

XI ENCUENTRO DE PUEBLOS NEGROS  
DE OAXACA Y GUERRERO**NO MAS INVISIBLE**

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**P**or casualidad, Padre Glyn Jemmott was in Winston-Salem visiting *Costeño* friends at the time my documentary photographs about the communities of the Costa Chica were presented at the Sawmill gallery of the Winston-Salem cultural association. He attended the opening reception, and told me about the Encuentro de Pueblos Negros to be held in Juchitan, Guerrero, Mexico in 2007. *Por casualidad otra vez*, my friend Gloria's mother who lives in Juchitan invited me to visit her for the meeting.

I arrived in Juchitan by Volkswagen taxi, about a 2 hour drive from Acapulco via a two lane highway. March was the midst of dry season and Juchitan was a hot, dusty town, that at midday reminded me of my travels in Ghana. Perhaps for this reason, Africans who forcibly migrated to Mexico during the Afro-Atlantic slave trade beginning five centuries ago felt comfortable and eventually established their communities there.

At my hostess Catalina's house, the young people awaited the arrival of "Los Negros". Jose, Catalina's nephew was preparing his costume for the traditional dance, "El Son de Los Toritos". The students seemed to be aware that such cultural traditions were "special", but perhaps not related to a recognition of their relationship to their own African cultural heritage.

That night in the town center, a man was using a megaphone to announce the opening of the "Encuentro". After sunset in a small gazebo, a French cartoon was screened for a group of eager children and a few curious adults. The film was an African folktale about a little boy who, although very small was very wise, a Trickster figure who from the first days of his life saved his village from various calamities, consistently outwitting an evil sorceress, and eventually being recognized as "hero". The film introduced one of the two primary components of the "Encuentro", the presentation of cultural works and activities that educated participants about their African heritage.

The next day, I registered for the "Encuentro" at the town auditorium, and heard the welcoming speeches given by local officials. Stepping out of the auditorium briefly, I landed in the middle of the opening procession. In the midst of women in long skirts and traditional huipil blouses dancing the samba-like

*Chilena* which is typically presented on such celebratory occasions. There, I encountered another Trickster figure, a large bull puppet constructed of bright colored fabric and maneuvered by a human inside.

There in the street I met Padre Glyn, and he educated me about another part of the "Encuentro", the political and consciousness-raising aspect. According to Glyn, representatives of Afro-descended towns of Oaxaca and Guerrero states have been meeting annually for the past ten years. Each year, the meeting location alternates between a town in Oaxaca State and a town in Guerrero. The next host town is determined at the close of each annual meeting.

Participants of the host town find a place to sleep for arriving participants. Two meals per day are eaten communally, prepared by members of the "Encuentro" community. This style of hosting visiting participants in the homes of local members, and sharing meals together is one of the many similarities I noted between aspects of the "Encuentro" and the methods of the community workers who visited the Deep South of the United States during the Civil Rights Movement.

Padre Glyn told me about the full title of the meeting *No Mas Invisible* (No Longer Invisible). He explained that Mexico's historical denial of the existence of Mexicans of African descent is a form of discrimination. He

continued to explain that although indigenous groups have benefited from the enactment of recent anti-discrimination laws, protections don't extend to Mexicans of African descent. He mentioned the need for support from public officials, which made me wonder about possible experiences with harassment.

The evening program in the auditorium included oratory presentations by students, and music and dance performances by high school students from participating communities. The dances and music selected were typical of the Coastal region and provided examples of African cultural influences. Each evening of the "Encuentro", cultural presentations re-acquainted *Costeños* with their traditional art forms.

Traditional dances exemplified the blending of aspects of Spanish and African origins. For example, the *Chilena*, presented by high school students and also danced by women elders of the community in processions blends the rhythmic stomping of flat



feet, possibly derived from Spanish Flamenco with the sensual isolated pelvic movements reminiscent of Samba, a dance form that has roots in African religious ritual dance.

Another unnamed dance was performed in a circle. Couples took turns entering the circle to dance. The center couple danced face to face very close, one dancer leading and leaning forward toward her partner who responded by leaning backwards as in the “Limbo” dance performed in Trinidad and the Caribbean. The same dance also included a “shoulder shake” like the isolations performed in West African Dance.

In another dance, “El Son de los Toritos” (The Dance of the Little Bulls) eight masked dancers in black bull costumes danced with a *Mojigangas*, a Trickster figure – a man dressed as a woman whose choreography included attempts to seduce the bulls and audience members. The music is a Son, whose four beat measures are similar to the African-derived sones of the Caribbean.

*La Danza de la Tortuga* (The Turtle Dance) was another costumed dance, the central figure wearing a tortoise shell costume and straw hat.

Surrounding the turtle were other costumed children dancing the *Chilena*. *La Tortuga*, another Trickster figure danced in the midst of the children, and then danced into the audience teasing and poking his “head” on a stick at children in the audience.

The rare Son Artesa is said to be presently danced only in a few small coastal Oaxacan towns was performed by elders from the town of El Ciruelo, Oaxaca. The dance was accompanied by a vocalist, a guitar, and a rhythm tapped out on a wooden box, a cajon. The Son Artesa is danced on top of a large smooth wooden box adorned on the ends with carvings of bulls’ heads. A five step rhythm is tapped out while a kerchief is held in one hand extended forward. Circular turns are made as the dancer keeps the rhythm. My host Taurino in Juchitan explained that the Son Artesa was originally a celebratory wedding dance. The box was filled with fireworks and the newly married couple danced on top of the exploding firecrackers.

Visual arts were also a component of the “Encuentro” program. A mural about the African history of La Costa Chica was commissioned and evolved during the conference. Art workshops for children taught them about African traditions and heritage. Workshops in printing, sculpture, and collage using archival photographs of local persons of African descent were held throughout the “Encuentro”. Children also learned West African dance from a Veracruz dance company whose members have studied in Guinea. Children’s

workshops were led by artists from the Cimmaron Cultural Center, a group of practicing artists who conduct workshops in coastal communities during the summer months giving children instruction in the use of art materials and techniques.

The presentation of Afrocentric visual art, the installation of public art in the community (i.e. the mural installation) and the instruction given to children in techniques that facilitate creative expression in areas related to their African heritage (i.e. African dance) are reminiscent of the strategies employed by the artists who participated in the Black Consciousness and Black Arts Movements in the United States during the Civil Rights Movement (Steele, 1998).

Providing Afrocentric art and cultural education to youth are also approaches that are similar to those employed during the Black Consciousness movement as well, for example as part of the curricula of the Council of Black Institutions school movement and related Saturday school programs (Ernez, 1993).

The political and consciousness raising aspect of the

conference occurred in the format of roundtable discussions held during the day. The stated objectives for some of the roundtable discussions were:

1. To elicit reflection about the “invisibility” perceived by members of Afromexican communities, especially as it is related to interfaces with her political and governmental authorities (institutions) of Mexico.
2. To strengthen the sense of identity and solidarity among members of the Afromexican communities of La Costa Chica of Mexico.
3. To articulate problems related to the social and economic development of the region with the participation of the local administration of the Afromexican communities.

The format of the roundtable discussions always included a presentation and clarification of stated problems or concerns, small group discussion, the formulation of suggestions or conclusions made by consensus, and the sharing of each small group’s outcome with the larger group. The individual group’s suggestions were then combined to be recorded as the outcome of each round table session.



ABOVE: High School students in Guerrero, Mexico

BELOW: Opening procession



Conversations during the roundtable discussions made evident the struggles of individuals from the Afrodescended communities of La Costa Chica as they work to understand the impact of the Afro-Atlantic Slave Trade on Mexico's history and cultural evolution in general, and on their personal cultural identities specifically. Participants acknowledged a personal historical relationship to the slave trade, for example, as a participant recalled a great-grandparent who was African and another commented that some individuals are unable to identify themselves as "really black". There has been a preference for identification with the Spanish as contributors to Mexican culture instead of the acknowledgement of their African heritage.

As individuals and communities recognize and identify their African heritage, they are able to recognize and articulate experiences of discrimination within Mexico. Participants recounted experiences of discrimination related to a lack of

harassment, the recently enacted anti-discrimination laws that protect members of indigenous groups do not extend to Afromexicans.

The discussion of the issue of "invisibility" was brought to the table again in a session titled, "*Negro Tu, Negro Yo*" (I'm Black, You're Black). The general absence of the consideration of Mexico's role in the Afro-Atlantic Slave Trade and Africa's cultural contribution to the development of Mexican *Mestizaje*, or the Third Root as discussed by Aguirre Beltran (1989) was a prominent theme. Participants identified experiences of invisibility such as the absence of references to Africa in school history books, and derogatory *dichos* or sayings. The denial of the very existence of individuals of a particular cultural group robs them of identity and a sense of personhood, perhaps comparable to the position of African Americans at the time of the abolition of slavery. In the United States, the enslaved were considered to be without a soul, essentially absent, and counted as only three fifths of a person.

Participants talked about how they began to understand the relationship between their own African physical characteristics and Mexican history. One participant stated that he knew about "being black" because he had black parents and grandparents who all lived in a black town. Another learned about Africans and slavery from a book in a university library. A third told a story frequently told in La Costa Chica about Africans escaping from a slave ship as a source of the original Afrodescended populations of La Costa Chica.

At the close of the meetings, participants developed a list of important issues and an action plan. Priorities included:

1. The formation of an agenda of priorities for the black communities of La Costa Chica.
2. The development of a network of solidarity encompassing individuals and institutions of the Black towns of La Costa Chica.
3. Identifying individuals from black towns and can learn more about "negritude", or what it means to be black.
4. Finding ways community members can relinquish negative connotations of "blackness" imposed by the larger culture, and how can community members embrace their historical connection to African culture as a resource for individual and community strengths.
5. There is a need for a system of higher education located in the region of La Costa Chica that will prepare primary, elementary, and secondary school teachers locally, incorporating accurate historical and cultural information into their training and curriculum development.
6. For adults, there is a need to recreate a memory of their African history and African rooted cultural traditions.
7. The participants realize that aspects of racism and discrimination have been internalized as a result of centuries of experiences of repression in the larger culture. Mechanisms to address these problems must be developed.
8. There is a need to seek institutional recognition for the communities' cultures and African origins.
9. There is a need for the creation of professional schools in La Costa Chica.
10. The libraries of La Cosa Chica must become designated as "central" municipalities so that they will be staffed by trained librarians.
11. "Blacks Are a Race With a Heart and Feelings" – there is a



ABOVE: Mural

BELOW: *Los Torritos Dancer*



consistent school teachers sent to their communities by the Federal Government and the lack of available jobs in Costa Chica communities, one of the poorest regions of Mexico. Because there is not a major research university in the region, students who want to continue their education must leave their communities to study and often don't return. In the face of discrimination and

need to acknowledge and express feelings and emotions related to shared experiences.

12. There is a need for the enactment of local and federal antidiscrimination legislation that will provide protection for Afromexicans.
13. The Mexican National Museum of Anthropology must acknowledge the African contribution to Mexican culture and history. Presently, there is not a gallery in the museum dedicated to the African Historical presence in Mexico and related cultural contributions.

At the close of the meeting, an official record of the proceedings and conclusions were prepared and the location for the next “Encuentro” in Oaxaca was selected.

## REFERENCES

Ernez, N.C. (1993). Equity and access in the instructional materials arena. *Journal of Black Studies* 23, 500-514.

Steele, V. (1998). Tom Feelings-The Black Arts Movement. *African American Review*. 32, 119-124.

## PHOTO DETAILS

All photos were taken and provided by Wendy Phillips.

p.40: Murals at work.

p.43: Young artist..

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