

Miscegenation and Racism: Afro-Mexicans in Colonial New Spain

by

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Abstract

Most students of Mexican history would be surprised to know that an extensive Black population, which will be referred to as Afro-Mexicans, existed during the colonial period. Though only a small percentage of Blacks went to Mexico in comparison to other parts of the Americas, Afro-Mexicans, both enslaved and free, at one time outnumbered the current dominant so-called mestizo population in Mexico. In addition, scholars have neglected studying Afro-Mexicans despite the fact that they made a great deal of contributions to the birth, growth, and development of Mexico. Thus, they should be examined for the important roles they played in Mexican history.

Mexico had an extensive Black population which eventually assimilated into the dominant so-called mestizo majority by the late eighteenth century. Although the Afro-Mexicans were a large population during the colonial period, by the late eighteenth century, they became a negligible group supplanted by Indians, Whites, and mixed groups known as castas, later called mestizos. What accounted for the Afro-Mexican demographic decline by late colonial Mexican society? Certainly, many reasons accounted for the demise of Blacks in Mexico. For example, many died from wars, diseases, captivity, bondage, abuses, shocks, malnutrition, as well as other causes. However, this paper will concentrate on two salient factors that caused the decline of the Afro-Mexican population in Mexico from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries: the prevalent miscegenation ethos and pernicious racism.

Nobody knows when the first enslaved Africans came to Mexico or New Spain as it was called during the colonial period, but their numbers grew in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. 1501 marked the earliest recorded date of the Black enslaved arriving in the Americas from Spain; Blacks served as companions, servants, and auxiliaries to the Spanish explorers and conquistadors. Not till 1519, notwithstanding, when Hernan Cortes first began his conquest of the Aztec empire, which he accomplished by 1521, did the Black enslaved come to New Spain. He brought the Black enslaved with him, including those that played prominent roles in the conquest, such as Juan Cortes and Juan Garrido. Historical records purported Hernan Cortes to be the first Spaniard to introduce the Black enslaved to the region. Though most Blacks in New Spain came as enslaved persons, a few came as free people (other historians a la Ivan Van Sertima claimed that Blacks lived in this region before the advent of Europeans). Cortes, himself, used the Black enslaved for military reasons not only in the conquest but for labor purposes on his plantations.

The conquest of the Aztec empire caused the demographic collapse of the indigenous populations (misnomer Indians). In 1519, New Spain had estimated the indigenous populations to be 27,650,000, but by 1532, they declined to 16,800,600; in 1580, the indigenous populations had decreased rapidly to 1,900,000; and in 1595, they dwindled to 1,375,000. Epidemics destroyed major indigenous populations in 1520, 1548, 1576-1579, and 1595-1598. By 1605, the indigenous populations had reached to 1,075,000. Epidemics, diseases, enslavement, and hard work caused the demographic collapse of the indigenous populations of the region. They had no immunity against such European diseases as smallpox, measles, yellow fever, malaria, and typhus. Other reasons for the decline of the indigenous populations included poor living conditions, low birth rates, destructive wars, harsh labor, and mass suicides. The average indigenous family declined to only four people: mother, father and two children.

As a result of the demographic collapse of the indigenous populations, clerics pressured the Spanish Crown to enact the New Laws in 1542-1543 to protect them from exploitation, hence Spanish intellectuals and clerics, most notably Bartholome de Las Casas, attacked Spanish abuse of the indigenous population. The New Laws, a series of decrees, banned their use in dangerous labor. In 1601, Philip IV barred the use of the indigenous populations in textiles and sugar mills because they suffered high mortality rates. The New Laws also sought to prevent the genocide of the indigenous populations that occurred throughout the West Indian islands through diseases, slaughters, wars and enslavement among other reasons. From those earliest experiences and to rationalize through racist stereotypes their insatiable need for labor, the Spaniards came to regard the indigenous populations, especially in New Spain, as inferior and too weak to endure the long and arduous labor. Thus, the Spanish Crown enacted many laws to "protect" them, but in reality, they fared no better than the Black enslaved because the avaricious Spaniards always found reasons to enslave the indigenous populations to their detriment.

Ironically, the demographic collapse of the indigenous populations caused African enslavement to be introduced in New Spain in the early colonial period. Being the first advocate of African enslavement in the Americas, Las Casas wanted to stop the genocide of the indigenous populations, and at the time, he genuinely believed that the Black enslaved would serve as better sources of labor than them; thus, he called for the African enslaved to replace the dying indigenous populations who the Spaniards forced to work for them. However, before his death, Las Casas realized that "it was as unjust to enslave Negroes as Indians and for the same reasons." In addition, the Spanish Crown abolished the enslavement of indigenous populations in 1542, and thus they could not be sold as chattel. However, Spanish colonists and officials still needed a reliable source of labor to meet the demands of a nascent colonial society being unwilling to do it themselves. Because a demographic collapse had occurred to the indigenous populations to the extent that few people survived to do the arduous labor, Europeans and Spaniards looked to Africa to acquire African labor via the transatlantic trade of the enslaved. Through racist rationalizations, the Spaniards justified the use of the Black enslaved by attributing to their superhuman strength, believing that one Black enslaved person was worth four indigenous persons and maintaining that enslaved Blacks were able to survive demanding labor that both the indigenous populations and Whites could not.

The introduction, growth, and development of African enslavement in New Spain can be divided in three main periods: 1519 to 1580, 1580-1650, 1650-1827. The first period, 1519 to 1780, saw that the Black enslaved were brought with the Spanish conquistadors and ended with the typhus epidemic. The Black enslaved populations increased but the indigenous populations declined. The second period, 1580-1650, witnessed a strong rise in the demand for African enslavement. From 1570-1650, the annual African imports of the enslaved averaged 30,000 to 45,000. After 1580, the enslavement trade in African people expanded, especially between the years 1595 and 1640. The third period, 1650 to 1827, experienced a decline of both the enslavement trade in African people and the enslaved Black population. During this period, the indigenous populations had recovered and the mixed populations, later misnamed the mestizo grew. Thus, Spanish officials had people other than Blacks to fulfill their labor demands. By its abolition, about 200,000 enslaved Africans had been imported to New Spain; with the total African enslaved importation into Spanish America at approximately 1,552,000.

Hence, the peak years of the African enslaved presence were 1606,1608,1609,1610 and 1616-1621. Up to 1640, New Spain received the largest number of enslaved Africans sent to Spanish America. New Spain and Peru became the two largest importers of the African enslaved during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The following table indicated the importation of the African enslaved to the Indies and New Spain:

TABLE I

Period	Total to the Indies	Total to New Spain
1521-1594	73,000	36,500
1595-1622	104,205	50,525
1623-1639	47,000	110,525

It demonstrated that the Spaniards and the colonial economies of New Spain and the Indies relied heavily on enslaved Blacks with many being imported in the Spanish colonial empire, which included New Spain, Central America, Peru , Gran Colombia , Puerto Rico, Hispaniola , Cuba , and other colonies. It also showed the development of the transatlantic slave trade in importing thousands of Africans to be enslaved in these regions. There existed constant and insatiable demands for supply-- that is the African labor.

The Spanish Crown granted to individual companies a monopoly, called the *asiento*, of transporting enslaved Africans to the Americas. It regulated every part of the transatlantic trade, including the enslaved, and the ages, sexes, numbers, origins, destinations and duties were paid on each Black enslaved person that entered New Spain. According to the *asiento* agreement, the enslaved African had to be between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five (youthful ages for extracting as much labor as possible). In addition, a ratio of two to three African male to every one African female was common in the colonial period. The Spaniards justified the exploitation and mistreatment of Blacks because they regarded them as a *mala raza*, an inferior race. The average life of the Black male was calculated as fifteen working years from the time he arrived in New Spain. The Spaniards believed that it was cheaper to work an African to death in a few years, ergo the need for constant new laborers, and their replacement rather than to keep them in a good state of health, so they would survive their bondage. The enslaved African came from many parts in Africa, but mostly from West Africa (Senegambia and Guinea-Bissau) in the early periods and Central Africa (Angola and the Congo) in the latter periods, because of the English, Dutch and French challenges and incursions to the Portuguese monopoly of enslavement along the coast of West Africa coast. Hence, the enslaved Black person born in colonial New Spain was called Creole; and those born in Africa were called *bozales*.

The enslaved Afro-Mexican worked in many parts in the colony of New Spain. They labored in sugar plantations, silver mines, and textile obrajes to name some of the prominent places. In the urban centers, which received a greater proportion of enslaved Africans than the rural areas, who worked as domestics, servants, and artisans and many other important occupations? Not surprisingly, as a result, as early as 1570, there were a large number of enslaved Blacks who lived in urban areas. For example, in Mexico city, the capital of the colony of New Spain and the heart of the Spanish empire, 50,000 Blacks and mulattos, a sizable proportion, slave and free, lived there. Thus the Afro-Mexican performed the most onerous and demanding work of all the exploited groups, and endured the brunt of hard labor and physical punishment. And interestingly, the enslaved Afro-Mexican occupied an unenviable position in society because they were the most despised, discriminated against, and hated of all peoples as they spent their entire lives being exploited, and additionally, the Spaniards had no conscience as they exploited Blacks and the indigenous peoples.

Consequently, the Spaniards developed an elaborate and contradictory ideological notions based on their racist concepts of race. And primarily, their essentialistic notion of *Limpieza de Sangre*, a Spanish doctrine designed to discriminate against anyone without “pure blood” and not descended from Old Christian stock. Thus, the Spaniards viewed anyone without this pure blood-- meaning the absence of Jewish, Muslim or Black ancestors in their blood-- as inferior. In the colonial period, Europeans, including the Spaniards, believed that individuals inherited their physical and mental traits via their blood. They utilized this racist concept based on their racism to structure Spanish colonial societies, including New Spain. Morner states that three main types of social stratification existed in colonial New Spain: a caste system, a society in which membership was fixed at birth; the estate system, an hierarchic society in which the strata was strictly determined by laws and customs; and finally a system of classes based mainly on economic differences without legal restrictions that allowed vertical social mobility. In addition, classes interacted in two main ways: acculturation meant the mixture of cultural elements; and assimilation meant the absorption of a people into another culture. Miscegenation, the process of race mixture, became an important tool in the dual processes of acculturation and assimilation. This racist ideology allowed the Spaniards to erect colonial New Spain according to race. A clearly defined social and racial structure existed of three distinct groups: a White Spanish elite minority exercising economic, social, civil, legal and political domination, a large vanquished indigenous population and a mass of enslaved Blacks that remained at the lowest rungs of the social hierarchy.

Thus the society of colonial New Spain held White blood in high prestige, and as a result; social mobility, political power, and economic prosperity in colonial New Spain depended upon how one approximated Whiteness in physical appearance (phenotype), at least in theory (but in some cases not in practice). The Spanish notion of race thus became an entirely fictitious ideology and social construction they applied and imposed on diverse people as being distinct and separate species with clearly defined physical, social, mental abilities among other attributes, imbedded in their concept of “purity of blood.”

And not surprisingly, this racialist based society encouraged miscegenation or racial mixture during the colonial period, and as a rule, White women did not accompany Spanish males who came to New Spain, creating an imbalance in the White male-female sex ratio in the Americas, plus, Spanish males had a tremendous racism towards Blacks and the indigenous peoples wherein only a few Spaniards married the daughters of the indigenous nobility to facilitate the Spanish conquest of the Aztec empire, because if the Spaniards married into the indigenous ruling class, not only did they have legal, political, economic, and social legitimacies to rule the subjected indigenous peoples, but also they and their mixed offspring could acquired inheritance rights over their possessions, among other things, including land, wealth, vassals, and most importantly power (the ultimate goal of conquest: power and domination over others). In addition, White males easily sexually exploited and abused Black and indigenous girls and women, so colonial Spanish America became populated with a mixture of groups as White males treated women of color as mere sexual objects instead of human beings. Morner astutely observes that the Spanish conquest of the Aztec empire was also a conquest of the women, because after all, they reproduced the nation. In other words, Whites, who always constituted an infinitesimally small population in Latin America, sexually abused and exploited Black and indigenous girls and women, which symbolized conquering the people and reproducing a new nation, to cause the birth of racially mixed groups, which they used to approximate their jaundiced images, colonial, imperialist, racialist and sexist projects.

And notably, after the conquest of the Aztec empire, the Spaniards consolidated their power via their fair skinned descendants (not the Black or indigenous looking ones) who enjoyed privileged positions in the political, religious, legal, societal, and economic echelons the society. Hence, Alexander Von Humboldt, a contemporary at the time who visited the colony, remarked that Whites had the greatest power and privileges in colonial New Spain wherein society honored those inhabitants of New Spain that did not have any appreciable Black or mulatto blood, although most did have some racial admixtures. And in fact, the Spanish notion of so-called racial purity was so important, that in Spain, not to descend from Jewish or Moorish blood earned one a title of nobility. In many respects, although not exclusive in colonial New Spain, one’s skin color governed what one’s status would be in society, and served as the basis of society in colonial New Spain.

Eventually, the Spaniards enacted elaborate racial categories to distinguish among diverse peoples and to maintain their privileged positions in colonial New Spain. Thus Whites categorized their society according to racial groups in order of power. i.e.,: peninsular, creole, castizo, mestizo, mulatto, negro, and indigenous. Pi-Sunyer explicates that the racial hierarchy also delineated racial, economic, social, and political privileges. First, the peninsular Spaniards and criollos ruled in the colony of New Spain: the peninsulars were Spanish born Whites; the criollos were American born Whites who enjoyed the best and highest economic, social, political, and civil offices as well as controlled commerce; next, came the castas (castizos), a compilation of mixed groups (mulattos, mestizos and zambos); then the mestizo, a mixture of indigenous and Spanish, who worked as artisans and skilled non-professionals, and the mulattos, a byproduct of Black and White which constituted most of the proletariat of the towns. In this mix, Blacks suffered the most severe racial discrimination, and since they belonged to an enslaved class, they received the most menial jobs. And not surprisingly, Whites relegated the indigenous populations to their villages, where they worked their lands, but even more interesting, the above racial categorizations only represented a very simplified version of the many racial sub-classifications they established to describe the diverse peoples of colonial New Spain, such as:

Negro	Pure Black
Mulato Blanco	Spanish and Negro
Mulato Prieto	Negro and Pardo
Mulato Lobo	Pardo and Indian
Morisco	Spanish and Mulato
Mestizo	Spanish and Indian
Castizo	Spanish and Mestizo
Indians	Indians
Indian Ladino	Indians: adopted Spanish language/customs
Lobo	Same as Mulato Lobo
Coyote	Mestizo
Chino	Negro and Indian
Pardo	Negro and Indian
Moreno	African descent person
Espanol	White

Diggs (1953) observes that race, and to a lesser extent, color, determined acceptance into colonial New Spain. And as a society obsessed with pigmentocracy, race and skin color determined one's position in society, yet they (the Spaniards) also employed other criteria to determine race, such as hair texture, hair color, eye color, body structure, and face width among other variables wherein the society became consumed with racial and color nomenclatures to describe diverse peoples as the subclassifications above indicated. From generation to generation, the continued miscegenation between diverse peoples made describing them more and more complex, and in fact, precise descriptions and classifications became difficult-- if not impossible by the maturation of colonial New Spain, as many Spaniards applied names to describe mixed peoples out of mockery, scorn, and contempt wherein some of the Afro-Mexican names had zoological origins that could mean mule, coyote, wolf, or cow to apply to human beings. For example, zambo meant an African monkey, which Spaniards used to call the offspring of Afro-Mexicans and indigenous peoples; as other labels to describe mixed peoples showed contempt as well, such as "no te entiendo" (I do not understand you). Imagine describing and referring to somebody with such demeaning phrases and terms as "I do not understand you," or as a cow, mule, wolf, monkey, or cow.

Nevertheless, the Spaniards highly encouraged race mixture to control the different diverse peoples in colonial New Spain. Hence, 'whitening up' was one of the few means of social mobility which allowed darker skinned individuals to intermarry with lighter skinned individuals to improve their chances for living a better life in an extremely racist and sexist colonial society. And as the mixed groups became in color, i.e. appearance more "White" and less African, Indian, or mestizo after generations of miscegenation, they passed into the casta category, and eventually joined the White group. Thus, the basic function of the sistema de castas, the elaborate racialist system of classification, served to maintain the power base of the Spaniards in the colony wherein White skin (and blood) served as the prerequisite for acquiring most prestigious and influential posts, positions, occupations, and offices. Therefore, race functioned as an inscriptive characteristic that ostensibly could not be changed, but in reality, many mixed groups became "White" through racial intermixture.

In this process, Afro-Mexicans ironically contributed to the demographic decline and racial dilution of their group by intermarrying with indigenous population. Afro-Mexican males, both enslaved and free acquired indigenous girls and women as concubines because of the imbalance of many Black male to few females. Thus Afro-Mexican males saw advantages of having children by indigenous girls and women, because according to Spanish law, children of free mothers would inherit their status and would be considered free as well. Similarly, many indigenous girls and women would marry Black males rather than their fellow men because they were sexually attracted to Black men, who had a reputation of being "boundlessly voluptuous."

The byproduct of this Afro-indigenous unions could thus live with their indigenous mothers, and still be regarded as indigenous. However, the Spanish Crown became alarmed at this growing Zambo population and sought without success to destroy them, thus Spanish colonial authorities (both church and state officials) discouraged Afro-indigenous unions and viewed Zambos along with other mixed groups as inferior to them. In addition, Zambos had a precarious status in colonial New Spain as a byproduct of two of the most despised peoples (Black and indigenous) in society as Spaniards subjected them to paying tribute, among other humiliating burdens. Yet, Zambos could consider themselves indigenous, a status even inferior to the enslaved Blacks, but the Spaniards exploited and killed many of the indigenous peoples in notorious institutions via encomiendas, repartimentos, and debt peonage among many other ways. And those Zambos that identified with their Black heritage would live a marginal existence and always be subjected to exploitation and ultimately, endured the same discrimination that applied to the Afro-Mexican population.

The Afro-Mexican population became further racially diluted with the growth of the mulatto population. White males found numerous opportunities to sexually abuse and exploit Afro-Mexican girls and women, whether enslaved or free. Travelers remarked how Spanish males preferred Black females over their own White women; some remarked that White males had a great attraction for Black females. The society of colonial of New Spain condoned, fostered, and encouraged the sexual exploitation and abuse of Black females. In fact, rarely would White males marry Afro-Spanish females, nor recognize their Black illegitimate children, called mulattos, or Afro-Spaniards. The Afro-Mexican mulatto inherited the status of their mothers, most of who were enslaved; although some Spanish males would sometimes free their mulatto children, and at other times, the Black mothers found other sponsors to free their offspring and themselves. However, if the mulattos appeared White, most would be freed (many mulattos thus became free), but still suffered from the invidious forms of discrimination steeped in illegitimacy and racism. Hence a series of things happened: both Black and White parents might abandon their mulatto children; rarely if ever, did Afro-Spaniards inherit their White fathers' wealth; whites regarded the mulatto or the mixed Afro-Spaniards negatively, attributing them to negative traits, and thus rank them below the mestizos in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Furthermore, based on their racist attitudes, the Spaniards imposed severe burdens on the mulattos, such as restricting their dress, movement, weapons, and preventing them from joining religious confraternities, barring them from assembling in large groups, and even banning them from owning their own homes. And still not content, mulatto women could not dress in silk, jewelry, gold, silver or pearls, the unemployed mulatto had to work as household servant for a 'Spanish master' or suffer 200 lashes and serve five years of forced labor in the Philippines.

The free Afro-Mexicans population continually increased throughout the colonial period, and thus they originated in the urban areas in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Most of them lived primarily in Mexico City, Puebla and Veracruz . By 1650, they numbered between 15,000 and 20,000 because of natural increase. Evidence indicated that the free Afro-Mexican population was predominantly female and mulattos. As a result, Spaniards sometimes freed them because they believed the mulatto to be genetically superior to his pure African counterpart. Spanish racism encouraged mulattos to take advantage of social mobility in their racially and sexually stratified society, and they identified with their White Spanish ancestry and rejected their African roots. The Spaniards employed a pernicious racism aimed at eradicating people of African descent by pitting lighter skinned Blacks against darker skinned ones to name just one of the many means. Through miscegenation, the caste system based on race prevented Afro-Mexicans from maintaining their distinct African heritage, especially in physical characteristics:

This pattern also implies an assimilation process, as Negroes lost almost all their original culture, retaining only some physical characteristics which were greatly diluted by their mixing. The assimilation of Negroes is due, among other reasons, to their compulsory role of mixing with others to create the colonial caste system.

The frequent miscegenation and racial dilution of the Afro-Mexican population resulted in many mixed, illegitimate children. Mulattos outnumbered the Blacks three to one of the Afro-Mexican population.

Miscegenation served as a tool of social and racial mobility. Whites had all the social, political, economic, legal, and religious (to name a few) advantages in colonial New Spain. Because of the many privileges and power that Whites enjoyed, not surprisingly, many Blacks desired to be Whites. Successive racial intermixture generations after generations with Whites, indigenous, and mixed peoples transformed the Afro-Mexican population into a mixed people, forming part of the castas, who also consisted of other mixed groups. Afro-Mexicans preferred to be mestizos or Whites and tried to approximate the White physical ideal in appearance, trying to pass for Whites, at least through miscegenation with lighter people. Those that accomplished this escaped racial discrimination and oppression by passing the color line from the Afro-Mexican caste (dark) to a Euro-Mexican one (White), constituting one of the general integration patterns during the colonial period. Along with other groups, Afro-Mexicans became assimilated into the caste system of compulsory mixing.

If some Afro-Mexicans could not pass for White because they were too dark, they could buy a certificate title of Blanco (White) gracias al sacar to pass the color bar, or have the audiencia declare them “que se tengan por blancos” (they may regard themselves as Whites); the certificate served as the means to denote legal White washing for Afro-Mexicans and other mixed groups. However, not all Afro-Mexicans could buy their way into “whiteness” since some were poor, and could not afford the exorbitant fee. However, it did not stop mixed groups from bribing officials and priests to declare them “Whites” on baptismal records. Many mixed families often petitioned the courts to be declared they belonged to “Whites” despite their sometime dark skinned physical appearance to the contrary of actual reality; it was a problematical statement "that such and such individual may consider themselves as whites." Thus, dark skinned mulattos experienced obstacles to passing as White or had to be audacious to challenge “ la linea de color.”

Many Afro-Mexicans realized that “whitening” held the key to their socioeconomic advancement. They jealously guarded their racially mixed classifications (mulattos, octoroons, mestizos, and so on); mixed Afro-Mexicans held on to their positions and status selfishly, they sought to marry always lighter than themselves, and not surprisingly, they did everything to dissociate themselves from the stigma of slavery and illegitimacy or in other words, their Black roots; many refused to identify with their Black enslaved counterparts, who remained at the bottom of society’s ladder. Those that could pass did so without a backward glance at their unfortunate poorer or Black enslaved counterparts; free Afro-Mexicans concerned themselves only with personal advancement rather than Black racial solidarity. Not to mention that the very process and byproduct of miscegenation undermined Black racial solidarity and encouraged the dilution of this group into many castes.

Gradual miscegenation resulted in the racial dilution and decline of Afro-Mexicans in colonial New Spain. By the late eighteenth century, many within the Afro-Mexican population had become lighter physically than in the early colonial period when most had dark skins. The most renowned expert on Afro-Mexicans, Dr. Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán contends that Blacks integrated into colonial New Spain by the formation of the national society, and became caught up in the process of racial mixing which accounted for the Afro-Mexican population’s decline and racial dilution:

The integration of the Negro population into the national society is, in fact, a process which began with the transfer of Negroes to the European colonies in America. This process continued during the three centuries of foreign domination and the first century of the national era, and today it is in its final stage. It took place in three centuries where Negroes were an important segment of the total population and in certain other countries, such as Mexico, where miscegenation has blurred the original difference, but where a few isolated nuclei of Negroes can still be identified by their racial characteristics.

Because of incessant miscegenation of the Afro-Mexican population, they never formed more than two percent of the total colonial society during the colonial period, thus the Afro-Mexican population declined by the late eighteenth century through pervasive racial mixture. And though a large number of African enslaved had been imported, by the 1790s they numbered at the most ten thousand, most of whom lived in Acapulco and Veracruz. Beltran (1972) states that race mixture of Afro-Mexicans caused their disappearance: "the majority (Negroes) had diluted their blood by union with the aborigines and Whites, thus giving rise to the mixture of bloods that form the biological basis of Mexican nationality."

In order for the Afro-Mexican population to have remained racially distinct, a group of factors had to have existed. Two conditions for a group to remain racially or ethnically distinct constituted the following: 1) the minority must have a set of differing characteristics that call for cohesion; 2) a set of obstacles that force it to remain separate. The lack of the above factors contributed to the immersion of Afro-Mexicans into the larger caste population. Miscegenation and enslavement became interrelated because the latter fostered the former. The Spaniards, along with other males in the racist and sexist society, had the power, opportunity and means to sexually abuse and exploit Black females who had no means of defending themselves. Moreover, factors such as racism and miscegenation encouraged the Afro-Mexicans to intermarry with lighter groups to improve their socio-economic status.

Pernicious racism also accounted for the decline of the Afro-Mexican population in the colonial period in New Spain. Whites imposed on Afro-Mexicans severe social, legal, economic, political, and religious restrictions to name a few. Afro-Mexicans experienced a hostile colonial society in New Spain. Viewing Afro-Mexicans as inferior evil people of mal raza (bad race) and mala casta (bad caste), the Spaniards constantly referred and treated them as barbaric, vicious, bestial, and other derogatory labels and stereotypes to legitimize their exploitation, abuse and oppression of them. The Spaniards regarded themselves as gente de razon (people of reason), who established a social system geared to maintain their alleged "purity of blood" to protect their elitist, hegemonial positions. They relegated people of color at the lowest rung of the ladder in the colony. Not all Afro-Mexicans followed the laws; some found ways to circumvent or ignore the discriminatory legislation; and other Afro-Mexicans openly defied the laws. Still others petitioned or sued the colonial government to be exempted from tribute or other restrictions.

The Afro-Mexican population experienced virulent and pernicious racism which made it difficult--if not impossible--for their existence as a viable group. Free Afro-Mexicans had to register with the Caja de Negro for the payment of tribute. They realized that their "free" status did not mean they would get better treatment than their Black enslaved counterparts. In general, the Afro-Mexican experience was similar for both enslaved and free because most of the exploitation, abuse, discrimination, and restrictions on the free Afro-Mexicans applied to the Black enslaved as well.

The free Afro-Mexican population fared little better than their enslaved counterparts; the free Afro-Mexican existed as a “marginal man” in a hostile and repressive society. But he had a restricted freedom where he existed in the interstice of being neither enslaved nor free; the free Afro-Mexican occupied a precarious intermediary position in society. Fearing their illegitimacy and inferiority, the Spaniards prevented them from access to the social, economic, legal, religious, and political domains of power to name a few in the colony. Even the colonial Spanish Church discriminated against Afro-Mexicans by preventing them from becoming priests and joining their religious orders among other things.

Free Afro-Mexicans experienced severe racism in the economic life of society, which made it difficult to exist as a viable group. Spanish artisans, merchants, and professionals denied them membership in their organizations known as the guilds, which barred free Afro-Mexicans from obtaining honest occupations. Though restricted from most guilds, a few of them admitted Afro-Mexicans but prevented them from becoming masters, only journeymen; only two guilds allowed Afro-Mexicans to obtain the status of masters: the candle makers and leather dresses. Thus, Afro-Mexicans had very limited economic options, and thus many flocked to the urban centers, where they worked as domestic servants, skilled artisans, and common laborers. In addition, most of the Afro-Mexicans earned very meager wages because Spaniards could always exploited enslaved labor (at the expense of wage labor) which they did not have to pay wages. Most Afro-Mexicans, enslaved and free, worked under Spaniards. The free Blacks and mulattos had to compete with the Afro-Mexican enslaved for the scarce skilled and unskilled jobs available; ironically, though having liberty, free Afro-Mexicans worked longer, harder and cheaper their Black enslaved counterparts. Despite racism, a few Afro-Mexicans accrued modest fortunes for themselves and their children; nevertheless, the vast majority of the Afro-Mexican population born and died in poverty. Free Afro-Mexican women faced even more severe discrimination because of their gender and race, having to deal with both sexism and racism, unlike Afro-Mexican men in colonial society. Afro-Mexican women could not participate in the crafts because Spaniards dominated them. Most free Afro-Mexican women worked as vendors, housekeepers, servants, domestics and wet nurses.

Because of the pernicious racism, Afro-Mexicans had an inevitable and precarious position in colonial New Spain. The Spaniards developed ingenious and invidious means for the oppression, exploitation and domination of Blacks. Despite the highly oppressive and repressive hostile dominant society, some Afro-Mexicans revealed their alienation by defying societal rules and laws in not following the expectations of conventions of colony. This defiance took the form of deviant behaviors, such as robbery, theft, and vandalism against the property of Spaniards and some indigenous peoples. The Spaniards refused to grant Afro-Mexicans full participation in the socio-economic, political, religious, and civil affairs of the society. Barred from many occupations, professions, positions, offices, among other things, some Afro-Mexicans retaliated by plaguing the racist and sexist hostile colonial society through acts of vandalism, robbery, and theft, which the Spaniards incorrectly called “criminal behavior” of Afro-Mexicans.

They rationalized and used such actions as showing further proof of their racist notions of the inferiority of Blacks as a race. Rarely if ever did the Spaniards grant privileges to Afro-Mexicans as a group, only to individual Blacks who had Spanish sponsors to attest to their characters.

Pernicious racism in the political realm also caused the decline of the Afro-Mexican population in the colonial period. Being extremely petrified to the point of paranoia, the Spaniards feared Black and indigenous revolts, rebellions, conspiracies and other uprising to their colonial rule. In consequence, they not only barred them from engaging in political affairs, but ostensibly forced many free Afro-Mexican males into military service to put down revolts, rebellions, and conspiracies, mostly indigenous in colonial New Spain. To illustrate an example of extreme Spanish fear of Blacks, they cruelly crushed so-called slave plot (based on hearsay) of 1537 in Mexico City, to demonstrate how petrified the Spaniards were of them. After 1537, for eight years, the Spaniards banned the importation of the African enslaved to the colony despite doing so in previous years. The Spaniards also crushed the enslaved plots of 1546 and the insurrections throughout New Spain. In 1609 and 1612, they discovered conspiracies of the enslaved in 1616, another uprising occurred; and revolts took place in the 1620s and 1630s. In colonial New Spain, many rebellions, insurrections and conspiracies occurred; in fact, well over 100 of them took place during the period 1523 to 1823. These revolts, rebellions, and conspiracies incited a rebellion spirit among the oppressed classes, who comprised Blacks, mixed and indigenous peoples. Afro-Mexicans did not participate in most of these rebellions, but they affected them, making them more rebellious and therefore difficult to control. New Spain became one of the first places in America to fight against slavery.

Pernicious racism also accounted for the abolition of the transatlantic trade of the enslaved, which caused the Afro-Mexican population to decline. Though initially the Spaniards relied on Afro-Mexican labor for their survival in the early colonial period because the indigenous population had declined, they recovered and a mixed group emerged and supplanted all the other peoples in the colony. Therefore, the Spaniards no longer needed massive numbers of the African enslaved because now they had a large amount of labor consisting of mixed groups in the colony. In addition, in the late eighteenth century, New Spain declined as a slave based economy, but instead became a wage based society, where it was more profitable and competitive to pay wages to reliable, effective laborers rather than rely upon unreliable, inefficient slave labor. As a result, Spaniards now turned to the indigenous and mixed groups to fulfill their labor demands. Contrary to other societies in the Americas, such as Cuba and Brazil, New Spain relied less on enslaved labor which lasted a shorter duration; Cuba and Brazil depended on African enslaved labor much longer.

In fact, the Afro-Mexican enslaved population was quite small in comparison to other societies: Jamaica had 345,000 in 1817; Cuba had 375,000 in 1853; United States had 3,953,760 in 1860; and Brazil had 1,510,806 in 1872. New Spain had a much larger indigenous population than other societies in the Americas, who had recovered to fulfill the labor demands in the mines, textiles and plantations. New Spain abolished its slave trade in 1817. In 1829, Mexico abolished all slavery, at least on paper, except for its far-flung territory of Texas.

Finally, the political maturation of a colonial society into the birth of a modern nation witnessed the decline of Afro-Mexican population and racial dilution during the early nineteenth century. After the war of independence, the victorious Mexican local criollos who had wrested power from the dominant Spanish peninsulars enacted legislation that declared the equality of all inhabitants of Mexico--no longer called New Spain because they had achieved their independence as a republic and modern nation, freeing themselves from the vestiges of colonial status and domination. On September 27, 1822, the Mexican Congress enacted the Plan de Iguala, which barred the classification of persons by races in official government documents. The Mexican criollo dominated the new government and incorporated to the prevailing Spanish racist ideology of "whitening," that later became buttressed by European pseudo-scientific notions of racial superiority and misconceptions about national progress based on approximating Whiteness. Thus, they favored miscegenation like their Spanish former rulers, so that one single race, preferably White, would replace all the others, by seeking to "whiten" the entire Mexican population, including the Blacks, mixed and indigenous peoples in the new republic.

Furthermore, the criollos encouraged European immigration and barred Asians and Blacks and other so-called inferior races from immigrating to Mexico . They failed in their racist objectives and came to a compromise: the castes or mixed groups, as their "racial ideal" which became the so-called the mestizo. Not surprisingly, because of this racially hostile society, the indigenous and Black populations declined in absolute numbers in Mexico. The descendants of Afro-Mexicans lost their African heritage and became absorbed into the larger caste groups; however they played a major role in the evolution of the castes, and today are incorrectly called the mestizos. By 1810, the assimilation of Afro-Mexicans became almost complete with only 0.1 percent full blooded Blacks and 10.1 (624,000) percent of the Afro-mestizos merging into the larger caste Mexican population of 6,125,000.

In conclusion, several factors caused the Afro-Mexican population to decline: miscegenation ethos and pernicious racism. The Afro-Mexican population changed from an enslaved to a free colored population. Most of the free Afro-Mexican population tended to be mixed, urban, and skilled. Prejudice and racism limited the access of Afro-Mexicans, unless they passed as "Whites," to the advantages of the larger society. Economic security could be obtained through strategic marital alliances with lighter skinned members of the caste society. The racist ideology of sistema de castas encouraged strongly the racial dilution of the Afro-Mexican population into the lighter castes.

The Spaniards employed the sistema de castas in their racist ideology to control the different oppressed peoples, primarily the Blacks, indigenous, and their admixtures. Miscegenation served as a tool to create racial dilution of these groups, which destroyed any racial solidarity among the Afro-Mexican population. By pitting lighter skinned Blacks against darker skinned ones by giving them preferential treatment and privileges, the Spaniards successfully curtailed the racial solidarity and ethnic cohesion of the Afro-Mexicans as a unified group. For example, the lighter skinned Afro-Mexicans had achieved their freedom and could move up the racial gradations of the sistema de castas to enjoy privileges and escape discrimination. The Spaniards strongly encouraged Afro-Mexicans to dilute racially and to be as fair skinned (preferably White) as possible; therefore, the sistema de castas eroded the racial solidarity and ethnic cohesion of Afro-Mexicans. In consequence, Afro-Mexicans merged into the more populous castes.

In addition, pernicious racism served as another factor that caused the decline of the Afro-Mexican population. The Spaniards in colonial New Spain discriminated against the Afro-Mexicans socially, legally, economically, politically and in many other ways. Afro-Mexicans suffered severe discriminations articulated in their marginality and fragility as a group. Only fortunate Afro-Mexicans could acquire jobs and earn decent wages while many others wasted their lives as “deviants” and “criminals” in a racist and sexist society. Finally, the Spaniards refused Afro-Mexicans full participation in the public life of colonial New Spain . The Spaniards feared Blacks revolting, rebelling, and overthrowing their colony. In consequence, they banned the importation of the enslaved African in New Spain for several years because it had been a hotbed of Black, but mostly indigenous revolts, conspiracies, and rebellions, and they did not want more Black people. They strongly pursued a policy of “racial fusion,” by encouraging Afro-Mexicans to mix, with the larger caste or mixed peoples, and thereby in the process destroyed the racial solidarity and ethnic cohesion of Blacks. Employing divide and rule tactics, the Spaniards skillfully manipulated Afro-Mexicans so that they only cared about their own privileges as a mixed group and did not identify with their darker counterparts. The Afro-Mexican population intermarried extensively such that by the end of the eighteenth century, it became a negligible amount of people, merging with the dominant castes. Caught in the nexus of miscegenation and racism, the Afro-Mexican population declined significantly. Clearly, the decline of the Afro-Mexican population and its absorption into the dominant castes reflected the maturation of a colonial society obsessed with race and pigmentocracy.

Though not the focus of this paper, the Afro-Mexican population did not disappear or become extinct even though it declined in population with the maturation of colonial society. On the contrary, Afro-Mexicans still exist in contemporary Mexican society. The last racial census that the Mexican government took was in 1921. Estimates taken from marital records in 1930s and 1940s showed that Afro-Mexicans numbered 120,000 to 300,000 of the Mexican population. Rout (1976) estimates that they represent one percent of the current Mexican population which is a considerable amount. They also exist in the southern Mexican states of Veracruz, Guerrero, and Oaxaca. For the Afro-Mexicans of today, their history remains to be written....

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