Local* 14, (31): 56-92; Kia Lilly Caldwell, *Negras in Brazil: Re-envisioning Black Women, Citizenship, and the Politics of Identity*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007); Eshe Lewis and John Thomas, “‘Me Gritaron Negra’: The Emergence and Development of the Afro-Descendant Women’s Movement in Peru,” *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 20, 8 (2019): 18–39; Tianna S. Paschel, *Becoming Black Political Subjects: Movements and Ethno-Racial Rights in Colombia and Brazil*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); Keisha-Khan Y. Perry, *Black Women Against the Land Grab: The Fight for Racial Justice in Brazil*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); Julia Margaret Zulver, “Asociación de Mujeres Afro Por La Paz: Feminism with the Body and Face of a Woman,” *Latin American Perspectives* 48, 4 (2021): 105–123.

<sup>305</sup> Itza Amanda Varela Huerta, “Nunca más un México sin nosotras: feminismo y mujeres Afromexicanas,” *Política y Cultura* 51, (2019): 105-124; Itza Amanda Varela Huerta, “Mujeres Negras en el movimiento político afrodescendiente: una genealogía,” *A Contra Corriente* 19, 1 (2021): 190-208. Also see María Elisa Velázquez Gutiérrez and Gabriela Iturralde Nieto, *Afromexicanas: trayectoria, derechos y participación política*, (Ciudad de Mexico: Instituto Electoral de la Ciudad de Mexico, 2020).

Mexican movement to then become leaders of the movement and start an Afro-Mexican women's movement.

This chapter uses gender as a category of analysis to examine Afro-Mexican organizing in the Costa Chica region of Guerrero and Oaxaca. The chapter begins with a brief discussion of the region's gender norms, which scholars first examined in the mid-twentieth century.<sup>306</sup> It then draws from oral history interviews and audio-visual sources to elucidate how male and female activists reproduced those gender norms to structure the Afro-Mexican movement. Next, it examines how a new generation of women who entered the movement in the 2010s subverted traditional gender roles and demanded their place as equals to men. Finally, the chapter examines how international Afro-Latin American female networks influenced Afro-Mexican female activists, like the *Red de Mujeres Afrolatinoamericanas, Afrocaribeñas y de la Diáspora*. In doing so, the chapter will demonstrate that international spaces played a critical role in the evolution of Afro-Mexican women activists.

## 5.1 Gender in the Costa Chica

Men and women of the Costa Chica have characterized the region as pervasively *machista*. Afro-Mexican feminists, in particular, have denounced the patriarchal structures that have not only created violent environments for women generally but have also made female activists specifically invisible in the Afro-Mexican movement. The process of invisibility was

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<sup>306</sup> Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *Cuijla: Esbozo etnográfico de un pueblo negro*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (México, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1985).

rooted in practice of reproducing gendered spaces, making the private feminine and the public masculine. That logic generated power structures within the movement that positioned men as public-facing leaders and relegated women to the background in supportive roles, a pattern that has been documented in Black organizing in other parts of Latin America.<sup>307</sup>

Establishing gendered spaces and demarcating those boundaries was an unwavering cultural practice in the Costa Chica that scholars have documented since the mid-twentieth century. In her ethnographic research in the community of San Nicolas during the 1990s, Laura E. Lewis described how children formed “gender-separated groups, typically with cousins and siblings, who then provide protections including from other groups of children.”<sup>308</sup> Parents taught their children about the different spaces and the ones to which they belonged. Children were expected to participate in chores that constricted girls to the home’s interior and boys to the exterior. Lewis wrote, “girls...help[ed] around the house, learn[ed] to cook, [made] quick trips to the grinding machines for corn dough, clean[ed], and bathe[d] younger siblings. Boys [took] on more arduous outdoor chores, such as gathering kindling for their mothers’ kitchen, tidying yards, climbing fruit trees, and eventually helping their fathers in the fields.” Though women were the primary caretakers of children, their power to punish children changed as the children grew older. While mothers physically punished their daughters for “failing to properly carry out an important chore,” they “ceded [boys’] masculinization to [their] father[s].” Furthermore, as

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<sup>307</sup> For Brazil see Caldwell, *Negras in Brazil*, 155-156; for Colombia see Asher, *Black and Green*, 138; for Peru see Lewis and Thomas III, “Me Gritaron Negra,” 27. Also, in Brazil, the media largely ignored the work of female leaders while they acknowledged the contributions of male leaders. Perry, *Black Women Against the Land Grab*, 12-16.

<sup>308</sup> Lewis, *Chocolate and Corn Flour*, 191.

“boys mature[d], they [were] given more freedom than girls.” Boys, unlike girls, were free to roam about without being “ordered about (*mandado*)” by their mothers.<sup>309</sup>

Adults heightened the private and public divide in their own lives. Lewis noted that “all public labor is done by men.” In a region plagued by low secondary school completion and high illiteracy rates, men worked in the fields, as cab drivers, and as police officers. Others went “through town with mattresses, bottled water, hammocks,” and other goods to sell.<sup>310</sup> Fishing, too, was a male-dominated industry. Meanwhile, women started small businesses, which they often operated from the home. When they did work in public spaces, women often dominated them, like the local markets. By the 1990s, more women were contributing to the household income than before. Women’s participation in paid labor consequently blurred the lines between women as caretakers and men as providers. Yet rather than chipping away at the binary of gendered spaces, that change reinforced and exacerbated those traditional norms. One of Lewis’s male interviewees told her, “married women who work might hurt men’s ‘pride.’”<sup>311</sup>

The process by which men and women entered marital unions played a significant role in maintaining the Costa’s gendered spaces. In the mid-twentieth century, Mexican anthropologist Gonzalo Aguirre Beltran documented that marital unions between men and women occurred either through a practice of symbolic rapture of the bride or her violent kidnapping. Ethnographic studies from the 1990s and 2010s have noted that while the latter practice is less common, it

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<sup>309</sup> Lewis, *Chocolate and Corn Flour*, 191-194.

<sup>310</sup> Lewis, *Chocolate and Corn Flour*, 218.

<sup>311</sup> Lewis, *Chocolate and Corn Flour*, 207.

remains part of the local culture.<sup>312</sup> When young men did not kidnap their young brides, they conspired with their families to force them into marriage.

In the fishing town of El Zapotalito, seated under the shade of a tree on the side of her family home, Mariana told her daughter, Berenice, and me about what life was like for her growing up in the Costa Chica during the late 1970s. With tears in Mariana's eyes, she recalled how at fourteen years old she was forced to marry her husband, Roberto. Mariana told us that after living with an aunt in Cuajinicuilapa, Guerrero, she returned to live with her mother in a nearby community in the neighboring state of Oaxaca. During her time there, two young locals, Roberto and his female cousin, created a story about a supposed encounter between Mariana and Robert while her mother was away visiting family in the nearby city of Pinotepa Nacional. Roberto and his cousin alleged that Mariana engaged in sexual activities with Roberto. Mariana insisted that Roberto and his cousin fabricated the story, maintaining that she never met up with Roberto. Still, Roberto's and his cousin's claims were enough to provoke Mariana's brother to insult her and demand that she leave the family home. Seeing that Mariana's mother was in Pinotepa Nacional, her brother had full authority over her. A desperate Mariana considered running away but had no money. Furthermore, Roberto's cousin warned Mariana that if she did not marry Roberto, either her family would have to kill him or Roberto would have to kill her brother.

A day after the accusations against her, Mariana had gone off to collect water with her grandmother. When she returned home, she was met with Roberto and a small group of men whom she did not know. They took her by force, with her brother's approval. When her mother

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<sup>312</sup> Aguirre Beltran, *Cuijla*, 148-161; Lewis, *Chocolate and Corn Flour*, 119,152, 227; Varela Huerta, "Nunca más un México sin nosotras," 121-122.

returned home, she was told of Mariana's alleged behavior and subsequent forced union. Bringing shame to the family, they disowned Mariana. She told us, "From that moment I no longer had a mother, brothers, uncles. I had no one."<sup>313</sup>

Key in Mariana's story was the female body and the value that local society placed on it, especially female virginity. Not all young women entered into unions with their kidnappers, either because they themselves chose not to or because the abuser's family opposed the union. Family opposition typically stemmed from claims that the young woman was no longer a virgin at the time of her abduction and thus an unworthy wife. In those cases, young women also faced rejection from their own families. Seeing that local customs devalued the bodies of these young women for marriage purposes, it made finding an official marital union difficult for them. Thus, they often entered relationships with married men as *queridas*. The term emerged from *queridato*, a locally accepted extramarital system in which men took a mistress, at time multiple mistresses.<sup>314</sup>

Protecting the female body and virginity reinforced the gendered binary of the private and public. For instance, in San Nicolás, it was understood that men were "of the streets" and

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<sup>313</sup> Mariana, interview by author, October 26, 2021. Pseudonym was used for this participant and her daughter, who is identified here as Berenice.

<sup>314</sup> For more on *queridato* see Aguirre Beltran, *Cuijla*, 161-163; Lewis, *Chocolate and Corn Flour*, 210, 226-234. Also see "Voces de mujeres de la Costa Chica de Guerrero y Oaxaca," video, 27:29, YouTube, posted by INAH, May 16 2018, YouTube, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qy\\_hKpi9Ca0&list=WL&index=94](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qy_hKpi9Ca0&list=WL&index=94). The topic of *queridato* in the Costa Chica was the central theme of a 2018 Mexican film that was praised for being the first film to include an all Afro-Mexican cast and local actors. However, people from the coast, especially activists, criticized the film for sensationalizing the tradition. Elena Ruiz Salinas appeared in the film. See Jorge Pérez Solano, dir., *La Negra* (Mexico: IMCINE, 2018).



women “of the home.”<sup>315</sup> The home offered young women and girls safety from crime and violence and became a shield that protected their honor and purity. When out in public, especially “in the streets,” women were generally in small groups. Being alone in the streets in the dark of night was then a transgression of social norms that made a woman vulnerable to being a victim of violence and risked losing her purity.

It was under this cultural backdrop that the Afro-Mexican movement emerged. Many women recalled that gendered spaces were left untouched. Instead, activists (men and women) reproduced the male public and female private binary in the movement. In doing so, women’s voices went largely unheard in public spaces for the first fifteen years of the movement.

## **5.2 Organizing from the Kitchen**

In 1998, México Negro became the first Black organization to come into existence, emerging from the previous year’s first EPN event. The presidency of the organization was delegated to a local male Black activist from Cuajinicuilapa, Sergio Peñaloza Pérez, who remained in this role until 2021.<sup>316</sup> Three other male-led organizations helped drive the movement in its early stages: Asociación Civil Alianza para el Fortalecimiento de las Regiones Indígenas y Afromexicanas (AFRICA A.C.) founded and led by Israel Reyes Larrea, Ecosta

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<sup>315</sup> Lewis, *Chocolate and Corn Flour*, 209-210.

<sup>316</sup> While Peñaloza Pérez has held the presidency for the majority of México Negro’s existence, there were periods when other activists held that position, especially in the early years of the organization. See Sergio Peñaloza Pérez, interview by author, 24 November 2020; Manuel Avila, interview by author, 30 Oct 2021; and Juan Ángel Serrano Mariche, interview by Lucila Cristal Laredo Dominguez, 18 March 2023.

Yutu Cuii (Ecosta) established and directed by Heladio Reyes Cruz, and the Enlace de Pueblos y Organizaciones Costeñas Autonomas (EPOCA A.C.) created and steered by Néstor Ruiz Hernández.

México Negro was the Afro-Mexican movement's leading organization and the EPN its most significant annual gathering. The event has been a space where organizers and activists raise local awareness of the region's African cultural heritage and hold discussions on topics on recognition and inclusion. The EPN has also been a contact point between locals and external actors like academics, Mexican state actors, and international activists. With México Negro as a default leading organization, locals associated it with the EPN. However, an independent committee, comprised by three women and four men, which included Peñaloza Pérez and Reyes Larrea, organized and oversaw the annual EPN events. Three women joined the committee at different times. Donají Méndez Tello seems to have been the first to join the EPN committee, after meeting Peñaloza Pérez in Cuajinicuilapa, where both attended meetings to erect a local museum celebrating the region's Afro-Indigenous history and culture. Elena Ruiz Salinas, a married woman with children living in El Ciruelo, joined after attending EPN events as a local participant. It is unclear how the third woman, Guadalupe Avila Salinas, became a committee member.<sup>317</sup>

Being on the committee afforded those women a degree of power in the movement. They participated in discussions about the logistics of the events and often were at the forefront of organizing them. Every annual EPN was held in a different community. The women were then tasked with finding local vendors that would supply food. They then recruited women to help

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<sup>317</sup> Donají Méndez Tello, interview by author, 06 January 2022; Elena Ruiz Salinas, interview by author, 15 May 2021.

cook, set up, and clean. During the event, the women on the committee oversaw logistical matters to ensure everything ran smoothly.<sup>318</sup> As Elena Ruiz Salinas stated, “of course there were more women [at the EPN events] but they were in the kitchen. When the events were held, women were the ones who served water, prepared food, and washed dishes. Men were the ones who spoke and directed the roundtables while the women did the cleaning...that was her role, with very little participation in public speaking. In leading, she was not very involved in that matter.”<sup>319</sup>

Insofar as making decisions on the content of the events, women took a subordinate role to their male colleagues. Méndez Tello recalled the occasion she suggested including the topic of HIV/AIDS and how it was affecting local Afro-Mexican communities. When she presented the idea to the committee, they responded with silence and then resistance. They wondered how the topic fit into their Afro-Mexican recognition and inclusion agenda. For Méndez Tello, the issue was rooted in state marginalization and exclusion of Afro-Mexicans. The virus was brought to the region by way of migration. She explained that men who were compelled to leave their communities to find work in Mexico’s urban centers and the United States brought the illness to the region upon their return. It was a public health issue affecting men, women, and families.

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<sup>318</sup> The case of Afro-Mexican women is similar to that of Afro-Colombian women in the broader Black movement. Writing about the 1990s, Asher noted that many women in the Process for the Black Communities (PCN) were responsible for administrative and logistical tasks. She also noted that in instances when women held leadership roles, they complained that male PCN members undervalued their contributions to the movement. See Asher, *Black and Green*, 138-138.

<sup>319</sup> Ruiz Salinas, interview.

After relentless convincing, the committee approved a panel to address the topic. Méndez Tello then secured the participation of medical experts who presented the topic to the general public.<sup>320</sup>

Securing the approval for a HIV/AIDS panel at an EPN was a significant achievement for Méndez Tello. However, she and her female colleagues could have been more successful in getting a panel or round table to address other issues that affected Afro-Mexican women specifically. At the EPN that included the HIV/AIDS panel, Méndez Tello held a separate presentation in the kitchen for the women who were cooking for the event. There, female health specialists addressed the issue of HIV/AIDS and talked to the women about sexual health and reproductive rights. In this way, women like Méndez Tello transformed the kitchen into a safe space within the EPN. The kitchen became a segregated and private space for Afro-Mexican women to address issues that affected them and their families.<sup>321</sup>

Women's struggle to place their issues on the table was a process that lasted approximately fifteen years. Activists offered two explanations for the time-lapse. First, female activists admitted that, in the beginning, they focused primarily on disseminating Black consciousness in the region. The topic of gender was peripheral, at best, in the movement's objectives and also theirs. Second, when Afro-Mexican women activists began to push to include the topic at EPN events, their male counterparts resisted. To justify their opposition, they claimed that the movement's priority was to revive ethno-racial and cultural awareness in the Costa Chica and later demand the state's recognition of Afro-Mexicans. As in other parts of Latin American, male activists maintained that addressing issues specific to women risked

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<sup>320</sup> Méndez Tello, interview. On how issues affecting Black women were marginalized in the Afro-Brazilian movement see Paschel, *Becoming Black*, 59-60.

<sup>321</sup> Méndez Tello, interview.

complicating their main message and could derail the movement's success.<sup>322</sup> Some of those men took it further still by telling their female comrades to stop participating in the movement.<sup>323</sup>

In the earlier years of the EPN, there was a strong emphasis on resurrecting Afro-Mexican traditions unique to the region. The EPN showcased traditional dances like the *danza de los diablos* and the *son artesa* to raise cultural awareness and pride in local history. As a result, those events favored cultural revival over social issues. However, when the movement shifted focus to social issues of Afro-Mexican exclusion and marginality, male leaders continued to downplay women's issues. They insisted that women's demands were superfluous to the movement. Similar to the cultural phase of the movement, men worried that including women's demands would detract from the movement's demands for recognition and inclusion. Though women also prioritized constitutional recognition and inclusion of Afro-Mexicans, they understood those demands as part and parcel of access to state resources like healthcare and education. For them, symbolic recognition went in tandem with access to material resources to ensure the state met the urgent needs of their communities.<sup>324</sup>

Gaining access to services and material resources was critical to male leaders as well. However, they insisted on following a path that began with state recognition of Afro-Mexicans as a distinct ethnic group with specific rights and privileges. Once they achieved recognition, they could then pressure the government to create and enact compensatory policies. Therefore, they argued that the movement needed a unified and clear message to gain constitutional recognition. As a result, leaders tightly controlled their public relations. Only specific male

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<sup>322</sup> For the example of Colombia see Asher, *Black and Green*, 137.

<sup>323</sup> Méndez Tello, interview.

<sup>324</sup> Beatriz Amaro Clemente, interview by author, 08 June 2021.

leaders were authorized to give interviews to the media. Ruiz Salinas recalled that while women were forbidden to talk to the press, other male members of the movement were too. The strategy helped male leadership control the movement's narrative and maintain a consistent public discourse.<sup>325</sup>

These practices resulted in the silencing of Afro-Mexican women.<sup>326</sup> Not only were topics of gender and women's experiences discarded in favor of cultural matters and discussions of recognition, but also, men dominated the stage at EPN events. Furthermore, the invited speakers were predominantly men. When women did participate in those panels, they were often outsiders (from cities), mestiza/white, and middle-class professionals. Meanwhile, Afro-Mexican women either stood behind the stage running the event's logistics or cooked for speakers and attendees in the kitchen.

Paradoxically, women formed the primary base of many of the region's male-led organizations.<sup>327</sup> Ecosta and EPOCA had a higher number of women than men participating in their events and workshops. Heladio Reyes Cruz of Ecosta told me that the organization, which was formed in 1994, had been planning events specifically for women and celebrated International Women's Day (8th of March) before it even began participating in Mexico's Black movement and EPN events. He added that due to Ecosta's work with local women, Father Glyn Jemmott was compelled to reach out and establish a relationship with it. Moreover, Reyes Cruz asserted that it was in these male-led organizations that women honed their leadership skills to

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<sup>325</sup> Ruiz Salinas, interview.

<sup>326</sup> Amaro Clemente, interview.

<sup>327</sup> On Brazil from the 1970s to the 90s, women made up the majority of active members in Black movement organizations but men dominated leadership roles. See Caldwell, *Negras in Brazil*, 155-156.

later build the Afro-Mexican women's movement.<sup>328</sup> While many women referenced their time in those organizations and contributions to their growth as activists, they also made clear that male leaders established paternalistic relationships with them that kept women in the background and without a public voice.<sup>329</sup>

### 5.3 “*Llegué dando machetazos*”

In 2011, Mexican public institutions began working with activists and organizations to organize public gatherings in Mexico City, the Costa Chica, and Veracruz. The visibility of events like the 2011 Forum of Black Peoples in Movement for their Recognition organized by the National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples (CDI) and the 2012 First National Forum on Afro-Mexican and Afrodescendant Population in Mexico organized by the Secretary of Foreign Affairs (SRE) secured the attention and attendance of women who either had been indirectly connected or had no connections to Afro-Mexican organizing.

Women activists in the Costa Chica and Mexico City reference four names whom they consider to have subverted gender expectation of the Afro-Mexican movement and catalyzed an emerging Afro-Mexican women's movement in the region: Rosa María Castro Salinas, Yolanda Camacho, Beatriz Amaro Clemente, and Juliana Acevedo Ávila. In 2011, these women began attending meetings and events organized by activists who had been engaged in collective organizing since the first EPN in the 1997. While they all had roots in the Costa Chica, they

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<sup>328</sup> Heladio Reyes Cruz, interview by author, 03 November 2021.

<sup>329</sup> Rosa María Castro Salinas, interview by author, 04 December 2020; 06 May 2021; 11-12 September 2021.

spent significant time living in urban centers getting a high school and college education. In fact, their education was one of the characteristics that distinguished them from most women, and men, who had been active in the movement before them. A 2010 study revealed that 20 percent of adults in Costa Chica communities were illiterate, and 43 percent did not complete their primary education.<sup>330</sup> Educational attainment in earlier years was likely lower in the region. Moreover, their time living in urban areas afforded these women different experiences that did not fit neatly with expected gender norms of the region. Thus, collectively, the women began challenging the movement's gendered hierarchy in which men held on to leadership positions and women were relegated to supportive roles. They not only began demanding and carving out leadership positions for themselves but also helped amplify the voices of other Afro-Mexican women.<sup>331</sup>

In 2011, a forty-three-year-old Rosa María Castro Salinas traveled to her childhood community of Charco Redondo, Oaxaca, to attend the Encuentro de los Pueblos Negros en Movimiento por su Reconocimiento event. She volunteered to help with the logistical duties of the event to ensure everything ran smoothly. As Castro Salinas listened to the panelists speak, it dawned on her that no Afro-Mexican women were participating in those panels. That event

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<sup>330</sup> Informe final de la Consulta para la identificación de comunidades afrodescendientes / Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas; coord. Liliana Garay Cartas, (México: CDI, 2012): 92; for Guerrero's Costa Chica see Lewis, *Chocolate and Corn Flour*, 220-222, 231.

<sup>331</sup> Castro Salinas, interview. Likewise, Caldwell noted that in parts of Brazil, the Black women's movement was driven and comprised of women active in Black organizations. See Caldwell, *Negras in Brazil*, 158-160. Also see Paschel, *Becoming Black*, 59-63.



marked Castro Salinas' entrance to the Afro-Mexican movement and her struggle to transform the movement's gendered hierarchy and division of labor.<sup>332</sup>

Castro Salinas was born and raised in Oaxaca's Charco Redondo, a community near the Chacahua lagoons. After her mother passed away, Castro Salinas' grandmother and step-grandfather raised her and her sister. Her grandparents instilled a value for education in Castro Salinas and her sister, emphasizing self-reliance. They urged the sisters to leave Charco Redondo behind to pursue a higher education and secure a brighter future. Her grandmother especially advised the sisters to never rely on a man. Following her grandparents' advice, Castro Salinas left for Villa de Tututepec, where she completed her secondary education and then traveled to Oaxaca City, where she attended and graduated college. She then moved to the resort town of Huatulco, Oaxaca, where she co-founded a feminist organization in 2010 that was soon disbanded. In 2014, Castro Salinas founded the Asociación de Mujeres de la Costa de Oaxaca (AMCO A.C.).<sup>333</sup>

Yolanda Camacho was born in Mexico City to parents who migrated there from the Costa Chica's Villa de Tututepec. Both her parents were Afro-Indigenous, of Black and Mixtec ancestry. When she was nine, her family moved back to the coast. After completing middle school, Camacho left for Oaxaca City to complete high school and then left for Mexico City to work. During her time in those cities, she noticed that strangers, including her teachers, treated her differently from her peers and made remarks about her physical appearance. In 1995 Camacho left Mexico City and returned to the coast. In 2000 she began working with Ecosta Yutu Cuii and casually interacted with Afro-Mexican activists. In 2011, when Ecosta was tasked

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<sup>332</sup> Castro Salinas, interview.

<sup>333</sup> Castro Salinas, interview.

to organize the EPN in Charco Redondo, Camacho began to actively and earnestly participate in the Afro-Mexican movement.<sup>334</sup>

Like Yolanda Camacho, Beatriz Amaro Clemente, was born and raised in Mexico City to parents who had migrated from the Costa Chica. She graduated college with degrees in journalism and communications, returned to the coast in 2010, and in 2011 took an administrative post in the municipality of Pinotepa Nacional. Employed by the municipality's department of cultural affairs, she directed local projects that celebrated the region's Afro-Mexican culture. During that time, she met AFRICA A.C.'s Israel Reyes Larrea and Juliana Acevedo Ávila; the latter had been working with Reyes Larrea since the early 1990s. After meeting Reyes Larrea and Acevedo Ávila, Amaro Clemente started participating in the Afro-Mexican movement.<sup>335</sup>

Of this small group of women, Juliana Acevedo Ávila was the only one who had participated in Afro-Mexican activism since the early 1990s. During her primary-school years in Oaxaca's community of José María Morelos, Acevedo Ávila met Reyes Larrea, a local schoolteacher who produced community projects celebrating Afro-Mexican culture. As an adolescent, Acevedo Ávila participated in local efforts to rescue and revive Afro-Mexican cultural expressions and traditions like the *Danza de la Tortuga*. A key objective of those projects was to raise local Black consciousness and identity. Additionally, Acevedo Ávila attended the first EPN in 1997 and later participated in other Black forums and events. However,

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<sup>334</sup> Yolanda Camacho, interview by author, 30 November 2020.

<sup>335</sup> Amaro Clemente, interview.

like the other women of this small group, Acevedo Ávila left her community to complete her studies. She attended university in Oaxaca City and graduated with a law degree.<sup>336</sup>

As these women began to actively engage with the Afro-Mexican movement, they did so through male-led organizations. Acevedo Ávila began at an early age with Israel Reyes Larrea and later participated in AFRICA's local efforts. Castro Salinas and Camacho were connected to Ecosta and México Negro. Camacho also worked some time with EPOCA. Amaro Clemente attended events organized by those organizations but acted as an independent activist.<sup>337</sup> However, internal conflicts between these women and male leaders led some to create new organizations and collectives specifically for women. Like their male counterparts, the organizations they established used a strategy of ethnic inclusivity that celebrated the region's Black and Indigenous demographics. Thus, in 2014, Yolanda Camacho established the Colectiva de la Costa de Oaxaca Ña'a Tunda (Ña'a Tunda). She included the Mixtec term "*ña'a tunda*," which means Black woman, to signal that while Ña'a Tunda centered Afro-Mexican women, it also advocated for the needs of Indigenous women. In 2014, Castro Salinas founded the Asociación de Mujeres de la Costa de Oaxaca (AMCO), sending a similar message of inclusivity by avoiding exclusionary language in the organization's name. Amaro Clemente later founded Unidad para el Progreso de Oaxaca (UNPROAX).<sup>338</sup>

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<sup>336</sup> Juliana Acevedo Ávila, interview by author, 23 December 2021.

<sup>337</sup> Reyes Cruz, interview; Camacho, interview; Castro Salinas, interview; Amaro Clemente, interview; Acevedo Ávila, interview.

<sup>338</sup> Camacho, interview; Castro Salinas, interview. Also see María José Lucero Díaz, *Voces de Lucha en la Costa Chica de Oaxaca*: "Mujeres Afromexicanas de la Colectiva Ña'a Tunda Contra las Violencias Interseccionales," (MA thesis, CIESAS, 2019): 131.

This group of women came into the movement with economic and social capital that significantly contributed to their evolution as Afro-Mexican leaders. The status of these women as educated professionals set them apart from other women who entered the movement before them. Furthermore, being away from the region's gender norms and expectations also helped them generate more equitable relationships with their husbands or rebuff marriage altogether. Those backgrounds and experiences allowed them to move freely along the Costa Chica and participate in events outside their communities. This venture was both expensive and time-consuming. Angustia Torres, a schoolteacher in the Morelos community and wife of AFRICA's founder Israel Reyes Larrea, stated that she stopped participating in the movement because it was economically unfeasible for her and her family. Despite being in a two-income household, they could not pool enough resources for both to actively participate in the movement and raise a family simultaneously. For many (if not most) women on the coast, their daily lives consisted of reproductive and remunerated labor, significantly limiting their opportunities to participate in the movement as leaders. Those who engaged in triple labor expectations (reproductive, remunerated, and activist/leadership) enjoyed higher social capital than those who could not.<sup>339</sup>

Initiating their own organizations helped these women gain visibility as emerging leaders of the Afro-Mexican movement and an emerging Afro-Mexican woman's movement. This change challenged power dynamics within the Afro-Mexican movement and caused resentment among some male leaders. The women received insults at public events, and their male colleagues perpetuated misogyny and gender inequality. Castro Salinas shared that while "Sergio

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<sup>339</sup> Lucila Mariche, interview by author, 27 October 2021; also see Varela Huerta, "Mujeres negras-afromexicanas," 203-04.

[Peñaloza Pérez] supported us,” others did not. She added, “there were *compañeros* who got upset, offended us...and said we were crazy like [women from] all women’s movements.”<sup>340</sup>

#### 5.4 Ambivalence toward Feminism

In addition to economic capital, education also offered these women advanced literacy skills and access to feminist thought. This group of women identified as feminists. The first generation of women who participated in the Afro-Mexican movement since its beginning were less likely to identify as such, even though they advocated for equality between men and women. Feminism as a social ideology in the Costa Chica did not influence the movement or general society. First-generation women understood the feminist struggle as a Mexico City movement. Feminism, for many of them, carried a negative connotation that ran counter to traditional and religious values, especially as it related to abortion rights. Furthermore, the protest tactics of Mexico City feminists put them off. Elena Ruiz Salinas told me that she defended women's rights but was against feminist protests in Mexico City, where, she said, women marched naked, destroyed monuments, and vandalized properties.<sup>341</sup>

Though Ruiz Salinas praised the premise of feminism’s struggle for gender equality, she cautioned that many feminists were “radical” and anti-men. The idea that the feminism of Mexico City was a radical form of feminism was prevalent among Afro-Mexican women,

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<sup>340</sup> Castro Salinas, interview.

<sup>341</sup> Ruiz Salinas, interview. On Afro-Brazilian women activists not identifying as feminists, see Caldwell, *Negras in Brazil*, 154.

including those who considered themselves feminists. Yolanda Camacho identified herself as a feminist but clarified that she was not radical. She specified that her feminism championed the equality of men and women, which seemingly diverged from Mexico City feminism that sought to impose women's superiority.<sup>342</sup> Afro-Mexican women were attentive to how patriarchal structures affected not just women but also men. They recognized that to dismantle hyper-masculinization and the violence it generated in the region, men had to be included in feminist spaces. Camacho noted that it was critical that men and women embrace feminist thought to ensure equality among them and subsequently bring harmony to their communities and to society more generally. In other words, their feminism "prioritize[d] the community...the whole, the human."<sup>343</sup>

First and second-generation activists associated radical feminism with urban feminism. The feminism that second-generation women (those who entered in the early 2010s) practiced differed from "radical feminism" in two ways. First, they were influenced by the realities and experiences of rural life. Second, many adopted Black feminist thought from the United States and Latin America, especially as it pertained to intersecting forms of discrimination like race, class, and gender. Castro Salinas, for example, identified as an Afro-feminist, which is part of a growing Afro-Latin American feminism that is rooted in the works of Black feminists like

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<sup>342</sup> Ruiz Salinas, interview; Camacho, interview. Also see Varela Huerta, "Mujeres negras-afromexicanas," 200.

<sup>343</sup> Camacho, interview. Lucila Cristal Laredo D., interview by author, 05 June 2021. Camacho referenced US African American feminist-scholar bell hooks as a source of influence during our interview. For hooks' in-depth discussion on how patriarchy also affects men see bell hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (New York: Atria Books, 2004). For example of Afro-Colombian women including and teaching men about women's rights see Asher, *Black and Green*, 134-135.

Brazil's Lélia Gonzalez and others. The opposite of Afro-feminism for her and other like-minded women was white feminism, which, once again, they linked to Mexico City.<sup>344</sup>

Afro-Mexican women recognized that their status as racialized women exponentially increased their vulnerability to systemic discrimination. However, like other Afro-Latin American women, they encountered resistance to anti-racism from white/mestiza feminists. Many Afro-Mexican women felt excluded from the broader feminist movement and began distancing themselves from white/mestiza feminists.<sup>345</sup> Indigenous women also experienced similar forms of exclusion within Mexico's feminist movement, which ultimately led Black and Indigenous women to build solidarity networks. Acknowledging that their status as working-poor women was intrinsically connected to their ethno-racial background and gender increased collaborative efforts among racialized women.<sup>346</sup>

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<sup>344</sup> Castro Salinas, interview. For discussions on Afro-Latin American feminisms see Caldwell, *Negras in Brazil*, 151-154; Lélia Gonzalez, "For an Afro-Latin American Feminism," in *Confronting the Crisis in Latin America: Women Organizing for Change* (Santiago, Chile: Isis International, 1988), 95-101; Agustín Laó-Montes, "Afro-Latin American Feminisms at the Cutting Edge of Emerging Political-Epistemic Movements," *Meridians* 14, 2 (2016), 7.

<sup>345</sup> In Brazil, Black women faced similar forms of anti-racism resistance from white/non-Black women that created a divide among the women's movement in the mid-1970s. See Caldwell, *Negras in Brazil*, 151-154; Paschel, *Becoming Black*, 59-60.

<sup>346</sup> Castro Salinas, interview; Amaro Clemente, interview; Acevedo Ávila, interview. In Brazil, Black women experienced similar forms of marginalization from the women's movement. See Caldwell, *Negras in Brazil*, 157.

## 5.5 Black-Indigenous Alliances

As Black women activists began taking on a more prominent role in the Afro-Mexican movement, they started forging networks with Indigenous women activists, who had a longer history in organizing as part of an ethnic group and as women to combat gender inequality and violence. The inequality that Indigenous women experienced was underscored in Mexico's first report on discrimination, which concluded that "perhaps there is no more dramatic example of [discrimination] than that of the Indigenous woman, triply vulnerable for being a woman, for being Indigenous, and for being poor."<sup>347</sup> Meanwhile, the report ignored the experiences of Afro-Mexican women entirely.

This degree of invisibility precluded Afro-Mexicans, men and women, from gaining access to state and NGO resources that Indigenous populations benefited from. For instance, the Mexican government established public institutions for Indigenous peoples like the Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas (CDI) and state-level institutions like the Secretaría de Asuntos Indígenas (SAI).<sup>348</sup> Moreover, in 2001, after the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional uprising of 1994, the Mexican government recognized the existence of Indigenous peoples and communities and granted them a set of collective rights.<sup>349</sup> Not only

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<sup>347</sup> Gilberto Rincón Gallardo, "Presentación al Informe General de la Comisión Ciudadana de Estudios contra la Discriminación intitulado. La discriminación en México: por una nueva cultura de igualdad," *Revista Mexicana de Ciencias Políticas* vol. XLIV, 183 (2001): 269.

<sup>348</sup> In 2018 the CDI became the *Instituto Nacional de los Pueblos Indígenas*.

<sup>349</sup> Juliet Hooker, "Indigenous Inclusion/Black Exclusion: Race, Ethnicity and Multicultural Citizenship in Latin America," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 37, 2 (May 2005): 285-310; Donna Lee Van Cott, "Multiculturalism versus Neoliberalism in Latin America," in *Multiculturalism and the Welfare State: Recognition and Redistribution*



were Afro-Mexicans not recognized as an ethnic group but also no such resources existed for them. Instead, many Afro-Mexicans from the Costa Chica went to the SAI to seek resources for community and development projects only to be turned away from authorities because they were not Indigenous peoples.<sup>350</sup>

Indigenous feminists familiar with the struggles of Afro-Mexican women played a critical role in introducing the latter to feminist non-governmental organizations as a way to gain access to resources. They introduced them to the Instituto de Liderazgo Simone de Beauvoir (ILSB)<sup>351</sup> and the Fondo Semillas foundation. In addition to NGOs, Indigenous women included Afro-Mexican women in events that the SAI sponsored.<sup>352</sup>

In 2014, Afro-Mexican and Indigenous women came together in El Zapotalito to establish a collective organization for local fisherwomen. El Zapotalito is a small fishing village inside Oaxaca's Lagoons of Chacahua National Park. The community of fewer than 1,000 inhabitants relied on fishing as the primary source of subsistence and income, which the state's developmental projects threatened. In 1972, the Mexican government built a breakwater in Cerro Hermoso's river-mouth lagoon, a coastal community neighboring Zapotalito. Then in the early 1990s and early 2000s, the government continued building dams and breakwaters as part of its

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*in Contemporary Democracies*, ed. Keith Banting and Will Kymlicka (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2006), 273-279.

<sup>350</sup> Berenice, interview by author, 26 October 2021.

<sup>351</sup> In 2015, ILSB held a conference in Mexico City for Afro-Mexican women of the Costa Chica. From that event emerged the Colectiva de Mujeres Afromexicanas en Movimiento (MUAFRO). See

<https://afromexicanas.mx/somos/>; <https://ilsb.org.mx/que-hacemos/>; <https://ilsb.org.mx/primer-encuentro-nacional-de-mujeres-afromexicanas/>.

<sup>352</sup> Amaro Clemente, interview.

development project to improve fishing in the estuaries and draw tourism to the region. However, those projects had deleterious effects on the local ecology.<sup>353</sup> The structures obstructed ocean water from entering the lagoons and estuaries, significantly reducing their oxygen levels. The result was an ecological disaster resulting in the local fish die-off.

The organization, Mujeres Pescadoras del Manglar (MPM), emerged to ensure that women involved in the local fishing industry had the necessary tools to advocate for their rights in a male-dominated industry. Camacho, who in 2014 was living in El Zapotalito, was a crucial figure in helping the women establish the MPM. That year, La Ventana, an NGO from Oaxaca, reached out to Camacho and expressed an interest in working with local women on a community project. At the time, Camacho was working in her community to develop an Afro-Mexican political identity among Afrodescendant women. Acting as a conduit between La Ventana and the women of El Zapolito, she spread the word about the NGO's interest in working with the women from the community. The women agreed to meet and work with La Ventana and subsequently established MPM.<sup>354</sup> The organization counted with twenty-six founding members. They elected Atanahí Martínez López, a twenty-six-year-old Afro-Mexican fisherwoman, as the first president of MPM. Like many women in her community, she did not complete her high school education but affirmed that the women entrusted her with leading the organization. She

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<sup>353</sup> Meztli Yoalli Rodríguez Aguilera, "Grieving Geographies, Mourning Waters: Life, Death, and Environmental Gendered Racialized Struggles in Mexico," *Feminist Anthropology* 3 (2022): 30.

<sup>354</sup> Berenice, interview.

noted that she had first-hand knowledge of local women's issues. She also had basic computer skills and was an instructor for a local adult education program.<sup>355</sup>

In 2015, MPM established a local restaurant with support from Fondo Semillas, La Ventana and the state institution INMUJERES. They created the restaurant to have an alternative source of income, especially since fishing had become increasingly difficult due to the region's environmental stress. The women took turns running and working the restaurant, which offered food to locals and tourists who stopped in El Zapotalito on their way to the beaches of Chacahua. The space also doubled as a meeting place to hold workshops for local women. However, the women eventually closed the restaurant because it failed to yield profits, causing women to prioritize other income-generating jobs.<sup>356</sup>

Though the restaurant closed, MPM remained active in the community and participated in efforts for community recognition and inclusion. It started a local clean-up project to help increase the oxygen levels of the lagoons and estuaries.<sup>357</sup> MPM women also participated in EPN events as an organization rather than as individuals. In 2018, they collaborated with other Afro-Mexican organizations to take their grievances to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. As the first and only fisherwomen's collective in Oaxaca, their role in drawing up charges against the Mexican state generated external interest in the organization, the community, and their struggles. Regional and national Mexican media were now giving this small group of

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<sup>355</sup> From Mariana's personal documents: grant application completed by Atanahi Martínez López, "Formato para presentación de proyecto convocatoria semillas 2015 'Derechos de las mujeres afromexicanas'; Proyecto: Empoderamiento de mujeres pescadoras del municipio de Tututepec, Oaxaca."

<sup>356</sup> Mariana, interview; Berenice, interview; also see Rodríguez Aguilera, "Grieving Geographies," 37.

<sup>357</sup> Rodríguez Aguilera, "Grieving Geographies," 37.

fisherwomen some attention.<sup>358</sup> Scholars from outside Mexico started traveling to the community to learn more about them and their local struggles. Women from the organization, like Beatriz and Mariana, collaborated with external academics to create workshops for other local women. Those workshops sought to offer women new skillsets and to teach activist language that would help them articulate their needs and demands.<sup>359</sup>

## 5.6 International Spaces

The networks forged between Afro-Mexican and Indigenous women contributed to the former's ability to make connections with international Afrodescendant women's networks and organizations. Castro Salinas and Camacho recalled that Guadalupe Martínez Pérez, who belonged to the Alianza de Mujeres Indígenas de Centroamérica y México (AMICM), introduced them to the Red de Mujeres Afrolatinoamericanas, Afrocaribeñas y la Diaspora (RMAAD). Martínez Pérez presented to them the opportunity to attend the Primer Cumbre Latinoamericana

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<sup>358</sup> Andrea Vega, Llevan a la CIDH caso de proyectos que han provocado la muerte de peces en la Laguna Chachahua-Pastoría," *Animal Politico*, October 5, 2018, <https://www.animalpolitico.com/sociedad/cidh-caso-laguna-chachahua-muerte-de-peces>; Andrea Vega, "México: la política multiplicó la muerte de los peces," *Cosecha Roja*, August 17, 2018, <https://www.cosecharoja.org/mexico-laguna/>; Nadia Altamirano Díaz, "La pesca se muere en Zapotalito, Oaxaca," *NVI Noticias*, September 19, 2017, <https://www.nvinoticias.com/prevencion/oaxaca/la-pesca-se-muere-en-zapotalito-oaxaca/18020>.

<sup>359</sup> Mariana, interview; Berenice, interview. For an example of workshops that academic researchers presented at El Zapotalito with the support of MPM women see Nele Rathke and Nadia Zimmer, "Mujeres Pescadoras del Manglar: Sistematización de su conocimiento sobre la comunidad para la transformación de situaciones problemáticas," Report, February 23, 2019.

de Lideresas Afrodescendientes de las Américas (CLLAA), which was held on 26-28 June 2015 in Nicaragua.<sup>360</sup> This event marked the first time Afro-Mexican women participated in an event organized by the RMAAD. The RMAAD came into existence in 1992 in the Dominican Republic at the Primer Encuentro de Mujeres Negras Latinoamericanas y Caribeñas.<sup>361</sup> It took Afro-Mexican women over twenty-five years to create an official Mexican chapter of the organization and twenty-three years to attend one of its events.

In 2015 a small group of women attended the first CLLAA. Four of those women were Castro Salinas, Camacho, Acevedo Ávila, and Amaro Clemente. They were accompanied by Teresa de Jesús Mojica Morga, a former Congresswoman for Guerrero, and Sagrario Cruz Carretero, an academic from Veracruz. Guadalupe Martínez Pérez, a Nahuatl woman, not only encouraged Castro Salinas and Camacho to attend the CLLAA but also helped them secure funding from the AMICM to attend. Acevedo Ávila and Amaro Clemente found support from other state institutions and from Fondo Semillas.<sup>362</sup> All four women asserted that the CLLAA was critical in their formation as Afro-Mexican women leaders and activists. Furthermore, they referenced the event as a catalyst to strengthen a nascent Afro-Mexican women's movement. The event helped them establish and cultivate networks with other Afrodescendant women from the diaspora. They left the event with tools and resources to amplify their demands to the state as

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<sup>360</sup> Castro Salinas, interview; Camacho, interview. For information on the CLLAA see Asociación Red de Mujeres Afrolatinoamericanas, Afrocaribeñas y de la Diaspora, *Memoria: Primer Cumbre de Lideresas Afrodescendientes de las Américas, 26 al 28 de junio 2015, Nicaragua* (Mangua, Nicaragua: ARMAAD, 2015). For images of the four women at the event in Nicaragua see

<https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=10153126666213853&set=pcb.1015312666683853>.

<sup>361</sup> <http://www.mujeresafro.org/sobre-nosotras/nuestra-historia/>. Also see Busquier, "Luchas y resistencias," 73.

<sup>362</sup> Fondo Semillas, Informe Anual 2015, <https://semillas.org.mx/informeannual2015/>.

Afro-Mexican women. They returned to Mexico with a letter from the organizers addressed to the Mexican president, Enrique Peña Nieto. In the letter, RMAAD leaders demanded that the Mexican state recognize the Afro-Mexican population.<sup>363</sup> Though there was no official response to that letter, the event became a springboard for Afro-Mexican women's participation in international spaces.

After the CLLAA, the University Institute for Women of the University of San Carlos (IUMUSAC), Guatemala, invited the women to speak at their Cátedra Mujeres Garífunas y Afrodescendientes.<sup>364</sup> At the event, Castro Salinas, Camacho, and Amaro Clemente shared their experiences as Afrodescendant women in Mexico. Like the CLLAA, the women identified the event as formative to their activism as Afro-Mexican *women*. Castro Salinas remembered: “[I] liked the model very much...I returned with great enthusiasm, and with my *compañera* Yolanda...and other *compañeras*, we started talking about a consortium, and then we founded our traveling consortium of Afro-Mexican women. This [was] formed by us, Afro-Mexican women, with the help of some *compañeras*, indigenous colleagues.”<sup>365</sup>

Upon returning to Mexico from Guatemala, Castro Salinas and Camacho teamed up with Acevedo Ávila and Amaro Clemente to form the Cátedra Itinerante de Mujeres Afromexicanas (CIMA). To get this project off the ground, they got help from Indigenous women who had undertaken similar projects. They also received support from the Autonomous University Benito Juárez de Oaxaca (UABJO). CIMA traveled along the Costa Chica of Oaxaca

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<sup>363</sup> Camacho, interview; Castro Salinas, interview; Amaro Clemente, interview; Acevedo Ávila, interview.

<sup>364</sup> For a Facebook post with images of the trip see

<https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=1040781525956011&set=a.1040780962622734>.

<sup>365</sup> Castro Salinas, interview.

and Guerrero to disseminate a discourse centered on Black women's pride and empowerment. Castro Salinas recalled:

It was a beautiful project that we created, in which we worked with the topic of empowerment. We talked about our history, who we are, where we came from, how Africans arrived to Mexico, and if we came from there. It was amazing. For the first time, Black women had an approach to our true history, and we started a campaign called *Orgullosamente Negra*, so every time we did our events we put up a sign here [points to torso], if you check our social media...you will see, for example, some photos of us, proudly Black... proudly Afro-Mexican.<sup>366</sup>

However, halfway through its first iteration, Acevedo Ávila and Amaro Clemente parted ways from CIMA. Internal divisions emerged between them and Castro Salinas and Camacho, in particular, the issue of academics and politicians' role in CIMA. Amaro Clemente explained that to secure funding for CIMA, they had to negotiate with particular academics and politicians. Unconvinced about the concessions made, Amaro Clemente and Acevedo Ávila left the project.<sup>367</sup> Castro Salinas and Camacho continued with CIMA and collaborated with institutions

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<sup>366</sup> Castro Salinas, interview. For examples of this campaign see Facebook images

<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1034087170107688&set=a.202466939936386;>

<https://www.facebook.com/alejandrarobleslamorena/posts/pfbid0VzxHQQhSz3ePQMcQhfAaQsEBED8cmjzL6pucfexQbHW5msjcU4rThZsFiQ8SZeVI>.

<sup>367</sup> Amaro Clemente, interview.

like INAH, CONAPRED, CNDH, and INPI.<sup>368</sup> Castro later established a CIMA academic certificate with UABJO.<sup>369</sup>

Between 2018 and 2020, Castro Salinas continued to attend international events, especially in U.S. academic institutions like the University of Texas and Harvard University.<sup>370</sup> In addition to those spaces, in 2018, Castro spoke at an Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) hearing in Denver, Colorado. This was the first time Mexicans took the topic of Afro-Mexican rights to the IACHR, and she was the only Afro-Mexican activist in the delegation of women who spoke at the hearing. She explained that the idea to request a hearing with the IACHR came from outside the movement: from academics, the Consejo para Prevenir y Eliminar la Discriminación de la Ciudad de México (COPRED), and International Institute on Race, Equality and Human Rights (IIREHR). This group of professionals had invited her and other activists to participate in developing their argument. Multiple Black organizations, NGOs, and

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<sup>368</sup> María Elisa Velázquez Gutiérrez and Gabriela Iturralde Nieto, *Afromexicanas: trayectoria, derechos y participación política*, (Ciudad de México: Instituto Electoral de la Ciudad de México, 2020): 45. Acronyms: INAH, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia; CONAPRED, Consejo Nacional para Prevenir la Discriminación; CNDH, Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos; INPI, Instituto Nacional de los Pueblos Indígenas. In Colombia, Black women forged similar alliances while retaining full autonomy from the state, NGOs, and other Black organizations. See Asher, *Black and Green*, 137-142.

<sup>369</sup> “Se inaugura el Diplomado Cátedra Itinerante de Mujeres Afromexicanas,” Universidad Autónoma Benito Juárez de Oaxaca, 25 January 2022, <http://www.uabjo.mx/se-inaugura-el-diplomado-catedra-itinerante-de-mujeres-afromexicanas>; Luz Elena Mejía Romero, “Autorreconocimiento de las mujeres afromexicanas en el marco del reconocimiento constitucional de la afrodescendencia en México (1997-2021)” (MA thesis, Universidad Autónoma Chapingo, 2021), 82-83.

<sup>370</sup> Castro Salinas, interview; <https://drcelas.harvard.edu/event/mexico-conference-20-same-challenges-different-expectations>; <https://www.facebook.com/events/707235586346272/>.



state institutions participated in the preparatory process. Preliminary meetings were held in person in Mexico City and virtually to ensure that people from the Costa Chica could attend the meetings. The IIREHR, which had prior experience with IACHR hearings, acted as primary consultants in this process. Other state institutions and NGOs that initiated the request with the Inter-American human rights system co-led those meetings. No Afro-Mexicans or Afrodescendants belonged to any of those institutions or organizations.

Because none of the people responsible for requesting a hearing with the IACHR were Afrodescendants, members of the group determined that at least one Afro-Mexican voice needed to be heard at the IACHR hearing. Citlali Quecha Reyna, one of the academics at those meetings, recommended that Castro Salinas represent the Afro-Mexican communities. Thus, the delegation that spoke at the hearing consisted of Castro Salinas, Quecha Reyna, and Nadia Alvarado Salas, a sociologist from Guerrero. In addition to Castro Salinas, a male Afro-Mexican activist was expected to attend the hearing. However, at the last minute, he could not travel to Colorado.<sup>371</sup> At the hearing, the delegation addressed the social invisibility of Afro-Mexicans, institutional discrimination, issues facing Afro-Mexican women and girls, xenophobia against foreign Afrodescendants, and environmental racism that the communities in the lagoons of Chacahua experienced. After presenting the issues affecting Afro-Mexicans, the delegation presented eleven demands on the Mexican state that ranged from the official recognition of Afro-Mexicans to affirmative action policies.

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<sup>371</sup> Castro Salinas, interview. For video of IACHR 169 period of sessions see <https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/Sessions/?S=169>; “Mexico: Human Rights of Afro-Mexican people,” YouTube video, 70:47, posted by Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, October 4, 2018, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RGE7JkSoGKM&list=PL5QlapyOGhXtxcMOpg35GCa2M7dJo\\_QVh&t=9s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RGE7JkSoGKM&list=PL5QlapyOGhXtxcMOpg35GCa2M7dJo_QVh&t=9s).

In 2019, Afro-Mexican women took the initiative to request a second hearing with the IACHR. Having been present at the 2018 preparatory meetings, they took what they learned in that process to organize and lead these new meetings.<sup>372</sup> Also, with Castro Salinas' attendance at the Colorado IACHR hearings, they now knew what to expect.<sup>373</sup> This time, Afro-Mexican women were the only speakers on behalf of the Afro-Mexican population at the 2019 IACHR hearing in Kingston, Jamaica. At this hearing, Acevedo Ávila, Amaro Clemente, and Mojica Morga emphasized the need to include a question in the 2020 census to count Afro-Mexicans as a distinct ethno-racial group.<sup>374</sup>

### **5.7 An Emerging Afro-Mexican Women's Movement**

Locally, women were gaining increased visibility as leaders of the Afro-Mexican movement. CIMA certainly was a vehicle that helped introduce them to local communities. In addition to her work in CIMA, beginning in 2013 Castro Salinas organized an annual women's summit, held in Huatulco, Oaxaca, in celebration of International Women's Day. In 2017, she and Camacho started an Afro-Mexican women's forum held annually in the Costa Chica. Like

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<sup>372</sup> For a discussion of Afro-Brazilian women's participation in international spaces and leveraging those experiences for organizing at home, see Paschel, *Becoming Black*, 129-130.

<sup>373</sup> Castro Salinas, interview; Acevedo Ávila, interview.

<sup>374</sup> <https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/Sessions/Default.asp?S=172>; "Mexico: Racial criteria in 2020 census," YouTube video, 64:08, posted by Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, May 13, 2019, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IwjpsnimVOg&list=PL5QlapyOGhXvvyKD3Y0-GblPrDQ1xE\\_Ht](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IwjpsnimVOg&list=PL5QlapyOGhXvvyKD3Y0-GblPrDQ1xE_Ht).

CIMA and the work of AMCO and Ña'a Tunda, these events set out to empower Afro-Mexican women along the coast.<sup>375</sup>

As Elena Ruiz Salinas once mentioned, there are no marches or protests in the Costa Chica.<sup>376</sup> Instead, the Afro-Mexican women's movement emphasized community building. While women like Castro Salinas and Camacho centered their activism on Afro-Mexican women, they also included workshops that welcomed men and the community.<sup>377</sup> Their community-based efforts took them to various communities along the Costa Chica, where they offered workshops on political identity and women's rights. Also, they collaborated with external partners to offer free social services, such as mental health counseling. Mariana, for example, recalled how the counseling she received through community-based projects helped her overcome her childhood trauma and trauma related to past domestic violence she experienced.<sup>378</sup>

In their work with Afro-Mexican women, leaders began introducing feminist perspectives in their meetings and workshops. Women counseled each other on matters ranging from education to reclaiming their power in marital unions. Women new to the movement and those who had been participating for a decade or longer found solace in those spaces.<sup>379</sup> It was through those relationships of solidarity and encouragement that Camacho returned to school to get a law

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<sup>375</sup> Castro Salinas, interview; Camacho, interview. For the first 2013 forum (under the name Mujeres en Acción por la Costa de Oaxaca) see <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10151381238423853&set=a.10150267946568853>.

For the 2017 forum images and resolutions see

<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10155098878293853&set=pcb.10155098901433853>.

<sup>376</sup> Ruiz, interview.

<sup>377</sup> Laredo D., interview.

<sup>378</sup> Mariana, interview.

<sup>379</sup> Castro Salinas, interview.

degree.<sup>380</sup> In the case of another woman who entered the movement in 2015, she found support to leave an abusive relationship and legally divorce her spouse. Through solitary and mutual support, these women were encouraged to assert their independence, which subsequently subverted traditional gender expectations.<sup>381</sup>

However, by 2020, the fracture between Castro Salinas and Camacho on one end and Acevedo Ávila and Amaro Clemente on the other deepened after they ended their work with CIMA. Not only did they cease collaborating with each other, there were also accusations from one group of excluding another group from international networks, like the Mexican chapter of the RMAAD. Still, their collective efforts brought change to how women participated in the Afro-Mexican movement. During the 2010s, the public presence of Black women had increased substantially from the previous decade in national and international spaces. In fact, by 2020, the leadership and visibility of the four women responsible for subverting the movement's gender hierarchy began to surpass that of their male counterparts. No longer were women relegated to the background as they had been in the late 1990s and throughout the 2000s.

## 5.8 Conclusion

Since the Afro-Mexican movement came into existence, women have played a critical role in advancing its cause for recognition and inclusion. However, the coast's patriarchal culture created a gendered hierarchy within the movement that relegated them to supporting roles. That

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<sup>380</sup> Camacho, interview.

<sup>381</sup> Poliana Habana, interview by author, 02 September 2021.

position limited their power in the movement and kept them behind the scenes while their male counterparts took public leadership roles.

However, the 2010s marked a significant shift for women in the movement. After nearly fifteen years of organizing from the shadows, they began taking up leadership roles and made themselves visible in national and international spaces. A small group of women who returned to the coast after spending years in large urban cities propelled that change. They entered the movement with intellectual and economic capital that helped them subvert traditional gender norms. That process became the catalyst for the Afro-Mexican women's movement, which brought and disseminated ideas in the Costa Chica about Afro-Mexican female empowerment and intersectional feminism.

These women were met with resistance from some of their male counterparts. Steeped in traditional gender norms, it was difficult for men to see women who once formed part of their base and foot soldiers become leaders themselves. This change ruptured relationships between some men and women in the movement. Now the old guard of male leaders had to compete for resources with women leaders who directed their own civic organizations. Since their constitutional recognition in 2019, Black activists have been giving more attention to women's issues and, albeit to a lesser extent, issues of Afro-Mexican youth and queer communities.

It was in the Encuentros de Pueblos Negros where one could observe a marked change in women's participation and visibility. No longer were they relegated to the kitchen or behind the stage. Instead, women joined men as public speakers on panels and roundtables. Furthermore, issues affecting Afro-Mexican women had become part of the movement's agenda, and the EPN's in particular. In November 2019, I attended an EPN event held in Mexico City. I witnessed how a roundtable on Afro-Mexican women and another on Black youth, racism, and

discrimination attracted substantially more participants than the remaining two on the constitutional recognition and on lands, environment, and territories. So few participants attended the two latter roundtables that day that organizers merged them together.

In the fall of 2021, in Mexico City, I met a U.S. artist of Afro-Mexican ancestry with family on the coast of Oaxaca; they told me that “everyone in the coast knows Rosy.”<sup>382</sup> Women like Rosa María Castro Salinas had become household names in the Costa Chica, and people beyond the coast knew of them and their activism. Young women from Mexico City traveled to the coast to attend AMCO and Ñ’na Tunda events. Outside Mexico, Castro Salinas established networks with other Afro-Latin American women, like Costa Rica’s vice president Epsy Campbell. In the summer of 2021, Castro Salinas attended a gathering in San José organized by Vice-President Campbell, and in the spring of 2022, Campbell delivered a speech virtually at one of Castro Salinas’ events.<sup>383</sup>

Currently the Afro-Mexican women’s movement in the Costa Chica comprises three generations. The first generation is the women who participated in the Afro-Mexican movement from its inception. The second generation is the women who entered the Afro-Mexican movement in the 2010s and came with significant education and professional backgrounds. A third generation consists of a group of women (of different ages) who entered the Afro-Mexican movement and the Afro-Mexican women’s movement after 2015. The younger women of this

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<sup>382</sup> Adrian Garcia, personal communication, October 2021.

<sup>383</sup> Rosa María Castro Salinas, personal communication, March 2022. Also see image in Castro Salinas’ personal Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/AsociaciondeMujeresdeOaxaca/photos/pb.100060101321019.-2207520000./650598959693568/?type=3>.

last generation entered the movements not only with a higher understanding of feminism but also with a firmer grasp of technology that allowed them to engage in social media platforms.

In 2019 in Mexico City, Afro-Mexican women and Black women from other nationalities created the *Colectiva Flores de Jamaica*. Like the women of the coast, they relied on U.S. Black and Afro-Latin American feminism. However, the collective was short-lived due to internal disagreements and alleged practices of colorism. Some members alleged that the collective prioritized the experiences and voices of darker-skinned women with curlier hair. According to their logic, those women represented Blackness and Africanness better than lighter-skinned women. Some women in the group argued that since darker-skinned women suffered from heightened forms of structural racism and discrimination, their voices should be amplified. Eventually, other issues began to emerge among the women, leading to the group's dissolution.<sup>384</sup>

Some of those young women continued to engage in Afro-Latin American feminist activism and formed new groups. Collectives like *Afro-Chingonas* and *Afrontera Colectiva* relied on podcasting and social media platforms to disseminate their Black feminist messages. Being in Mexico City allowed them to establish networks with anti-racist, feminist, queer, and environmentalist groups and to collaborate with them in organizing protests and demonstrations in the city. Engaging in those practices set them apart from the Afro-Mexican women's movement on the coast. While some women from the coast collaborated with some of the same anti-racist organizations, generational and experiential differences stalled collaborations between urban and rural Afrodescendant women. Nevertheless, by 2020 Black women's visibility in activist spaces increased, as did their roles as leaders.

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<sup>384</sup> Valeria Angola, interview by author, 04 March 2022.

## 6.0 The Constitutional Recognition of Afro-Mexicans

On 30 April 2019, Mexican Senator Susana Harp Iturrigarria took the floor of the Senate to present a proposed amendment to the Mexican Constitution. A large black-and-white print photograph was displayed on an easel stand beside her as she delivered her speech. The image depicted an Afro-Mexican toddler perched on the shoulders of a young Afro-Mexican girl against the tropical background of Collantes, Oaxaca. The blurred background drew attention to the young boy and girl, highlighting their African ancestry. Harp Iturrigarria argued in her speech that Afro-Mexicans held significant relevance in “[Mexican] history, culture, and identity” and lamented that due to “discrimination and social exclusion, they have been devalued [...] and erased from [the nation’s] history [...] they have been the subject of structural invisibility that has left them out of economic development as communities and persons [...] they are the poorest of the poorest.”<sup>385</sup>

Central to Harp Iturrigarria’s eight-minute address was the assertion that Afro-Mexicans had inhabited the Mexican territory prior to its formation as a nation-state. She argued that, like the Indigenous population, they possessed distinct traditions and customs that distinguished them from the dominant mestizo culture. Harp Iturrigarria emphasized that Africans were introduced to New Spain through their forced migration to endure a life of enslavement. Beyond forced labor, she argued that Afro-Mexicans significantly contributed to Mexico’s politics, history, and

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<sup>385</sup> “Sen. Susana Harp (Morena) pide reconocimiento de pueblo afromexicano,” Senado de México, YouTube video, 8:59, 30 April 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eUiwplSBfsw&list=WL&index=117&t=3s> (Last accessed 12 November 2023).



culture. In so doing, she posited that their traits were equivalent to those of Indigenous peoples and communities when interpreting the law identifying Mexico's native populations.

By aligning Afro-Mexicans with Indigenous peoples, Harp Iturrigarria strategically operated within Mexico's multicultural citizenship framework, which recognized cultural and ethnic diversity. However, that very same framework also upheld a post-racial ideology, asserting that race and racial differences were nonexistent. This strategy proved successful, as evidenced when the Mexican Senate passed her initiative and sent it to the Chamber of Deputies for further review and analysis. The episode underscores the power of a multicultural narrative in Mexican politics. Moreover, it aligns with scholarly claims that ethno-racial policies for Afrodescendants and Indigenous peoples in Latin America emerged during the region's embrace of official multiculturalism, referred by scholars as the multicultural turn.<sup>386</sup>

Mexico's multicultural reforms began in 1990 after it became the first Latin American nation to adopt and ratify the International Labor Organization's Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (ILO 169). The international treaty bound participating nation-states to respect and protect Indigenous peoples' rights in their territories. In Mexico, Afro-Mexicans were excluded from those conversations and subsequent reforms, unlike other parts of Latin America like Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, and Guatemala, where similar, though not always equivalent,

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<sup>386</sup> Peter Wade, *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Pluto Press, 2010), 112-150; Jean Muteba Rahier, ed., *Black Social Movements in Latin America: From Monocultural Mestizaje to Multiculturalism* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012).

constitutional rights were granted to Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples based on group identity.<sup>387</sup>

By the time that Harp Iturribarría presented her initiative to Congress, much had changed in Mexico that made the political environment much more amenable to recognizing Afro-Mexican as a distinct ethnic group. Her address coincided with the 2015-2024 International Decade for People of African Descent, which in turn compelled state institutions like the Consejo Nacional para Prevenir la Discriminación (CONAPRED), Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos (CNDH), and the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI) to recognize Afro-Mexicans. Moreover, the states of Oaxaca and Guerrero had reformed their constitutions, recognizing Afro-Mexicans as an ethnic group. Then in 2018, the landslide victory of the Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional (MORENA) helped create suitable conditions to persuade the Mexican government to reform its constitution to acknowledge its Afrodescendant population and their special rights as an ethnic group.

This chapter delves into the efforts of multiple state actors to reform the Mexican Constitution to formally recognize its Afrodescendant population. It explores the circumstances that prompted the recognition of Afro-Mexicans, the actors involved, and the influence of international conventions and campaigns. The chapter also examines Afro-Mexicans' reactions to the constitutional amendment, showing how it exacerbated divisions within an already fragmented Afro-Mexican movement.

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<sup>387</sup> Juliet Hooker, "Indigenous Inclusion/Black Exclusion: Race, Ethnicity and Multicultural Citizenship in Latin America," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 37, (2005): 285-310.

## 6.1 State-Level Recognition of Afro-Mexicans

Within Mexico, the state governments of Guerrero and Oaxaca were at the forefront in recognizing their Afrodescendant populations. As some Mexican scholars have aptly noted, those governments took the leading role because they needed to address and resolve pressing issues affecting their residents, many of whom were Afrodescendants, especially in the Costa Chica region. Moreover, Black civic organizations exerted more significant political influence in that region than in other parts of Mexico.<sup>388</sup>

Oaxaca was the first state in Mexico to recognize Afro-Mexicans. In 2001, the state reformed its Law on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and Communities and included “comunidades afroamericanas” (Afro-American communities) as a protected group under Article 2. However, as María Elisa Velázquez and Gabriela Iturralde have noted, “the law did not specify its scope in relation to the rights of the Afro-Mexican population.” Furthermore, it took a decade for Oaxaca’s Secretaría de Asuntos Indígenas (SAI) to include Afro-Mexicans in its agenda when it established the Department of Attention to Afrodescendant Communities in 2011. A year later, the state created the Advisory Council of the Indigenous and Afro-Mexican Peoples of Oaxaca.<sup>389</sup>

By 2012, legislators in Oaxaca were drafting initiatives to recognize Afro-Mexicans as part of a wider attempt to reform articles dealing with the rights of both Indigenous and Afro-Mexican peoples. The state conducted twenty-four consultations with Indigenous and Afro-

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<sup>388</sup> María Elisa Velázquez and Gabriela Iturralde, “Afromexicanos: reflexiones sobre las dinámicas del reconocimiento,” *Anales de Antropología* 50 (2016): 242-243.

<sup>389</sup> Velázquez and Iturralde, “Afromexicanos,” 242-243.

Mexican communities. However, only one of the twenty-four meetings specifically engaged the Afro-Mexican population, which was held on 12 September 2012 in Huazolotlán, Oaxaca, and gathered 231 participants.<sup>390</sup> Still, according to Oaxaca's PRD state deputy Leticia Álvarez Martínez, "the existence of the Afro-Mexican people, their communities, their rights and culture, became a priority in legislative terms, such that between May 30 and October 24, 2012," Oaxaca's state legislature received four initiatives to recognize Afro-Mexicans as an ethnic group in the state's constitution.<sup>391</sup>

By 5 June 2013, Oaxaca's legislature approved amendments to articles 1, 16, and 25 of the state constitution. The reforms added a section to Article 1, prohibiting all forms of discrimination. The reformed Article 16 recognized Afro-Mexicans as part of the state's "multiethnic, multilingual, and culturally plural" society and granted Afro-Mexicans the same rights given to Indigenous peoples and communities. Article 25 included Afro-Mexicans and Indigenous communities as protected groups in electoral practices.<sup>392</sup> That same year, following

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<sup>390</sup> Nemesio J. Rodríguez Mitchell and J. Francisco Ziga Gabriel, "Oaxaca negra: reconocimientos metodologías y simulaciones," (paper presented at Décimo Simposio Internacional de Estudios Oaxaqueños, Oaxaca, MX, July 4-6, 2013), 3.

<sup>391</sup> "Participa diputada Leticia Álvarez en foro nacional afromexicano," *El Quadratín*, 19 September 2013 <https://oaxaca.quadratin.com.mx/Participa-diputada-Leticia-Alvarez-en-foro-nacional-afromexicano/> (Last accessed 22 November 2023).

<sup>392</sup> [https://www.conapred.org.mx/index.php?contenido=noticias&id=4048&id\\_opcion=340&op=448;](https://www.conapred.org.mx/index.php?contenido=noticias&id=4048&id_opcion=340&op=448;) <https://www.jornada.com.mx/2013/06/06/estados/034n2est>; <https://www.panoramadelpacifico.com/una-mirada-afromexicana-reconocimiento-constitucional-en-oaxaca-al-pueblo-afromexicano/> (Last accessed 22 November 2023).

the constitutional recognition, Oaxaca declared October 19 as Día del Pueblo Negro Afromexicano de Oaxaca.<sup>393</sup>

In 2014, Guerrero became the second Mexican state to formally recognize its Afrodescendant population. As in Oaxaca, recognizing Afro-Mexicans in Guerrero's constitution was a gradual process that was intertwined with reforms addressing the rights of the state's Indigenous population. In 2011, commemorating the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples, the local SAI organized a forum to analyze and discuss the incorporation of Indigenous and Afro-Mexican peoples' rights into a more comprehensive local constitutional reform. The UN had already designated 2011 as the International Year for People of African Descent. In 2012, building upon the momentum of that campaign, Gonzalo Ramón Solís Cervantes, a delegate of the state's Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas (CDI), emphasized in a press conference that "from [the International Year] came the idea of demanding constitutional recognition [...] in the new constitution promoted by Governor Ángel Aguirre."<sup>394</sup>

In 2013, the SAI established the Subsecretaría para el Desarrollo del Pueblo Afromexicano (SDPA). Scholars in Mexico have identified the SDPA as the primary advocate

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[https://www.cndh.org.mx/sites/default/files/doc/Programas/Indigenas/OtrasNormas/Estatal/Oaxaca/Ley\\_DPCIOax.pdf](https://www.cndh.org.mx/sites/default/files/doc/Programas/Indigenas/OtrasNormas/Estatal/Oaxaca/Ley_DPCIOax.pdf).

<sup>393</sup> Velázquez and Iturralde, "Afromexicanos," 243. Translation: Afro-Mexican Black Peoples of Oaxaca Day.

<sup>394</sup> See Bianca Silvia Ramírez Navarro and Clarie Wright, "Redes de defensa transnacionales frente a estructuras políticas federales. El caso afromexicano," *Razon Critica* 6 (2019), 279-280; and Rosendo Betancourt Radilla, "Reconocerá la nueva Constitución al pueblo afro como la quinta etnia de la entidad," *El Sur Acapulco*, 13 January 2012, <https://suracapulco.mx/archivoelsur/archivos/1547> (Last accessed 23 November 2023).

for Guerrero's recognition of Afro-Mexicans.<sup>395</sup> The dedicated efforts of the SDPA materialized in April 2014, when Guerrero reformed its Constitution and recognized Afro-Mexicans. This recognition was enshrined in Section II of Guerrero's Constitution, spanning articles 8 to 14, in which Indigenous and Afro-Mexican peoples' rights were acknowledged and guaranteed. By situating the rights of Afro-Mexicans within the same section as those of Indigenous peoples and communities, the state explicitly affirmed that Afro-Mexicans' rights were equivalent to Indigenous peoples' rights.<sup>396</sup>

In 2017, Mexico City became the third and final state-level entity to officially recognize Afro-Mexicans. Mexico City's process differed in several aspects from Oaxaca and Guerrero. To begin with, the Mexico City recognition of Afro-Mexicans unfolded in an urban context, a significant departure from the rural characteristics of Guerrero and Oaxaca, in particular the Costa Chica region. Secondly, the Afro-Mexican civic organizations in Mexico City came nowhere near the numbers found in the Costa Chica. Thirdly, the city was in the process of drafting a new constitution rather than reforming an existing one. This was prompted by "an amendment to the national constitution officially chang[ing] the capital's status from federal district to, simply, Ciudad de México (Mexico City, abbreviated CDMX)...[turning it] into a

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<sup>395</sup> See Velázquez and Iturralde, "Afromexicanos," 243; and Ramírez Navarro and Wright, "Redes de defensa," 279.

<sup>396</sup> *Periódico Oficial del Gobierno de Estado de Guerrero*, 29 April 2014, 16-19. Also see América Nicté-Ha López Chávez, "La movilización etnopolítica afromexicana de la Costa Chica de Guerrero y Oaxaca: logros, limitaciones y desafíos," *Perfiles Latinoamericanos*, 26, 52 (2018): 19; Velázquez and Iturralde, "Afromexicanos," 243; and Ramírez Navarro and Wright, "Redes de defensa," 279.

more independent city, officially the 32nd federal entity, on par with a state.” This new federal entity was required to “draft and adopt its own citywide constitution.”<sup>397</sup>

Afro-Mexicans and their allies found an opening for securing recognition during Mexico City's effort to draft its own Constitution. As part of a citywide engagement campaign, city officials invited its citizens to contribute to the constitution-building process. They directed city residents to submit their proposals through the online petition platform Change.org. The proposals then needed to pass a multi-tier threshold of five thousand, ten thousand, and fifty thousand signatures to be formally considered. Two petitions advocating for the recognition of Afro-Mexicans were initiated on Change.org, one by the Mexico City organization Afrodescendencias en México Investigación e Incidencia, and another by Guerrero's Fundación Afromexicana Petra Morgia. Those petitions received 634 and 201 signatures, respectively, well under the required 5,000 minimum. However, those organizations, in particular Afrodescendencias, had support from state and academic institutions in Mexico City like CONAPRED, CNDH, and INAH. Notably, some of Afrodescendencias' members belonged to those very institutions. Thus, even without securing the required signatures, members of Afrodescendencias and its collaborating organizations managed to present their proposal to the drafting committee and ultimately secure a space in Mexico City's constitution recognizing Afro-Mexicans.<sup>398</sup>

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<sup>397</sup> “Crowdsourcing a Constitution,” <https://citiesofservice.jhu.edu/resource/crowdsourcing-a-constitution-mexico-city/> (Last accessed 23 November 2023).

<sup>398</sup> For Afrodescendencias' Change.org petition see <https://www.change.org/p/diputadas-y-diputados-de-la-asamblea-constituyente-de-la-ciudad-de-m%C3%A9xico-reconocimiento-de-las-poblaciones-afromexicanas-en-la-constituci%C3%B3n-de-la-ciudad-de-m%C3%A9xico>; for Fundación Petra Morgia's petition see

On 5 February 2017, the Mexico City constitution was officially enacted. Within it, Article 11, titled “Inclusive City,” had a designated section N specifically addressing the “Rights of Afrodescendant persons.” That section was followed by text specifying their “right to the protection and promotion of their traditional knowledge and their cultural, artistic, material, and intangible heritage; equal treatment...and full exercise of their rights;” and recognition of Afro-Mexicans’ historical contributions to Mexico City and the nation.<sup>399</sup> Thus, as *el D.F.* officially transitioned to CDMX, Afro-Mexicans found inclusion and recognition in the city's Constitution and institutions. The next challenge was to get Afro-Mexicans recognized in the national Constitution.

## 6.2 National-Level Recognition: Unsuccessful Attempts

Between 2006 and 2016, several federal deputies and senators attempted, unsuccessfully, to amend the Mexican Constitution to recognize Afro-Mexicans as an ethnic group with specific rights. They all aimed to reform Article 2, which declared Mexico a “pluricultural” nation and

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[https://www.change.org/p/gobierno-mexicano-y-gobierno-de-la-ciudad-de-m%C3%A9xico-reconocimiento-constitucional-de-los-afromexicanos-basta-de-discriminaci%C3%B3n-y-racismo?recruiter=false&utm\\_source=share\\_petition&utm\\_medium=copylink&utm\\_campaign=share\\_petition](https://www.change.org/p/gobierno-mexicano-y-gobierno-de-la-ciudad-de-m%C3%A9xico-reconocimiento-constitucional-de-los-afromexicanos-basta-de-discriminaci%C3%B3n-y-racismo?recruiter=false&utm_source=share_petition&utm_medium=copylink&utm_campaign=share_petition). For details on the Change.org petitions see <https://oecd-opsi.org/innovations/crowdsourcing-the-mexico-city-constitution/>; and <https://citiesofservice.jhu.edu/resource/crowdsourcing-a-constitution-mexico-city/> (All last accessed 23 November 2023).

<sup>399</sup> [https://www.infocdmx.org.mx/documentospdf/constitucion\\_cdmx/Constitucion\\_%20Politica\\_CDMX.pdf](https://www.infocdmx.org.mx/documentospdf/constitucion_cdmx/Constitucion_%20Politica_CDMX.pdf) (Last accessed 23 November 2023).



recognized Indigenous peoples as a distinct ethnic group with specific collective rights. The article was reformed in 2001 as part of the Indigenous Rights Bill stemming from the San Andrés Accords between the Mexican state and the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN). The reform identified Indigenous peoples as the subjects of that article, reasoning that they had lived in the Mexican territory since the beginning of the colonial period and had “preserv[ed] their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions, or part of them.”<sup>400</sup>

Those members of Congress, along with Afro-Mexicans and their allies, found an opening in the concluding paragraph of Article 2, which stated that rights established for “Indigenous people, their communities and peoples, any community comparable to those will have the same rights as appropriate as established by law.”<sup>401</sup> The initiatives presented to Congress claimed that, like Indigenous peoples, Mexico's Black population had been present in Mexico since the beginning of the colonial period and possessed their “own social, economic, cultural and political institutions, or part of them,” as the article stipulated.<sup>402</sup>

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<sup>400</sup> See Artículo 2o. in the Constitución Política de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos, pages 2-5, <https://www.diputados.gob.mx/LeyesBiblio/pdf/CPEUM.pdf> (Last accessed 11 October 2023). For a discussion on the 2001 Indigenous Rights Bill see María Inclán, *The Zapatista Movement and Mexico's Democratic Transition: Mobilization, Success, and Survival* (New York: Oxford University Press), 92.

<sup>401</sup> See Artículo 2o. in the Constitución Política de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos, page 4, <https://www.diputados.gob.mx/LeyesBiblio/pdf/CPEUM.pdf> (Last accessed 11 October 2023).

<sup>402</sup> For discussions on Afrodescendant ethnicity and taking on an "indigenous-like status" in Latin America, see Hooker, "Black Inclusion/Black Exclusion," 285-310; Wade, *Race and Ethnicity*, 112-150. For Brazil and Colombia see Paschel, *Becoming Black Political Subjects*, 81-116. For Colombia see Kiran Asher, *Black and Green: Afro-Colombians, Development, and Nature in the Pacific Lowlands*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 32-56.

However, most of those initiatives preceded the 2015 inter-census. Without demographic information from the INEGI it was particularly challenging to undo two centuries of governmental disregard for Afro-Mexicans that had rendered them invisible to the nation. According to Néstor Ruiz Hernández, “legislators still believed that there were no Black people in Mexico.”<sup>403</sup>

Another challenge to get Article 2 reformed was partisan politics. The first three initiatives were introduced to Congress by deputies from the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD): Francisco Diego Aguilar of Mexico State, Delfina Elizabeth Guzmán Díaz of Oaxaca, and Teresa de Jesús Mojica Morga of Guerrero, who identifies as Afro-Mexican. They presented their bills in 2006, 2012, and 2013 respectively.<sup>404</sup> During that period, Congress was dominated by the conservative right-wing parties Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) and

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<sup>403</sup> Néstor Ruiz Hernández, interview by author, 19 January 2021.

<sup>404</sup> For Aguilar’s initiative see

[http://sil.gobernacion.gob.mx/Archivos/Documentos/2006/02/asun\\_2222029\\_20060202\\_1139000476.pdf](http://sil.gobernacion.gob.mx/Archivos/Documentos/2006/02/asun_2222029_20060202_1139000476.pdf) (Last accessed 11 October 2023). For see Guzmán Díaz’s initiatives see

[http://sil.gobernacion.gob.mx/Archivos/Documentos/2012/11/asun\\_2911191\\_20121106\\_1352216853.pdf](http://sil.gobernacion.gob.mx/Archivos/Documentos/2012/11/asun_2911191_20121106_1352216853.pdf) (Last accessed 17 October 2023),

[http://sil.gobernacion.gob.mx/Archivos/Documentos/2013/09/asun\\_3006303\\_20130920\\_1378228228.pdf](http://sil.gobernacion.gob.mx/Archivos/Documentos/2013/09/asun_3006303_20130920_1378228228.pdf) (Last accessed 18 October 2023). For Mojica Morga’s initiative see

[http://sil.gobernacion.gob.mx/Archivos/Documentos/2014/09/asun\\_3140177\\_20140911\\_1409846760.pdf](http://sil.gobernacion.gob.mx/Archivos/Documentos/2014/09/asun_3140177_20140911_1409846760.pdf) (Last accessed 18 October 2023).

Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). When all three deputies presented their initiatives, the PRI and PAN controlled the Constitutional Points Commission.<sup>405</sup>

Another obstacle to obtaining recognition for Afro-Mexicans in Congress was the apparent lack of effort by Aguilar and Guzmán Díaz to garner support for their initiatives. In the case of Aguilar, his reasons for drafting and introducing an initiative are unclear. His bill demonstrated little knowledge of the population he purportedly represented. Absent from the bill were Afro-Mexican efforts for recognition or any references to studies, even if limited, on Afro-Mexican history and culture. Furthermore, Afro-Mexican activists did not make any references to him or his initiative to this author, raising doubts on his engagement with Afro-Mexicans. Contrary to Aguilar, Guzmán Díaz did have a history working with Afro-Mexican activists in the Costa Chica. However, there are no indications that she presented the bill to Afro-Mexican communities that might catalyze their lobbying efforts. For activists like Néstor Ruiz Hernández, these early efforts reflected the lack of political will from legislators who presented their bills and from all members of Congress.<sup>406</sup> Sergio Peñaloza Pérez, another activist, stated that the Mexican government prioritized other issues that did not involve recognizing and “assuming economic responsibility for the development of [Afro-Mexican] communities.”<sup>407</sup>

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<sup>405</sup> [http://sil.gobernacion.gob.mx/Librerias/pp\\_ComposicionComisiones.php?SID=&Referencia=2084405](http://sil.gobernacion.gob.mx/Librerias/pp_ComposicionComisiones.php?SID=&Referencia=2084405) (Last accessed 18 October 2023);

[http://sil.gobernacion.gob.mx/Librerias/pp\\_ComposicionComisiones.php?Referencia=563999](http://sil.gobernacion.gob.mx/Librerias/pp_ComposicionComisiones.php?Referencia=563999) (Last accessed 18 October 2023). Note: Additionally, Aguilar presented his proposal during the campaign cycle for the highly contested 2006 general elections, during which the PRD accused the PAN of voter fraud to secure the presidency.

<sup>406</sup> Ruiz Hernández, interview by author, 19 January 2021.

<sup>407</sup> Sergio Peñaloza Pérez, interview by author, 22 January 2021.

Among these three initiatives, Mojica Morga's appeared to have had the most promise of being passed. Unlike Aguilar and Guzmán Díaz, Mojica Morga took steps to garner support from members of Congress. In July 2013, she helped found the Colectivo Nacional Afromexicano (CONAFRO), which was composed of Black organizations and activists from the Costa Chica, scholars, academic institutions, municipal presidents from coastal Oaxaca and Guerrero, and local and federal deputies of the same region.<sup>408</sup> She and CONAFRO organized the Foro Nacional Afromexicano: Rumbo al Reconocimiento Constitucional como Una de las Tres Raíces Culturales del País, which was held on 9 and 10 September 2013.<sup>409</sup> The event included presentations and panel discussions with scholars, activists, and regional and federal state actors (including Delfina Guzmán Díaz, the author of an earlier such bill). It also had a festive component that introduced non-Black attendees to Afro-Mexican gastronomy, music, and dances. The event aimed to boost congressional awareness of Afro-Mexicans, was the first of its kind and was undoubtedly a clever strategy to gain support for recognizing Afro-Mexicans.

Mojica Morga bussed in Afro-Mexicans from the Costa Chica to attend the event. Néstor Ruiz Hernández was among those Costeños who traveled from the coast to Mexico City for the two-day event and recalled its success. He remembered returning to the Costa Chica and feeling

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<sup>408</sup> <https://colectivonacionalafromexicano.blogspot.com/2013/07/> (Last accessed 19 October 2023).

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[http://www3.diputados.gob.mx/camara/005\\_comunicacion/a\\_boletines/2013\\_2013/septiembre\\_septiembre/09\\_09/19\\_93\\_inaugura\\_presidente\\_de\\_la\\_jucopo\\_diputado\\_silvano\\_aureoles\\_foro\\_nacional\\_afromexicano](http://www3.diputados.gob.mx/camara/005_comunicacion/a_boletines/2013_2013/septiembre_septiembre/09_09/19_93_inaugura_presidente_de_la_jucopo_diputado_silvano_aureoles_foro_nacional_afromexicano) (Last accessed 19

October 2023); "Conapred urge a trabajar contra discriminación hacia afrodescendientes," 9 September 2013

<https://www.sinembargo.mx/09-09-2013/748714;>

[https://www.conapred.org.mx/index.php?contenido=registro\\_encontrado&tipo=1&id=550](https://www.conapred.org.mx/index.php?contenido=registro_encontrado&tipo=1&id=550) (Last accessed 19 October 2023).

confident that Congress would pass Mojica Morga's initiative after witnessing members of Congress publicly pledge support to recognize Afro-Mexicans.<sup>410</sup> Presumably, that included Ricardo Anaya Cortés, PAN deputy and the President of the Mesa Directiva (and 2018 presidential candidate), who not only delivered a brief speech but also participated in the ribbon-cutting ceremony. It is unclear how many other senators and deputies attended the event. Nevertheless, activists and *costeñas/os* left with high hopes that Congress would pass Mojica Morga's initiative.<sup>411</sup>

In the end, Congress did not vote on Mojica Morga's initiative, sharing a similar fate to Aguilar's and Guzmán Díaz's bills. Aguilar's bill remained tabled for five years until the Constitutional Points Commission ultimately discarded it on 23 November 2011.<sup>412</sup> The Chamber of Deputies did not vote on Guzmán Díaz's and Mojica Morga's initiatives due to not being "ruled within the regulatory period."<sup>413</sup>

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<sup>410</sup> Ruiz Hernández, interview by author, 19 January 2021.

<sup>411</sup> For a video summary of the *Foro Nacional Afromexicano: Rumbo al Reconocimiento Constitucional como una de las tres raíces culturales del país* see Foro Nacional para el reconocimiento constitucional de los afromexicanos," Teresa de Jesús Mojica Morga, YouTube video, 5:23, 25 October 2013, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hBvGAM4\\_REA&list=WL&index=34](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hBvGAM4_REA&list=WL&index=34) (Last accessed 19 October 2023).

<sup>412</sup>

[http://sil.gobernacion.gob.mx/Librerias/pp\\_ReporteSeguimiento.php?SID=&Seguimiento=2289097&Asunto=2222029#C](http://sil.gobernacion.gob.mx/Librerias/pp_ReporteSeguimiento.php?SID=&Seguimiento=2289097&Asunto=2222029#C) (Last accessed 17 October 2023).

<sup>413</sup> For Guzmán Díaz see

[http://sil.gobernacion.gob.mx/Librerias/pp\\_ReporteSeguimiento.php?SID=&Seguimiento=3007981&Asunto=3006303](http://sil.gobernacion.gob.mx/Librerias/pp_ReporteSeguimiento.php?SID=&Seguimiento=3007981&Asunto=3006303) (Last accessed 17 October 2023),

[http://sil.gobernacion.gob.mx/Librerias/pp\\_ReporteSeguimiento.php?SID=&Seguimiento=3191246&Asunto=3189180](http://sil.gobernacion.gob.mx/Librerias/pp_ReporteSeguimiento.php?SID=&Seguimiento=3191246&Asunto=3189180) (Last accessed 18 October 2023). For Mojica Morga see

### 6.3 An Emboldened Black Movement and Increased Institutional Support

While members of Congress were making unsuccessful attempts to reform the constitution to recognize Afro-Mexicans, Afro-Mexicans and their allies were making significant advances in raising their public visibility. The Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos (CNDH), which had previously ignored Afro-Mexicans, began organizing events like the two-day 2015 International Conference on Racial Discrimination and Afrodescendants in Mexico in Veracruz. In 2016, the CNDH published three works on Afro-Mexicans, one of which was an edited volume emerging from the 2015 conference. The other two publications were based on studies carried out by the institution.<sup>414</sup> In 2019, the agency organized an international conference on “Protection of Cultural Heritage as a Collective Right” and published presentations emphasizing Afrodescendants’ and Indigenous’ rights.<sup>415</sup>

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[http://sil.gobernacion.gob.mx/Librerias/pp\\_ReporteSeguimiento.php?SID=&Seguimiento=3023889&Asunto=3023092](http://sil.gobernacion.gob.mx/Librerias/pp_ReporteSeguimiento.php?SID=&Seguimiento=3023889&Asunto=3023092);

[http://sil.gobernacion.gob.mx/Librerias/pp\\_ReporteSeguimiento.php?SID=&Seguimiento=3141546&Asunto=3140177](http://sil.gobernacion.gob.mx/Librerias/pp_ReporteSeguimiento.php?SID=&Seguimiento=3141546&Asunto=3140177) (Last accessed 18 October 2023).

For Chamber of Deputies Regulations see <http://cronica.diputados.gob.mx/MarcoJuridico/Reglamento.pdf>, 574. (Last accessed 17 October 2023).

<sup>414</sup> CNDH, *Afrodescendientes en México. Protección Internacional de sus Derechos Humanos* and the *Estudio Especial de la CNDH sobre la situación de la población afrodescendiente de México a través de la encuesta intercensal 2015* (México, 2016).

<sup>415</sup> CNDH, *Argumentos para la Defensa y Protección del Patrimonio Cultural de Pueblos y Comunidades Indígenas y Afrodescendientes en México y América*, (Ciudad de México: CNDH, 2019).

The CNDH also collaborated with CONAPRED and INEGI on the 2017 *Perfil sociodemográfico de la población afrodescendiente en México*.<sup>416</sup> The study expanded on the data from the 2015 inter-census results, offering detailed analyses of municipalities in which Afro-Mexicans comprised at least ten percent of the population. The report’s objective was to highlight Afro-Mexicans’ presence in the national territory and bring to light their “demographic and socioeconomic characteristics.” The study also made clear that institutions publishing information on Afro-Mexicans were taking “positive steps in following the Declaration and the Durban Program of Action guidelines. Likewise, progress [was] being made in the actions of the International Decade for People of African Descent, which [sought] to ensure that the lack of information stop[ed] being a obstacle to the visibility and recognition of [that] population.”<sup>417</sup>

That same year, CONAPRED published its third *Encuesta Nacional sobre Discriminación en México*, and for the first time included Afro-Mexicans, showing the pervasiveness of anti-Blackness in Mexico. According to that report, 56 percent of ENADIS respondents stated Afrodescendants were likely to have their rights ignored, making them the most vulnerable group in the study. After Afrodescendants the other vulnerable groups included women (48 percent), non-Catholics (45 percent), adolescents, foreigners, and children (42 percent). Also, nearly a quarter of respondents stated they would refuse to rent a room to a Black person, and twelve percent opposed inter-racial marriage with an Afrodescendant.<sup>418</sup> It is unsurprising that more than half of ENADIS respondents believed that the rights of

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<sup>416</sup> Translation: “Socio-demographic Profile of the Afrodescendant Population in Mexico”

<sup>417</sup> INEGI, *Perfil sociodemográfico de la población afrodescendiente en México* (Mexico: INEGI, 2017), IV.

<sup>418</sup> Consejo Nacional para Prevenir la Discriminación, *Encuesta Nacional sobre Discriminación 2017: Principales Resultados* (Mexico, 2017).

Afrodescendants in Mexico were likely to be ignored. Afro-Mexicans had long been socially marginalized, and a decade earlier, as Mexico vowed to eradicate all forms of discrimination, state leaders were embroiled in widely condemned discussions concerning Blacks in the U.S. and upheld racist imagery produced in Mexico during the mid-twentieth century Mexico.<sup>419</sup>

Between 2014 and 2019, there was a notable surge in the publication of research and analyses by state institutions advocating for the constitutional recognition of Afro-Mexicans. In addition to the ENADIS report, CONAPRED published two other studies under its “Legislate without Discrimination” series, in collaboration with the Secretaría de Gobernación (SEGOB), the Senate, and the Chamber of Deputies. Its 2015 *Derechos colectivos y reconocimiento constitucional de las poblaciones afromexicanas*, was a 472-page analysis that included an overview of Afro-Mexican history, contemporary conditions of Afro-Mexicans, a list of international conventions of which Mexico as a signatory, and policy recommendations. In addition to those studies, CONAPRED collaborated with the Movimiento Nacional por la Diversidad Cultural de México (MNDPCM), the SEGOB, and the Instituto de Migración to produce two more analyses. Infographics and reports were also coming from the Consejo Nacional de Población, Comisión de Derechos Humanos del Distrito Federal, Instituto Electoral de la Ciudad de México, and the Chamber of Deputies’ Centro de Estudios Sociales y de Opinión Pública.

The International Year and Decade also emboldened Afro-Mexican activists to insist on state recognition. After 2015, there was an increase in Afro-Mexican activists, women in particular, attending international gatherings to denounce discrimination against them and appeal for support from international bodies like the Organization of American States, in particular the

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<sup>419</sup> See Chapter 3.



Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR). As noted in the previous chapter, Rosa María Castro Salinas and Juliana Acevedo Ávila traveled to the U.S. and Jamaica, respectively, to deliver information on issues affecting Afro-Mexicans and publicly make demands on the Mexican government. Activists also began submitting alternative reports to CERD for Mexico's periodic reviews. In June and July 2019 two separate reports were submitted from Afro-Mexican activists to convey their concerns directly to the Committee. A report submitted by a coalition of Afro-Mexican organizations led by women accused INEGI of ignoring Afro-Mexicans as the agency prepared for the 2020 national census and expressed opposition to a proposed initiative to recognize Afro-Mexicans, claiming that the bill brought visibility to the population but fell short of recognizing its rights.

During this period the number of Black organizations in the Costa Chica began to grow and the region's activists increased their efforts to engage with Afro-Mexicans from other regions. By 2015, there were at least twenty-four organizations in the Costa Chica.<sup>420</sup> In 2017, the Encuentros de Pueblos Negros (EPN) was held in Mata Clara, Veracruz, the first time the event was held outside the Costa Chica. México Negro worked with Rosa María Hernández Fitta and activists in Veracruz to organize the event.<sup>421</sup> In 2018 the EPN was held in Múzquiz, Coahuila. Dulce Herrera was the main local organizer in collaboration with México Negro and other Costa Chica organizations. Organizers secured transportation for Costa Chica locals to

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<sup>420</sup> For a list of twenty-three of those organizations see Heriberto Ruiz Ponce, "Organización civil de pueblos negros en Oaxaca," *Acta Sociológica* Num.74, (Septiembre-Dicembre 2017), 14. Missing from that list was Colectiva de la Costa de Oaxaca Ña'a Tunda A.C., which according to its founder, Yolanda Camacho, was established in 2014.

<sup>421</sup> For images and video clips about the Mata Clara EPN see its Facebook page

<https://www.facebook.com/p/Encuentro-De-Pueblos-Negros-Mata-Clara-2017-100068919680307/>.

travel to Veracruz and Coahuila to attend those events and network with the locals.<sup>422</sup> These events were opportunities for Costa Chica activists to discuss their campaign for constitutional recognition during roundtable discussions with folks outside their region. According to a local newspaper, *El Sol de la Laguna*, the event was expected to attract not only locals but also representatives from national institutions like CONAPRED and international guests from Colombia, Canada, Haiti, South Africa, and the United States.<sup>423</sup>

The decade also brought significant political shifts. In 2012, Mexican voters reinstalled the PRI in the executive office with the election of Enrique Peña Nieto. Peña Nieto, like so many before him, ran his campaign on a promise to eliminate the systemic corruption that had for so long plagued Mexico. However, his *sexenio* (six-year term) was engulfed in accusations of corruption and human rights violations. During Peña Nieto's presidency, Mexico's rank fell by 32 points on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, placing the country at 138 among 180.<sup>424</sup> Among the multiple examples of corruption and impunity that characterized the PRI's return to power was the disappearance of 43 students from the state of Guerrero in September 2014 and the *Casa Blanca* scandal of the same year that involved a conflict of interest

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<sup>422</sup> Sergio Peñaloza Pérez, interview by author, 22 January 2021; Poli Habana, interview by author, 2 August 2021.

<sup>423</sup> Abel Rodas Ramírez, "Preparan Encuentros de Pueblos Negros en Múzquiz," *El Sol de la Laguna*, Local, Martes 9 de Octubre de 2018, <https://www.elsoldelalaguna.com.mx/local/preparan-encuentro-de-pueblos-negros-en-muzquiz-2257921.html>. For a video clip of the event see "Muzquiz Coahuila dan bienvenida al 19 encuentro de pueblos negros," CMM Informativo, YouTube video, 44:21, 10 November 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Rhws3yqTgY>.

<sup>424</sup> Gina Hinojosa and Maureen Meyer, *The Future of Mexico's National Anti-Corruption System: The Anti-Corruption Fight Under President López Obrador* (Washington DC: WOLA, 2019), <https://www.wola.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Report-National-Anti-Corruption-System-2019.pdf>.

on a real estate purchase by the First Lady. One Mexican scholar described this period as moving the country from “delirium to disenchantment” that had generated “widespread social discontent” and resistance.<sup>425</sup>

On 1 July 2018, the Mexican people elected Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) as president in a landslide victory on the promise to reduce poverty and inequality, end corruption, and curtail violence.<sup>426</sup> His party, the left-leaning MORENA, was also victorious, winning a congressional majority in the Senate and Chamber of Deputies. What was most striking about AMLO’s and MORENA’s victories was that 2018 marked the first time the MORENA party participated in a presidential election. The party first emerged as a civil association in 2011 and

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<sup>425</sup> Denise Dresser, “Mexico: Why Mexico Fell Apart, and How to Fix It,” *Berkeley Review of Latin American Studies* (Spring 2017), <https://clacs.berkeley.edu/mexico-why-mexico-fell-apart-and-how-fix-it>. Also see Mauricio Merino, “Mexico: The Fight Against Corruption,” The Mexican Institute at the Woodrow Wilson Center (June 2015), [https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/mexico\\_the\\_fight\\_against\\_corruption.pdf](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/mexico_the_fight_against_corruption.pdf); Roberto Simon, “Rise and Fall: Mexican Civil Society’s Anti-Corruption Push in the Peña Nieto Years,” [https://www.ascoa.org/sites/default/files/archive/AWG\\_Mexico\\_CaseStudy\\_2020.pdf](https://www.ascoa.org/sites/default/files/archive/AWG_Mexico_CaseStudy_2020.pdf); “Surveying the damage: Enrique Peña Nieto,” Amnesty International, 30 November 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/11/enrique-pena-nieto-el-recuento-de-los-danos/>.

<sup>426</sup> Azam Ahmed and Paulina Villegas, “López Obrador, an Atypical Leftist, Wins Mexico Presidency in Landslide,” *New York Times*, 1 July 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/01/world/americas/mexico-election-andres-manuel-lopez-obrador.html> (Last accessed 25 October 2023); Marilia Brocchetto, James Griffiths and Samantha Beech, “Lopez Obrador Scores Landslide Victory as Mexico Votes for Change,” CNN, 2 July 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/07/01/americas/mexico-election-president-intl/index.html> (Last accessed 25 October 2023).

was registered as national political party in 2014.<sup>427</sup> Furthermore, 2018 marked the first time that a leftist president and political party was elected to office. That AMLO and MORENA won with a landslide suggests that Mexicans, especially those that had felt disenfranchised and marginalized, were seeking a significant change.<sup>428</sup>

#### 6.4 Reforming Article 2 of the National Constitution

One of the new MORENA senators was Susan Harp Iturrubarría of Oaxaca, a Lebanese-mestiza and member of one of the most prominent families in Mexico. In the 1990s, her paternal uncle, Alfredo Harp Helú, a stockbroker, was involved in the acquisition of the National Bank of Mexico (Banamex) and later became the chairman of the Grupo Financiero Banamex-Accival. Prior to entering Mexican politics, Harp Iturrubarría had been a singer of traditional Mexican music, which included Afro-Mexican sounds. Through music and the arts, she forged relations with Afro-Mexican communities in the Costa Chica. Harp Iturrubarría had traveled to the region to perform, research, and collaborate in projects that celebrated and promoted Afro-Mexican culture.<sup>429</sup>

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<sup>427</sup> Rosendo Bolívar Meza, “Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional: Democracia Interna y Tendencias Oligárquicas,” *Foro Internacional* 228, LVII, 2017 (2), 460.

<sup>428</sup> Carolina Gómez Mena, “Más de 100 organizaciones apoyarán a AMLO” *La Jornada*, 4 April 2018, 15, <https://www.jornada.com.mx/2018/04/04/politica/015n2pol> (Last accessed 25 October 2023).

<sup>429</sup> For an interview with Susana Harp see “Susana Harp senadora de la República, preside Foro Afromexicano en Pinotepa Nacional Oaxaca,” CMM Informativo, YouTube video, 6:26, 11 February 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vstyji9ZoGw> (Last accessed 18 March 2024).

In 2018, Harp Iturrubarría ran her senatorial campaign on two themes: culture and sustainability. Key to this discussion was the cultural component of her campaign, which guided her commitment to recognizing the Afro-Mexican population. During one of Harp Iturrubarría's campaign stops in Puerto Escondido, Oaxaca, she discussed recognizing Afro-Mexicans and promised the audience, "it can be done in the Senate and we will do it together."<sup>430</sup> Upon taking office, Harp Iturrubarría delivered on her promise and began developing an initiative with MORENA Senator, and incoming president of the Mesa Directiva of the Senate, Martí Batres Guadarrama, to reform Article 2 of the Constitution.<sup>431</sup>

On 18 October 2018, Senator Harp Iturrubarría introduced the initiative to the Senate.<sup>432</sup> Since her predecessors in the Chamber of Deputies and Senate had introduced four previous initiatives, she and her advisors had a blueprint to build upon. But unlike the previous efforts, Harp Iturrubarría and her team now had the support of state institutions like CONAPRED, INPI,

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<sup>430</sup> Yolanda Sánchez, "Se compromete Susana Harp con población afro oaxaqueña," *Página 3*, April 16, 2018, <https://pagina3.mx/2018/04/se-compromete-susana-harp-con-poblacion-afro-oaxaqueña/> (Last accessed 20 October 2023).

<sup>431</sup> Note: Activists and academics have credited Harp Iturrubarría as the primary author and lobbyist of the initiative. To what degree Batres Guadarrama was involved in drafting the initiative is unclear.

<sup>432</sup> For Susana Harp Iturrubarría's 18 October 2018 introduction of her initiative see Juan Arvizu Arrijoja y Alberto Morales, "Proponen reforma en Senado para reconocer derechos de afrodescendientes," *El Universal*, 18 October 2018, <https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/nacion/politica/proponen-reforma-en-senado-para-reconocer-derechos-de-afrodescendientes/>;

"Sen. Harp: Reconocer a pueblos afromexicanos como parte de composición pluricultural," Senado de México, YouTube video, 9:05, 18 October 2018, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UR\\_yXeadl\\_c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UR_yXeadl_c) (Last accessed 12 November 2023).

INAH, and CNDH, all of which had in the past decade had published studies on Afro-Mexicans and advocated for their recognition. Those reports also gave Harp Iturribarría and her team access to state-produced data on Afro-Mexicans that had not been available to previous members of Congress. As a result, Harp Iturribarría developed and presented a statement of motives that thoroughly explained the processes by which the Mexican state made Afro-Mexicans publicly invisible, the consequences that invisibilization had on that population (marginalization and racism), the efforts of the Afro-Mexican movement for recognition, constitutional reforms at the state level recognizing Black Mexicans, and the international treaties and campaigns that legitimized their claims. And she carefully explained why Afro-Mexicans were a distinct ethnic group like their Indigenous counterparts.<sup>433</sup>

Owing to their public invisibility, Harp Iturribarría argued, Afro-Mexicans were also disproportionately exposed to “institutional discrimination [...] exclusion and vulnerability.”<sup>434</sup> She explained that in the municipalities that INEGI analyzed, 15 percent of persons over the age of 15 were illiterate (three times the national average) and 56 percent did not complete high school. Six of every ten persons age 12 and older were not economically active, meaning that agriculture was their sole source of subsistence. Additionally, those municipalities experienced

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<sup>433</sup> For Harp Iturribarría’s initiative see

[http://sil.gobernacion.gob.mx/Archivos/Documentos/2018/10/asun\\_3756979\\_20181018\\_1539864557.pdf](http://sil.gobernacion.gob.mx/Archivos/Documentos/2018/10/asun_3756979_20181018_1539864557.pdf) (Last accessed 25 October 2023).

<sup>434</sup> For Harp Iturribarría and Batres Guadarrama’s initiative see pages 1

[http://sil.gobernacion.gob.mx/Archivos/Documentos/2018/10/asun\\_3756979\\_20181018\\_1539864557.pdf](http://sil.gobernacion.gob.mx/Archivos/Documentos/2018/10/asun_3756979_20181018_1539864557.pdf) (Last accessed 25 October 2023).

“very high marginality” in health services, with 76 percent of the population affiliated with Seguro Popular (public healthcare insurance), nearly twice the national average of 41 percent.<sup>435</sup>

Harp Iturrigarria’s initiative was submitted to the Senate’s joint Commission of Constitutional Points and Legislative Studies to study, analyze, and deliver an opinion for a congressional vote.<sup>436</sup> The joint Commission partnered with INPI, CONAPRED, INAH, and CNDH to hold consultations with Afro-Mexican communities.<sup>437</sup> An open call was published on

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<sup>435</sup> See pages 3-4 of Harp Iturrigarria and Batres Guadarrama’s initiative

[http://sil.gobernacion.gob.mx/Archivos/Documentos/2018/10/asun\\_3756979\\_20181018\\_1539864557.pdf](http://sil.gobernacion.gob.mx/Archivos/Documentos/2018/10/asun_3756979_20181018_1539864557.pdf) (Last accessed 25 October 2023). 3-4. Seguro Popular is a public health insurance program designed for Mexican families who are ineligible to enroll in other health insurance programs because they do not belong to Mexico’s formal economy. See “Seguro Popular,” [http://www.salud.gob.mx/transparencia/inform\\_adicional/Avancesyresultados.pdf](http://www.salud.gob.mx/transparencia/inform_adicional/Avancesyresultados.pdf).

<sup>436</sup> Consultations with social groups like Afro-Mexicans and the Indigenous were part of Article 6 of ILO 169. Thus, providing those meetings signaled that the Mexican Senate was adhering to ILO 169. Also, the Senate’s Mesa Directiva sent the initiative to the Commission of Indigenous Affairs. However, on 2 April 2019, the same Mesa Directiva determined that the Commission of Constitutional Points and the Commission of Legislative Studies would be the only independent bodies tasked with reviewing and opining on the Harp Iturrigarria and Batres Guadarrama initiative. See Senado de la Republica LXIIV Legislatura, “Dicatamen de las comisiones unidas de puntos constitucionales; y de estudios legislativos , en relación a las iniciativas con proyecto de decreto que adiciona un apartado C al Artículo 2o,” 25 April 2019, 2.

<sup>437</sup> See Senado de la Republica LXIIV Legislatura, “Dicatamen de las comisiones unidas,” 10-11. Also, according to Article 6 of ILO 169, governments will “consult the peoples concerned, through appropriate procedures and in particular through their representative institutions, whenever consideration is being given to legislative or administrative measures which may affect them directly...with the objective of achieving agreement or consent to the proposed measures.” See C169 - Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169), Part 1. General Policy, Article 6,

25 January 2019 on the Senate’s website inviting “Afro-Mexican persons, communities, and peoples” to the *consulta previa, libre e informada* (free and informed prior consultation) to seek their consent for the initiative to reform Article 2 of the Mexican Constitution. On 6 February 2019, the open call was published in national newspapers like *La Jornada* and *El Universal* to reach more Afro-Mexican citizens.<sup>438</sup> Forums were held during the month of February in Oaxaca, Guerrero, Veracruz, and Mexico City, which over 650 people attended.<sup>439</sup>

While most of those who attended the consultations supported the initiative's aim to reform Article 2, a small group wanted to see more articles added to the initiative. According to a Senate report, some of those in attendance wanted the initiative to “intervene in articles 27 and 115.” That group wanted to add text to those articles that identified Afro-Mexicans as a protected group. That same group also disputed “the specific term to recognize [Afro-Mexicans] in the constitution.” This was a debate that had divided activists for the past decade. Again that division re-emerged, with some preferring the term “Afro-Mexican,” others the term “Afrodescendants,” and a third group favoring *pueblos negros* (Black Peoples).<sup>440</sup>

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[https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:55:0::NO::P55\\_TYPE,P55\\_LANG,P55\\_DOCUMENT,P55\\_NODE:REV,en,C169./Document#A6](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:55:0::NO::P55_TYPE,P55_LANG,P55_DOCUMENT,P55_NODE:REV,en,C169./Document#A6) (Last accessed 11 November 2023).

<sup>438</sup> “Dictamen de las Comisiones Unidas de Puntos Constitucionales; y de Estudios Legislativos, en relación a las iniciativas con proyecto de decreto para un apartado C al Artículo 2...,” 25 April 2019, 2. Also see “Sobre pueblos afromexicanos,” *La Jornada*, 7 February 2019, <https://www.jornada.com.mx/2019/02/07/correo/002a2cor> ; [https://comisiones.senado.gob.mx/puntos\\_constitucionales/docs/convocatoria.pdf](https://comisiones.senado.gob.mx/puntos_constitucionales/docs/convocatoria.pdf).

<sup>439</sup> “Dictamen de las Comisiones Unidas de Puntos Constitucionales; y de Estudios Legislativos, en relación a las iniciativas con proyecto de decreto para un apartado C al Artículo 2...,” 25 April 2019, 12.

<sup>440</sup> “Dictamen de las Comisiones Unidas de Puntos Constitucionales; y de Estudios Legislativos, en relación a las iniciativas con proyecto de decreto para un apartado C al Artículo 2...,” 25 April 2019, 19-20.



That same small group of activists also criticized the gatherings for masquerading as free and informed prior consultations while ignoring Afro-Mexican demands. Francisco Ziga Gabriel, an activist from Oaxaca, argued that the consultations with communities could not be considered *previas, libres e informadas* because they occurred after the initiative had been introduced to the Senate. According to Ziga Gabriel, the consultations that the Senate and its partnering public institutions eventually held were, in fact, due to pressures from activists and grassroots organizations. He stated that on 20 October 2018, two days after Harp Iturribarría introduced the initiative to Congress, a group of activists convened in Pinotepa Nacional, Oaxaca, where they drafted and sent a letter to the senator. Ziga Gabriel recalled the letter stating that activists agreed with reforming Article 2, but noting that the initiative had not gone through a process of consultation prior to its presentation to the Senate and were now demanding one.<sup>441</sup> He and others have claimed that Harp Iturribarría and her team ignored their proposed changes. Ziga Gabriel told me that Congress passed the initiative's original version, which was introduced on 18 October 2018, with no changes.<sup>442</sup> Thus, for him and other activists, the consultations were merely performative.

During and after the consultations, other members of Congress began introducing initiatives to recognize Afro-Mexicans by amending Article 2 of the Mexican Constitution and reforming Articles 27, 28, and 115. On 12 February 2019, PRD Senator Omar Obed Maceda

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<sup>441</sup> Francisco Ziga Gabriel, interview by author, 7 April 2021. Sergio Peñaloza Perez also criticized how the initiative was introduced prior to consulting with Afro-Mexican communities. However, unlike Ziga Gabriel, Peñaloza Perez did not overtly denounce the consultations. Sergio Peñaloza Perez, interview by author, 22 January 2021.

<sup>442</sup> Ziga Gabriel, interview.

Luna from the State of Mexico introduced his initiative to the Senate. The Chamber of Deputies received three initiatives from PRI deputies. On 6 February 2019, PRI Deputy María Guadalupe Almaguer Pardo introduced her initiative. Then, on 29 April 2019, PRI Deputy René Juárez Cisneros introduced his bill. And on that same date, PRI Deputy Rubén Ignacio Moreira Valdez introduced his separate proposal. The initiatives presented to the Chamber of Deputies were either withdrawn or discarded. The Senate integrated Maceda Luna's initiative into Harp Iturribarría's proposal but did not consider articles 27, 28, or 115 for amendment.<sup>443</sup>

On 24 April 2019, the joint Commission of Constitutional Points and Legislative Studies voted to send Harp Iturribarría's initiative to the Senate for a vote. On 30 April 2019, before the vote, Harp Iturribarría delivered a speech in which she emphasized that, like Indigenous peoples, Afro-Mexicans were a distinct cultural group.<sup>444</sup> Batres Guadarrama, president of the Senate's Mesa Directiva, announced that because the initiative "consists of a single article it will be discussed [...] in one act." During the discussion, Maceda Luna took the floor to praise the

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<sup>443</sup> For congressional records on Omar Obed Maceda Luna's initiative see

[http://sil.gobernacion.gob.mx/Librerias/pp\\_ReporteSeguimiento.php?SID=&Seguimiento=3866942&Asunto=3811026#C](http://sil.gobernacion.gob.mx/Librerias/pp_ReporteSeguimiento.php?SID=&Seguimiento=3866942&Asunto=3811026#C); For María Guadalupe Almaguer Pardo's initiative see

[http://sil.gobernacion.gob.mx/Librerias/pp\\_ReporteSeguimiento.php?SID=5bac3a85219f8cfb9ce4a1981357ad39&Seguimiento=3810014&Asunto=3809533#C](http://sil.gobernacion.gob.mx/Librerias/pp_ReporteSeguimiento.php?SID=5bac3a85219f8cfb9ce4a1981357ad39&Seguimiento=3810014&Asunto=3809533#C); René Juárez Cisneros's initiative only sought to amend Article 2, see

[http://sil.gobernacion.gob.mx/Librerias/pp\\_ReporteSeguimiento.php?SID=&Seguimiento=3794625&Asunto=3794546](http://sil.gobernacion.gob.mx/Librerias/pp_ReporteSeguimiento.php?SID=&Seguimiento=3794625&Asunto=3794546); For Rubén Ignacio Moreira Valdez's initiative see

[http://sil.gobernacion.gob.mx/Librerias/pp\\_ReporteSeguimiento.php?SID=&Seguimiento=3874561&Asunto=3873282](http://sil.gobernacion.gob.mx/Librerias/pp_ReporteSeguimiento.php?SID=&Seguimiento=3874561&Asunto=3873282) (All last accessed 13 November 2023).

<sup>444</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eUiwplSBfsw&list=WL&index=117&t=3s> (Last accessed 12 November 2023).

initiative for raising awareness of Mexico's Black population. He also used that moment to note that the PRD had introduced a similar initiative earlier in the year (a proposal drafted by him, as noted above) and that there were “pending issues” that the Senate would have to address at a later date. Maceda Luna was stealthily elucidating his (and others’) perceived shortcomings of the initiative.<sup>445</sup>

After a very brief discussion, the Senate voted unanimously (by 122 votes to none, with 0 abstentions) in favor of amending Article 2 of the Mexican Constitution by adding a Section C that recognized Afro-Mexicans as “peoples and communities, whatever their self-denomination, as part of the nation’s multicultural composition.” According to Section C, Afro-Mexicans were entitled to “ the appropriate rights indicated in the previous sections of this article in the terms established by law, in order to guarantee their free determination, autonomy, development and social inclusion.” Following the approval, Harp Iturrigarria stepped onto the Senate floor accompanied by Afro-Mexican women activists from the Costa Chica region, Mexico City, and Veracruz, who were in attendance during the voting, where they were met with a round of applause, celebrating the passing of the initiative in the Chamber of the Senate.<sup>446</sup>

The Senate then sent the initiative to the Chamber of Deputies, where it also passed by 348 votes to none, with 1 abstention, on 28 June 2019.<sup>447</sup> On 31 July 2019, the full Congress

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<sup>445</sup> “Sesión ordinaria de la Cámara de Senadores del 30 de abril de 2019” Senado de México, 30 April 2019, YouTube video, 8:42:37, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CC2IIIIGnu\\_E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CC2IIIIGnu_E).

<sup>446</sup> See [http://sil.gobernacion.gob.mx/Archivos/Documentos/2019/05/asun\\_3878660\\_20190523\\_1558619947.pdf](http://sil.gobernacion.gob.mx/Archivos/Documentos/2019/05/asun_3878660_20190523_1558619947.pdf) (Last accessed 13 November 2023); “Sesión ordinaria de la Cámara de Senadores del 30 de abril de 2019” Senado de México, 30 April 2019, YouTube video, 8:51:20-8.51.37, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CC2IIIIGnu\\_E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CC2IIIIGnu_E).

<sup>447</sup>

[http://sil.gobernacion.gob.mx/Librerias/pp\\_ReporteSeguimiento.php?SID=&Seguimiento=3866942&Asunto=37569](http://sil.gobernacion.gob.mx/Librerias/pp_ReporteSeguimiento.php?SID=&Seguimiento=3866942&Asunto=37569)

approved the amendment to Article 2 of the Mexican Constitution. The reform was published in the *Diario Oficial* on 9 August 2019. The Mexican government had finally recognized Afro-Mexicans as an ethnic group that formed part of Mexico's multicultural nation.

### **6.5 Article 2, Section C: Reactions from Activists and Allies**

The amendment to Article 2 of the Constitution officially recognized Afro-Mexicans as part of the nation's multicultural composition. However, a small dissenting group of the Afro-Mexican movement was vocal about its discontent with the perceived shortcomings of that reform. On 9 May 2019, weeks after the Senate had approved Harp Iturrigaray's initiative, Afro-Mexican activist Juliana Acevedo Ávila denounced the initiative as racist during an Inter-American Commission on Human Rights session about the inclusion of Afro-Mexicans in Mexico's 2020 national census. For Acevedo Ávila, the reform necessitated a change in the original language of Article 2. She argued that adding a section toward the end of the article failed to specify Afro-Mexicans' rights.<sup>448</sup>

Acevedo argued that adding Section C was a purely symbolic gesture made to show the international community that Mexico was making advances in its inclusive and anti-

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<sup>79</sup>; For audio-visual of the debate and voting see "Sesión Extraordinaria de la Cámara de Diputados 28-Jun-2019," Canal Congreso de México, YouTube video, 03:00:00 – 02:22:10 (debate) and 02:22:11 – 02:23:25 (voting), 28 June 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dE4NYamWAsM> (Last accessed 16 November 2023).

<sup>448</sup> "Mexico: Racial criteria in 2020 census," Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, YouTube video, 54:35 – 58:55, May 13, 2019, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IwjpsnimVOg&list=PL5QlapyOGhXvvyKD3Y0-GblPrDQ1xE\\_Ht](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IwjpsnimVOg&list=PL5QlapyOGhXvvyKD3Y0-GblPrDQ1xE_Ht) (Last accessed 27 November 2023).

discriminatory policies.<sup>449</sup> Elia Avendaño, a Mexican legal scholar, similarly stated that the article's amendment was a strategic effort by the state to situate itself among other Latin American nations that recognized their Afrodescendant population in their respective constitutions, like Brazil, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua. In so doing, Mexico “pretends to respect the rights of Afro-Mexican peoples and communities, but maintains them in situations of poverty [and] social inequality.”<sup>450</sup>

The amendment to Article 2 deepened the divides within an already fragmented Afro-Mexican movement. Activists and academics have noted that the division generated two competing groups. Activist Néstor Ruiz Hernández categorized these fractions as the *grupo de aire* (air group) and the *grupo de tierra* (ground group). For Ruiz Hernández, the *grupo de aire*, vocally critical of the 2019 amendment, operated through social media activism and in international spaces. The *grupo de tierra*, of which he formed part, was devoted to grassroots mobilization and building community relations. Ruiz Hernández's characterization of the two fractions was overly simplistic and biased toward his group. The *grupo de aire* did have a more substantial online presence but was also involved in community organizing events. And while

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<sup>449</sup> In addition to Julia Acevedo Ávila there is a group of leading voices critical of the 2019 amendment to Article 2 of the Mexican Constitution, which includes and have been interviewed by this author: Beatriz Amaro Clemente, 8 June 2021; Elia Avendaño, 21 June 2021; Sagrario Cruz, 22 April 2021; Nemesio Rodriguez, 7 June 2021; and Francisco Ziga Gabriel, 7 April 2021.

<sup>450</sup> Elia Avendaño, “Reflexiones a un año de la inclusión constitucional afromexicana,” *Cultura y Política* (2020): 3, [http://www.nacionmulticultural.unam.mx/portal/cultura\\_politica/elia\\_avendano\\_20200807.html](http://www.nacionmulticultural.unam.mx/portal/cultura_politica/elia_avendano_20200807.html) (Last accessed 27 November 2023).

the *grupo de tierra* indeed had a stronger presence in the communities of the Costa Chica, its leaders were also traveling to speak at international gatherings and events.<sup>451</sup>

What really set the two groups apart was their relationships with academic and state institutions. On the one hand, the *grupo de tierra* had forged alliances with institutions like CONAPRED and INAH. Due to those relations, that group was less critical of the state and fully backed Harp Iturrubarría's initiative. For example, in the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights session, academic María Elisa Velázquez, who attended as part of the Mexican state's delegation and was an active ally of the *grupo de tierra*, rebutted Juliana Acevedo Ávila's claims that the constitutional recognition was discriminatory or racist against the Afro-Mexican population. She stated, "On the contrary, it is a product of the struggle [for Afro-Mexican recognition] of the Afro-Mexican organizations, academia, and state institutions."<sup>452</sup>

The constitutional amendment indeed resulted from years of struggle by Afro-Mexican activists and their academic allies. However, the *grupo de tierra*'s alliance with the state drove some of its leaders to avoid publicly voicing criticism of the reform or how the initiative was formulated. For example, in Néstor Ruiz Hernández's efforts to contest claims that Harp Iturrubarría did not include Afro-Mexican communities in the drafting of her initiative, he stated that she met with communities to discuss her intentions at a roundtable at the 2018 Encuentro de Pueblos Negros in Múzquiz, Coahuila. But that event was held in November 2018, weeks after

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<sup>451</sup> Néstor Ruiz Hernández, interview by author, 19 January 2021.

<sup>452</sup> Mexico: Racial criteria in 2020 census," YouTube video, 59:50 – 59:59, posted by Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, May 13, 2019, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IwjpsnimVOg&list=PL5QlapyOGhXvvyKD3Y0-GblPrDQ1xE\\_Ht](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IwjpsnimVOg&list=PL5QlapyOGhXvvyKD3Y0-GblPrDQ1xE_Ht) (Last accessed 27 November 2023).

Harp Iturrubarría introduced the initiative to the Senate. Ruiz Hernández went on to dispute that Harp Iturrubarría did not modify her initiative after the consultations held in Oaxaca, Guerrero, Veracruz, and Mexico City. According to him, the text in the final draft that stated, “this constitution recognized the Afro-Mexican people” was a revision made by the community.<sup>453</sup> For him and others in this group, the debate around the legitimacy and effectiveness of the recognition came down to the *grupo de aire*’s unhappiness that the recognition had been presented and achieved by Harp Iturrubarría and not by someone of their choosing. The *grupo de tierra* also criticized the *grupo de aire* for being stuck on details and for not considering the historic achievement as a major stepping-stone toward recognizing Afro-Mexicans and their rights.

But for the *grupo de aire*, the devil was very much in the details of Section C. Elia Avendaño, who wrote multiple articles on the reform, identified six differences between how the article was formulated to grant specific collective rights to Indigenous peoples and communities as subjects of the law but failed to do so for Afro-Mexicans. According to Avendaño: Section C was an addendum to Article 2, not a reform; the text did not define the concepts of peoples and communities and their applicability to Afro-Mexicans; “there was no precise mechanism to identify Afro-Mexicans [;] the term Afro-Mexican was noted as the principal legal identity [;] specific rights for Afro-Mexicans were not identified [; and] no mandate was established to

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<sup>453</sup> For Néstor Ruiz Hernández’s comments see interview by author, 19 January 2021. For the 2018 Encuentro de Pueblos Negros see <https://vanguardia.com.mx/coahuila/monclova/encuentro-de-pueblos-negros-reune-afroamericanos-en-coahuila-POVG3424092>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dRsvBGAOg3c&t=6s> (Last accessed 27 November 2023).

determine specific items, in federal or local expenditure budgets, to guarantee its application.”<sup>454</sup>

The opposite was true for the Indigenous population, which the Constitution identifies explicitly and outlines those concepts and rights. Thus, for Avendaño and those who agreed with her, the recognition of Afro-Mexicans was merely symbolic, since the section’s language did not specify any rights for that group that could be upheld in a court of law.

Another critical difference between the two groups was how they viewed the state. The *group de tierra* understood that to make advancements for the Afro-Mexican population, they would have to work with the state, and they were more than willing to do so. Thus, while they backed Harp Iturrigarria’s initiative and refrained from publicly calling out its shortcomings, they viewed securing rights as a gradual process that required further strategic moves on their part. This also meant running for regional and national congressional seats. And it also meant maintaining a working relationship with Harp Iturrigarria and other members of Congress to ensure the introduction of new initiatives that would grant them rights, especially during the International Decade for People of African Descent. The *grupo de aire* was far more critical of the state and its ability and willingness to ensure that the rights of Afro-Mexicans be promoted, respected, and protected. For them, the state’s disregard for Indigenous rights, who, with Afro-Mexicans, remained the most socially and economically marginalized group in Mexico, foreshadowed how the state would handle the rights of Mexico’s Black population.

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<sup>454</sup> Elia Avendaño, “Análisis sobre la inclusión constitucional de los pueblos afromexicanos,” *Cuestiones Constitucionales* 49 (July-December 2023): 87.



## 6.6 Conclusion

Without a doubt, achieving constitutional recognition has been a significant step forward for Afro-Mexicans, who before the twenty-first century were largely invisible at all levels of Mexican society. However, as some activists and scholars have pointed out, the reform fell short of identifying and defining the concept of Afro-Mexican communities and peoples and specifying Afro-Mexican rights. That lack of clarity has given state institutions the power to determine who is considered a part of the Afro-Mexican peoples and Black communities, and who is eligible to access specific resources allocated for that group. Tianna S. Paschel's criticisms about the limitations in the hemisphere's multicultural reforms help illuminate the current situation in Mexico. "The black subject identified in multicultural constitutions throughout Latin America did not include the general black population, but specific subsets like *quilombos* in Brazil and black rural communities on the Pacific Coast of Colombia."<sup>455</sup> The Mexican case is similar to what occurred in Colombia in the 1990s. For example, filmmaker André Lo Sanchez recalled going to the Instituto Nacional de los Pueblos Indígenas (INPI) in Mexico City, the institution that also handles Afro-Mexican affairs, to solicit resources for a cultural project only to be told that to access those resources he would need backing from a community leader. Being from a city and not belonging to a community equivalent to Indigenous communities in rural areas made him ineligible to access resources allocated for Afro-Mexicans.<sup>456</sup>

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<sup>455</sup> Paschel, *Becoming Black Political Subjects*, 87.

<sup>456</sup> André Lo Sánchez, personal communication, 11 February 2022.

That Mexico shares some similarities with Colombia's multicultural approach to recognizing its Afrodescendant population is befitting as activists and policymakers looked to that nation, and others in Latin America, as models to follow. While Mexico pursued a multicultural approach, national and global conversations about racial equality have intensified in the 2020s in response to the global pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement. Afrodescendant activists in Mexico, especially of a younger generation, have been engaging in those conversations and raising awareness about structural anti-Black racism in the country.

## **7.0 Conclusion: The Struggle for Afro-Mexican Visibility**

As this dissertation has shown, between 2000 and 2020 Mexico underwent a significant shift from ignoring its Black population to recognizing them as an integral part of the nation. This transformation stemmed from more than two decades of Black mobilization in the Costa Chica region, which emerged during a period when Black movements in other Latin American countries were garnering significant strength and successfully lobbying their respective governments for ethno-racial rights. Afro-Mexican activism focused on achieving constitutional recognition as a distinct ethnic group and their inclusion in state institutions' agendas and in the national census, aligning with Latin America's multicultural turn and global policies for ethno-racial rights. Thus, in 2019, Afro-Mexican activists and their allies witnessed how after over twenty years of struggle, Congress amended Article 2 of the Mexican Constitution to recognize its Black population as a distinct ethnic group with rights equivalent to those of Indigenous peoples.

In this concluding chapter, I will address three points that emerged from my research. First, Afro-Mexican activists' efforts for constitutional recognition were preceded and accompanied by other ongoing efforts to gain social, cultural, and statistical visibility. It was a movement to reverse the erasure of Afro-Mexicans, which was a consequence of Mexico's mestizaje project. Second, the Afro-Mexican movement's emergence, character, and outcome was due to an interplay between local, national, and international factors. Third, the tension around visibility and invisibility was also an internal issue that plagued the Afro-Mexican movement, in which men dominated leadership roles and relegated women to the background without a public voice.

## 7.1 Social, Cultural, and Statistical (In)Visibility

The movement for Afro-Mexican inclusion and recognition went beyond merely pressuring the Mexican government to acknowledge this population in the federal constitution as a distinct ethnic group. This was also a collective effort to increase the national visibility of Mexico's African heritage and its Afrodescendant citizens. For too long, Mexico ignored Afro-Mexicans and their contributions to the nation's history and culture. This neglect stemmed from the success of Mexico's mestizaje project, which sought to create a unified national identity by eliminating ethno-racial differences. Consequently, Mexico erased Afro-Mexicans from the nation's official documents and history books, rendering them socially, statistically, and culturally invisible. In essence, Mexico's efforts to eliminate group differences in pursuit of a homogenous national identity propagated the widely accepted myth that there were no Blacks in Mexico.

Seeking cultural and social visibility must then be understood as a direct confrontation to Mexico's mestizaje ideology and a challenge to the Mexican government to follow through on its claims of multiculturalism. As Afro-Mexicans and their allies elucidated the African roots of Mexican music, dances, and culinary traditions, they went beyond simply demonstrating Afro-Mexican contributions to the nation's culture. They called for Mexico and its institutions to acknowledge the statistical presence of Africans and their descendants in Mexico's past and present. Programs like the *Nuestra Tercera Raíz* were critical both in demonstrating the statistical relevance of Mexico's Black population and in humanizing this group by elucidating the diverse social positions they occupied from the time of encounter to the colonial period to the modern age. In pointing to the long presence of Afrodescendants in Mexico and the inextricable links binding Mexican culture to its forgotten African heritage, Afro-Mexicans found an opening to

position themselves as a *pueblo originario* (original people), which up until recently had been a status reserved for Indigenous communities and peoples.

Scholars have written about Afro-Latin Americans taking on an “Indigenous-like” identity to gain cultural visibility and secure ethno-racial rights within a multicultural framework. This dissertation echoes those arguments to demonstrate how Afro-Mexicans strategically used that identity. However, it also shows that as Afro-Mexicans paid attention to Indigenous movements within their country, they concurrently observed how Black movements across Latin America had embraced this identity to achieve the recognition they so desired. Seeing the achievements in places like Colombia, Afro-Mexicans adopted an “Indigenous-like” identity, allowing them to demand that the Mexican government acknowledge their culture as both distinct from and a contributor to the broader Mexican culture. Adopting this identity helped legitimize, in the eyes of the multicultural state, Afro-Mexican demands for the protection of their culture.

Making Afro-Mexicans visible to the Mexican state and nation also necessitated that activists and their allies shine a light on Afro-Mexican contributions to Mexican society beyond the nation’s culture to solidify their citizenship. Doing so was vital to legitimize their demands and combat the nationally held myth that there were no Blacks in Mexico, which subsequently emboldened Mexican officials to question the citizenship of Afro-Mexicans, leading some immigration officials to threaten Black Mexicans with deportation. Thus, to increase the social visibility of Afro-Mexicans, researchers and Black activists highlighted the wide-ranging positions that Africans and their descendants occupied in Mexican society from the time of encounter to the present day. They also emphasized the participation of Afro-Mexicans in Mexico’s wars for independence from Spain and the formation of the new republic by revealing

that two of the nation's founding fathers, Vicente Guerrero and José María Morelos, were themselves of African ancestry. By invoking these histories, Afro-Mexicans and their allies made clear that the nation's Black population had been and continues to be an integral part of the Mexican nation.

The Afro-Mexican struggle to attain statistical recognition was significantly longer than securing the acknowledgment of their social and cultural contributions to the nation. Their efforts to raise their national profile through official population counts involved convincing a governmental institution, which had ignored Afro-Mexicans since the late nineteenth century, to recognize them as a distinct ethnic group. As we have seen, the absence of demographic data on Afro-Mexicans as a separate group concealed basic information on their quality of life and interactions with racial inequality. Thus, Afro-Mexican efforts to have the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI) recognize them as an ethnic group went beyond merely proving their existence. Afro-Mexicans' statistical visibility played a pivotal role in revealing their socio-economic position in the nation and access to essential services such as education and healthcare. This information enabled Afro-Mexicans and their allies in academic and state institutions to demonstrate the urgent need for recognizing Afro-Mexicans in the constitution. Moreover, it served as a tool for Afro-Mexicans to demand that the Mexican government allocate resources for Mexico's Black population, paving the way for social equality.

## **7.2 The Convergence of the Local, National, and International**

This dissertation builds upon a scholarship that takes seriously the role international factors played in shaping the emergence, evolution, and results of Black social movements in

Latin America. Specifically, my research highlights how specific historical moments influenced Black movements and governments across Latin America differently. For instance, while the 2001 Durban Conference helped bring significant and immediate changes to Brazil's Black population after the government adopted affirmative action policies, the conference did not carry the same weight regarding Mexico's population. The Durban Conference's direct influence on Mexico is apparent in the government's embrace of anti-discrimination legislation and the establishment of the Consejo Nacional para Prevenir la Discriminación (CONAPRED). However, Black activism in the Costa Chica at this moment had just recently emerged as a cohesive and structured movement. As a result, Afro-Mexican activists had yet to create a sustainable campaign that would allow them to leverage international conventions to make demands on the Mexican state.

By the time the 2011 International Year for People of African Descent campaign came around, the Afro-Mexican campaign for recognition had found its footing, gaining significant strength and visibility. This allowed Black activists and their allies to invoke the International Year to pressure national institutions like CONAPRED and the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI) to recognize them as a distinct group and include them in their agency's programs and agendas. By this time, the U.N. Committee on Elimination of Racial Discrimination was also pressing these institutions to recognize Afro-Mexicans as a distinct ethno-racial group. With the Mexican government invested in creating and maintaining its international reputation as a democratic nation that upholds human rights, it was indispensable for the institutions it tasked to implement anti-discrimination policies (CONAPRED) and collect demographic information on its citizens (INEGI) to take formal steps to not only recognize Afro-Mexicans but also shine a light on their living conditions.

In other words, the interplay between local Black activism and international institutions and campaigns centering Afrodescendants influenced Mexican institutions. We saw that in earlier pages when CONAPRED, INEGI, and a growing number of public institutions began recognizing Afro-Mexicans as an ethnic group and started publishing studies on their living conditions and experiences with racial discrimination. The official publications generated during the 2015-2024 International Decade for People of African Descent helped make Mexico's Black population and its plights as a marginalized group visible. Moreover, the 2018 electoral victory of the left-leaning MORENA party (Partido Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional) and its presidential candidate, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), ushered in a significant shift away from previous conservative Mexican regimes. The social and political conditions for Afro-Mexicans to gain constitutional recognition had become more favorable than ever before. During the first year of the AMLO's *sexenio*, Congress amended the Mexican Constitution to recognize Afro-Mexicans as an ethnic group.

Simply put, the interaction between local activism, national political developments, and international factors helped bring about the visibility and constitutional recognition of Afro-Mexicans. Such consequential interaction occurred when Afrodescendants were the subjects of international attention, significant political transformations were underway at the national level, and the Afro-Mexican movement had become more sophisticated at the local level. The Afro-Mexican movement could plausibly have gained recognition and inclusion without leveraging international campaigns that centered on Afrodescendants, but as activists admitted to me, the path toward achieving recognition would have been much longer and more challenging.

Gender, Power, and Inequality



### 7.3 Gender, Power, and Inequality

This project also takes gender seriously and uses it as a tool to examine the power dynamics within the Afro-Mexican movement closely. Undoubtedly, men and women were pivotal in establishing and shaping the movement. But as we saw in chapter five, the Afro-Mexican movement inherited local ideas about gender that reinforced an imbalance of power between the men and women working together to achieve national visibility and recognition as a Black ethnic group. Men positioned themselves as the leaders and public faces of the Afro-Mexican movement and had the final say on all organizational matters. Meanwhile, some of the women we met in this dissertation were relegated to the background and deterred from taking public-facing roles. This dynamic resulted in their invisibility despite women organizing and coordinating the same public gatherings where their *compañeros* denied them a public platform to voice their thoughts. Instead, women were pushed to the kitchen, where they cooked for the event and hosted panels and workshops addressing the needs of Afro-Mexican women. We then see a variant of a gendered public and private binary that makes the former a masculine space and the latter a feminine space.

However, no imbalance of power goes unchallenged. In earlier pages, we met a small group of women who openly and incessantly contested the movement's gender dynamics. After spending significant time away from the Costa Chica, these women returned with ideas about gender that defied local norms, which strained their relationships with some of the men involved in the movement. The rift between male leaders and this group of women drove the latter to establish their own organizations that put the needs of the Afro-Mexican women front and center.

The efforts of Afro-Mexican women to assume public leadership positions increased their visibility in the Costa Chica region. But their networks with Indigenous women in Mexico and Afro-Latin American women outside the country also helped many of these women evolve as activists and leaders. In their new roles, they were now stepping outside the shadows of their *compañeros* to travel to and speak in national and international spaces. The presence of Afro-Mexican women in those spaces certainly increased their visibility, and it also helped the Afro-Mexican movement gain more support from external actors, as we saw when women appealed to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. Clearly, women were a significant force that helped drive the Afro-Mexican movement and its achievements. As one of those women once declared, “I dare say that if we women had not entered with that force, we might still be struggling and we would still be invisible in the constitution.”<sup>457</sup>

#### **7.4 Visibility Partially Achieved: 2020 and Beyond**

Following the 2019 constitutional amendment, in 2020 the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI) introduced a question in Mexico's decennial national census, aimed at counting Afro-Mexicans as a distinct group. Continuing a practice initiated five years earlier for the 2015 inter-census, INEGI collaborated with Black activists in formulating the question, which asked, “because of your ancestors and according to your customs and traditions, do you consider yourself to be Afro-Mexican, Black, or Afro-descendant?” INEGI found that 2.5

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<sup>457</sup> See Cadumen Lab, “Generaciones en Resistencia,” YouTube, 08 March 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W2BScWe8avU>.

million out of 126 million Mexicans identified as Afro-Mexican, Black, or Afrodescendant, comprising 2 percent of the total population. The results reflected a 96 percent increase from the 2015 inter-census figures, which had indicated that Afro-Mexicans constituted 1.2 percent of the Mexican population.<sup>458</sup>

Despite that increase, Afro-Mexican activists and their allies expressed disappointment in the 2020 figures, believing they should have been higher. They raised concerns about the accuracy of INEGI's results, highlighting several issues. One concern was the alleged bias of INEGI volunteers, who activists claimed did not inquire about Afro-Mexican identity from individuals they did not perceive as Black. For instance, there is the case of Gina Diédhiou, an Afro-Mexican activist in Mexico City, whose father is Black but mother is not. When INEGI interviewed Diédhiou's mother for the census while Gina was at work, they did not ask if anybody in the household identified as Afro-Mexican, even though Gina and her son self-identify as such. After discovering this omission, Diédhiou, who works at CONAPRED, contacted INEGI to request a re-do of the interview to ensure that she and her son were counted as Afro-Mexicans. Other activists made similar charges against INEGI, citing the agency's poor training of its census takers.<sup>459</sup>

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<sup>458</sup> INEGI, "Presentación de resultados: población afromexicana o afrodescendiente," INEGI-Censo 2020, (2021), 25-26. Original question in Spanish: "por sus antepasados y de acuerdo con sus costumbres y tradiciones, ¿se considera afromexicano(a), negro(a), o afrodescendiente?"

<sup>459</sup> Gina Diédhiou, interview by author, 27 November 2020; Virtual Panel, "Los afrodescendientes en el censo 2020," Facebook/Zoom, 15 April 2020, [https://www.facebook.com/Cepiadetpag/videos/513873813353720?locale=es\\_LA](https://www.facebook.com/Cepiadetpag/videos/513873813353720?locale=es_LA) (last accessed 14 May 2020).

Another contributing factor was a fumbled AfroCenso awareness campaign. After INEGI declined to create an awareness campaign for Afro-Mexicans, citing budgetary constraints, organizations in the Mexico City partnered with international NGOs, state institutions, and local Afro-Mexican organizations to create a campaign. However, according to activists in the Costa Chica region, the campaign encountered logistical challenges. Organizations in Mexico City, tasked with disseminating campaign materials, encountered delays in delivering campaign materials to rural regions, hindering efforts to raise local awareness about the new census question. Compounding these challenges were the COVID-19 pandemic shutdowns, which coincided with the census. Activists asserted that pandemic-related restrictions hampered INEGI workers' ability to complete all scheduled home visits.<sup>460</sup>

Afro-Mexican criticisms of the 2020 national census echoed those of other Afro-Latin Americans regarding their own census outcomes. This has been an ongoing issue in Colombia since the 2005 census, when the Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística (DANE) reported that 4.3 million people identified with one of three Black categories presented to them in the DANE questionnaire, representing 10 percent of the Colombian population. However, activists had anticipated a much higher number, estimating it to be 26 percent. They argued that the lower figure was partly due to the government's failure to include the term *moreno*, which Afro-Colombians widely use. For the 2018 census, DANE reported a 30 percent decline from the 2005 figures, with only 3.0 million people identifying as Black. The new numbers drew criticism from Afro-Colombian and international organizations, with the Conferencia Nacional de

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<sup>460</sup> Néstor Ruiz Hernández, interview by author, 25 November 2020; Sergio Peñaloza Pérez, interview by author, 24 November 2020; Virtual Panel, "Los afrodescendientes en el censo 2020," Facebook/Zoom, 15 April 2020, [https://www.facebook.com/Cepiadetpag/videos/513873813353720?locale=es\\_LA](https://www.facebook.com/Cepiadetpag/videos/513873813353720?locale=es_LA) (last accessed 14 May 2024).

Organizaciones Afrocolombianas (CNOA) labeling the 2018 census results as “statistical genocide.”<sup>461</sup> A similar trend was observed in Ecuador, where the 2022 census reported just over 800,000 people identifying as Black, a 22 percent decrease from the 2010 census. As in Colombia, Ecuador’s Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos faced criticism and accusations of undercounting and “erasing” its Afrodescendant population.<sup>462</sup>

These instances underscore the ongoing challenges and controversies surrounding the accurate representation of Afro-Latin American populations in national census data. But despite the challenges and criticisms surrounding Mexico’s 2020 census, it did reveal that the nation has

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<sup>461</sup> Paschel, *Becoming Black*, 139; Andrews, *Afro-Latin America: Black Lives*, 31; Julián Vivas, “El ‘error’ del Dane que borró del mapa a 1,3 millones de afros,” *El Tiempo*, 25 November 2019,

<https://www.eltiempo.com/colombia/otras-ciudades/el-error-del-dane-que-borro-del-mapa-a-1-3-millones-de-afros-436936>; DANE, *Comunidades Negras, Afrocolombianas, Raizales y Palenqueras: Resultados del Censo Nacional de Población y Vivienda 2018* (Colombia: DANE, 2021), 30,

<https://www.dane.gov.co/files/investigaciones/boletines/grupos-etnicos/informe-resultados-comunidades-narp-cnpv2018.pdf>; DANE, *Población Negra, Afrocolombiana, Raizal y Palenquera: Resultados del Censo Nacional de Población y Vivienda 2018* (Colombia: DANE, 2019), 16,

<https://www.dane.gov.co/files/investigaciones/boletines/grupos-etnicos/presentacion-grupos-etnicos-poblacion-NARP-2019.pdf>.

<sup>462</sup> Yasmín Salazar Méndez, “Las estadísticas nos desaparecieron,” *Primicias*, 23 September 2023,

<https://www.primicias.ec/noticias/firmas/estadisticas-censo2022-afroecuatorianos-inec/>; Antonio Ayoví Nazareno, “Los afroecuatorianos ‘abducidos’ del censo 2022,” *El Universo*, 27 October 2023,

<https://www.eluniverso.com/opinion/columnistas/los-afroecuatorianos-abducidos-del-censo-2022-nota/>; INEC, *Censo Ecuador: Presentación de Resultados Nacionales* (Ecuador: INEC, 2023), 33,

[https://www.censoecuador.gob.ec/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Presentacio%CC%81n\\_Nacional\\_1%C2%B0entrega-4.pdf](https://www.censoecuador.gob.ec/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Presentacio%CC%81n_Nacional_1%C2%B0entrega-4.pdf).

one of the larger populations in Latin America that self-identifies as Black or Afrodescendant.<sup>463</sup> This significant demographic presence is likely to serve as a catalyst for activists and members of Congress to advocate for policy reforms addressing Afro-Mexican inequality. Activists and lawmakers have already utilized data from the 2015 inter-census to pressure Congress to grant Afro-Mexicans the constitutional recognition they so desired. Recently, advocates have been making strides in various areas, such as urging the Secretaría de Educación Pública to incorporate Afro-Mexican history into school textbooks and introducing affirmative action policies in Congress. Moreover, Afro-Mexican activists are intensifying their efforts to confront systemic racism and discrimination within Mexican society.<sup>464</sup> For many of them, the next frontier will be the struggle for racial equality policies.

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<sup>463</sup> On Latin America's Black population figures see Edward Telles, "The Project on Ethnicity and Race in Latin America (PERLA): Hard Data and What is at Stake," in *Pigmentocracies: Ethnicity, Race, and Color in Latin America*, ed. Edward Telles and the Project on Ethnicity and Race in Latin America (PERLA) (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 26-27.

<sup>464</sup> Gabriela Iturralde, personal communication, 8 August 2023. For a 2021 initiative from Senator Susana Harp to include Afro-Mexicans in existing affirmative action policies see: [http://sil.gobernacion.gob.mx/Archivos/Documentos/2021/04/asun\\_4180951\\_20210429\\_1618322862.pdf](http://sil.gobernacion.gob.mx/Archivos/Documentos/2021/04/asun_4180951_20210429_1618322862.pdf) (last accessed 14 May 2024), Rosa María Castro Salinas, personal communication, 1 May 2023.

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Hemeroteca Nacional de México

### **Digital Databases**

Consejo Nacional Para Prevenir la Discriminación (CONAPRED), Centro de Documentación

Secretaria de Gobernación, Sistema de Información Legislativa

United Nations Treaty Body Database

### **Periodicals**

Animal Político

Crónica

Diario de México

Detroit News

El Diario de Zihuatanejo

El Economista

El Financiero

El Imparcial

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