

THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF ENSLAVED AFRICANS AND THEIR DESCENDANTS TO THE GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE AMERICAS

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I am good to work, not to learn stories. (Leovigildo [Güillo] Penaloza, an Afromestizo from San Nicolás, Guerrero, Mexico, January 22, 1991)

Mr. Penaloza's attitude mirrors centuries of exploitation. Physically, he was born in the twentieth century, but his true genesis is in the fourteenth century. He, however, lacks awareness of his historical condition.

The Afromestizo of San Nicolás are historical clones. In this respect, they are no different from most of the people of African descent in the Americas. They are the product of an environment they had little or no voice in shaping. San Nicolás has a population of approximately 4,500 people. Most, if not all, are classified as Afromestizos, persons of mixed blood (African and Indian) in which the African strain is dominant.

The notion of African historical contributions to the Americas (or almost anywhere else for that matter) has continually been maligned. After all, many people see no such contributions, and those who do generally think them insignificant. Both views are, of course, wrong.

The African has made significant contributions to the development of the New World—contributions that in no small way help

to explain the stark contrast of wealth and extreme poverty that exist in this hemisphere.

The need for a comprehensive study of the contributions of Africans and their descendants was prompted in part by the author's brief stay in San Nicolás, Guerrero. Why show the historical contributions of people of African descent at all? Are not these present-day descendants muted by the present realities of squalor and despair? Focusing particularly on the *Afromestizos*, this article will build a bridge to connect the past to the present—in essence, to contextualize the questions surrounding the “underdeveloped” peoples of the Americas.

INTRODUCTION

San Nicolas is flat, hot, dry, and dusty. The temperatures in January may reach 80°F. Towering palms, scrub bushes, and occasional flowers dot the red dirt landscape. Small tree trunks and stark sticks support the barbed wire fences that divide the property. Water from the *lavaderos* (wash houses) drains into the yards and streets. Paper, plastic bags, animal feces, and other inedible debris litter the town. The children play in such close proximity to the pigs and chickens one might assume the animals are their playmates.

The houses along the dusty dirt roads are of three types: mud and sticks with dirt floors and tin roofs; brick; and the less common adobe houses of mud and sticks covered with plaster. The mud and stick houses usually have one room, which is used for sleeping. The brick and adobe houses may have two and sometimes three rooms. Many of the houses have an open palm-roofed space either in the front or back where many of the families' activities take place.

Some of the houses have a 3-foot wall around the porch to keep the domestic animals out; others have fences made of sticks. To enter, one must step over an opening that is about 1½ feet high. In other houses one might step directly from the street into the house. Most have a dirt patio in back. The patio is usually swept clean by a broom of sticks. The better housekeepers sprinkle the yard to keep down dust.

The typical kitchen is a lean-to made of sticks with a tin roof. Smoke from the open cooking fire escapes through the opening in the sticks. No bathrooms were observed, although several houses did have palm-enclosed areas on the patio. There was no evidence of human excrement in these palm-enclosed areas, but one man was observed zipping his trousers as he emerged from one, and examination of the area after he left revealed a wet circle. Thus I assume the area is used for urination during the day.

The houses are sparsely furnished—a hammock, two chairs, and rope beds being standard. The beds have simple frames held together by ropes that act as a mattress; they are similar to beds that were widely used in the United States during the early 1800s. Those families fortunate enough to have refrigerators use them to store soft drinks for resale. A sign with soft drink logos nailed to the outside of a house is not only an advertisement, it is a status symbol proclaiming that that family owns a refrigerator.

The day begins very early for the people of San Nicolás. Women prepare the meals over an open fire and take corn to be ground into meal for tortillas, a basic staple of the Mexican diet. They wash, do other household chores, tend to the children, and bake pan (a type of sweet bread). Most of the men farm. They work on the lands in summer and winter. There are two planting seasons. Leovigildo Penalozā, a typical farmer, grows corn twice a year—once during the rainy season, which lasts from late June to September, and once during the winter. In addition to corn, sesame seeds, chilies, jamaica, beans, rice, watermelon, papaya, lemons, oranges and cacao are also grown.

A few men own livestock, and some money is made through the sale of cattle and goats. Work begins at 4 a.m. and ends at about 5 p.m. or 6 p.m. The lands close to the town are farmed in summer, the rainy season, and the lands close to the river are farmed in winter, the dry season. The men sometimes travel long distances to get to the lands. Penalozā said, “I must walk for an hour to get to the land. If I go on horseback it takes only 30 minutes.”

Some of the men own *camionetas*,¹ and they earn money by picking up passengers. The route is from San Nicolas to Cuajinicuilapa (Cuaji), and from Cuaji to other small towns in the area.

One can go to Punta Maldonado, the coastal fishing village east of San Nicolás, and points in between, providing it is the day for the women to go to Punta Maldonado to buy fish, in which case the driver of the fish truck will take passengers.

The fish that are bought in Maldonado are brought back to San Nicolas and prepared to be sold at the market in Cuaji. Preparation of the fish for market is a social occasion for the women as well as an economic enterprise. They scale the fish, remove the entrails, except for the eggs, wash, and roast or salt and sun dry the fish with the efficiency of an assembly line. The fish that are roasted are cooked on a rack over an open fire.

Children have specific chores. Gathering firewood for cooking is a chore that is performed primarily by young boys. They travel long distances from the town to gather the wood. Small trees are cut and trimmed with a machete. Tied into bundles, the wood is transported back to town by burro.

Going to the springs to get drinking water and carrying corn to have it ground into meal is a chore that may be assigned to young girls. It is commonplace for the women and girls to transport goods by carrying them on their heads.

In early evening, when the men are home from the lands and the chores are finished, they will sit on the porch or patio. The boys will play marbles or both boys and girls will play a game that resembles bingo. Primarily the people sit and talk. They work very hard and there is little time for leisure.

The children attend school in the morning or afternoon. There are not enough teachers or enough room for them to attend both morning and afternoon sessions. The classrooms are crowded; there are few books and virtually no supplies. Children were observed using rulers made from paper to measure the diagram of a town square in shared textbooks. They dress in uniforms—the girls in blue, beige, or red skirts and white blouses, and the boys in blue pants or pants of a houndstooth pattern, with beige and brown the dominant colors.

An interview with the principal of one of the three primary schools and a third-grade teacher revealed that most of the students do not finish secondary school. There is not a great deal of interest

in school, except for the units on the conversion of money—particularly the conversion of dollars to pesos. Most of the students plan to go to the United States to work. They do not mind entering the country illegally to work in the fields. According to the principal, a recent survey revealed that 13 out of every 100 people from the state of Guerrero go to the United States to work.

The average Mexican lives in poverty, but the people of San Nicolas are poorer than average. The stark poverty is humbling. Many of the children appear to be malnourished. Their bloated abdomens and knobby knees are sure signs of malnutrition. Skinny pigs, dogs, turkeys, and chickens forage unrestricted throughout the town. Mexicans generally do not have much to say that is complimentary about the people of San Nicolás. Mexicans often declare, “You should not go there, the people are bad. They will rob you. They will kill you. They are on drugs.” These statements are typical from Guadalajara to Acapulco and beyond.

The people observed in San Nicolás were helpful, kind, and gentle. They do not deserve the wholesale derogatory comments that are made about them as a people. Many of them are aware of the town’s reputation, and its people are saddened by it. They have the same hopes, dreams, and desires of other human beings. They want a better education for their children. They want a cleaner town. They want better roads. They want a drainage system. They want a better life and they deserve it.

Yet, although the people experience these deplorable circumstances, the author cannot help but sadly conclude that the people of San Nicolas could not sense that they indeed deserve better. All they know or have been taught is destitution, slavery, and that they are a despicable people. They do not know that their poverty’s genesis lies beyond their personal self-worth. The children playing marbles in the dirt, the farmer Penaloza, the women carrying their day’s work on their heads, or buying fish in Punta Maldonado—not one could comprehend that they were the products of an unjust relationship started long ago. Indeed, to understand today’s *Afromestizos*, one must go back to their damning creation—the slave trade of the Americas.

HISTORY OF ENSLAVEMENT

Organized trading for enslaved Africans began with the Portuguese about 1450. However, before the slave trade ended, the British, French, Swedish, Dutch, and Danish were participants in the importation of human cargo. The English became the eventual leaders (Meltzer, 1980). "During the eighteenth century, the British were the world's leading slavers, trading some two and one-half million slaves or more than twice as many as the French" (Stein, 1979, p. xvi).

Researchers lack the data to make accurate estimates regarding the number of enslaved Africans transported to the Americas. The European trade in enslaved Africans began in the fifteenth century and ended in the nineteenth century. Scholars will never know the exact total of the numbers of enslaved Africans that landed alive in the lands across the Atlantic (Davidson, 1961).

Curtin's census of the Atlantic slave trade cites Kuczynski (1948-1953), Dunbar (1861), and Deerr (1949-1950). Kuczynski reports that by the year 1600, 900,000 enslaved Africans had landed in the Americas. He also reports that another 2,750,000 landed during the seventeenth century, another 7,000,000 during the eighteenth century, and another 4,000,000 during the nineteenth century, bringing the total to 14,650,000. Dunbar reports a figure of 13,877,500 (cited in Curtin, 1969, pp. 5-7). Deerr's estimates give a total figure of 11,970,000. His estimates, by territorial control, appear in Table 1.

After extensive examination of the figures of the commonly used data reported above, Curtin developed a formula to determine the importation of enslaved Africans by analogy to enslaved population and growth, and arrived at a figure of 10 million (Curtin, 1969, p. 269).

There were half a dozen Africans, one of them a free soldier, with the Spanish Forces during the conquest. Between 1519 and 1650, more than 120,000 Africans were imported to Mexico as enslaved persons. Prior to the arrival of the Africans, both slave and free Native Americans were used as laborers. However, the Native Americans were more susceptible to the Spanish diseases, were

TABLE 1
Atlantic Slave Trade

Old-World Traffic (Madeira, Canaries, Sao Thomé, southern Europe)	200,000
Spanish American, Asiento period (to c. 1750)	450,000
Spanish American, post-Asiento period	550,000
Portuguese America	3,325,000
English Islands (including Guiana and Honduras)	1,900,000
English mainland of North America	1,500,000
U.S. imports, 1776-1808	420,000
Illicit U.S. imports, 1809-1861	1,000,000
French New-World territories	1,650,000
French imports to Mauritius and Reunion	450,000
Dutch Guianas and Dutch West Indies	900,000
Danish West Indies	75,000
Total	12,420,000
Total Atlantic slave trade	11,970,000

NOTE: From *Atlantic Slave Trade* (p. 13) by P. C. Curtin, Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press. Copyright 1969 by the Regents of the University of Wisconsin. Reprinted by permission.

physically weaker, and were less adaptable. Thus they proved to be unsatisfactory laborers (Meyer & Sherman, 1979).

The Africans worked in the mines, small factories, and the sugar mills. They also worked as stevedores, on plantations as farm and ranch hands, and as artisans. Others were put in charge of Native American workers and served as overseers on rural properties (Miller, 1985).

They served in similar capacities throughout the Americas. Yet despite these contributions to the economy and other contributions in the fields of science, education, religion, literature, and so on, the Africans and their descendants have been virtually ignored by history—except to report that they were indeed enslaved and to provide scant reports of their influence in the fields of music and dance.

The economy of Europe was inextricably bound to the revenues produced from slave labor. Profits from the slave trade, particularly the sugar and tobacco plantations, improved the lot of the masses in England, as indicated by the fact that tea, which was scarce and expensive when it was first introduced in England about 1650, became so readily available that the price was drastically reduced a century later. A more important development than that of the

“creature comforts” of English citizens was the impact of slavery on Europe’s global commerce and the Industrial Revolution. Much of the capital to finance ventures relating to commerce and the Industrial Revolution was attained from the profits of slavery (Stavrianos, 1971).

Mexico’s silver operations gave an unprecedented boost to Spain’s economy. It helped to “finance a series of European wars” (Miller, 1985, p. 117). The Potosi silver production in the last half of the sixteenth century made Lima, Peru, one of the wealthiest zones in the New World. Because of their superior work ability, Africans were the primary workers in gold mines. “African gangs of ten to fifteen slaves worked gold deposits in the tropical eastern Cordillera region of Carabaya in South Andes” (Klein, 1986, pp. 29-30). Gold mining in both Portuguese and Spanish America tended to be the sole province of the enslaved Africans (Klein, 1986).

Slavery for a time allowed the French to dominate the European sugar and coffee markets; thus, for a time, slavery brought riches, conquest, and stability to Europe (Stein, 1979). To the peoples of African descent, it brought thousands of communities like San Nicolas—impoverished and defeated. These suffering communities are not taught of the bravery of their forefathers in building the Americas. Despite some of the most adverse circumstances ever recorded, the enslaved Africans contributed to every facet of life in their new land, the Americas. Ironically, they have aided their captors in every war that has been fought in the Americas since their arrival.

According to Klein (1986), “Cortez and his various armies held several hundred slaves when they conquered Mexico in the 1520’s. Close to 2,000 slaves appeared in the armies of Pizarro and Almagro in their conquest of Peru in the 1530’s and in their subsequent civil wars in the 1550’s” (p. 28).

Buckley (1979) reports “the fortification on the island of Hispaniola (Haiti), was built by slaves belonging to the King of Spain” (p. 1). The French, Portuguese, and Dutch engaged the services of a number of enslaved Africans in their armies. It became customary to grant freedom to these soldiers, a practice that became common throughout the Caribbean. Enslaved Africans fought on the sides of both the British and the American Colonist during the American

Revolution. Crispus Attucks, an enslaved African who resisted by fleeing from enslavement, was the first to die in the fight for the independence of the American colonies (Adams, 1964, p. 16). In the U.S. Civil War, a battalion of Black soldiers fought on the side of the Union. The entire battalion fought bravely although they faced certain death.

The history of the Africans began long before they were imported to the Americas. Writing a people's history with its beginnings in captivity and bondage does a grave injustice to a people who have made significant contributions to world history since the beginning of world civilization. The contributions of the Africans and their descendants to the Americas have been neatly tucked away for years. Their contributions have yet to become a conspicuous part of the education of the children of the Americas, and compared to the history of European culture, our knowledge is sparse.

Much of the economy of the early Americas was dependent on the labor of enslaved Africans and Native Americans, and without this labor, the Americas would not have prospered. The Africans and their descendants were also leaders in the liberation of their adopted countries from the dominance of Europe.

Vicente Guerrero, the second president of Mexico, was a mestizo of African heritage. He promptly abolished slavery and, in an effort to maintain Mexico's independence, which Spain had not yet recognized, he expelled almost all of the remaining Spanish from Mexico (Brandenburg, 1964).

José Mariá Morelos, a half-cast mule driver of African ancestry, became a leader in the revolution. In 1813, he issued a plan for social and economic reform. The plan called for racial equality, land reform and distribution, and anticlerical measures. Under Morelos, the Revolution became, "in idea, a social movement" (Tannenbaum, 1956, p. 39).

Juan Álvarez, like Morelos and Guerrero, was of African ancestry. Álvarez led the Revolution of Ayutla, initiating the period known as "the Reform" (1855-1876), which gave birth to the Mexican Constitution of 1857 (Brandenburg, 1964).

Toplin (1974) states that Mexico was not the only country to produce non-White heroes in the political and military arenas. "In

Cuba's Ten Years War(1868-1878), and the War of Independence (1895-1898), Maximo Gomez, Antonio Maceo, and Modesto Diaz were noted as the most capable of Cuban military leaders" (p. 219).

Only recently have African Americans examined their heroes and heroines, and they have yet to fully study the contributions made by their forefathers before the enslavement period. Nevertheless, because of Black History Month and a concerted effort on the part of many Black researchers, we are thankfully more aware of the contributions of African American inventors, scientists, and educators. An outstanding African American in the field of science, Dr. George Washington Carver, revolutionized southern agriculture. He made numerous discoveries of useful by-products from the peanut, sweet potato, and soybeans. And, he "demonstrated the use of science and scientific techniques in improving the land and diversifying the foundations of the South's economy" (Adams, 1964, p. 57).

Norbet Rillieux, born in enslavement, was a teacher and an inventor. His father, the master of the plantation where he was born, sent him to school in France. He developed a method for extracting juice from sugar cane, greatly reducing the time and cost in manufacturing sugar. This new method also produced a superior quality of sugar. The Rillieux method, which involved "enclosing the condensing coils in a vacuum chamber and to employ the vapor from the first condensing chamber for evaporating the juice in a second chamber under higher vacuum," was adopted in Cuba and Mexico (Adams, 1964, p. 50).

Mary McLeod Bethune, "a cotton picker, educator, and White advisor," was the founder of Bethune College, which merged with Cookman College to become Bethune-Cookman College. Through her own determination and perseverance, she became educated and subsequently built a school for the education of other African Americans (Adams, 1964, p. 96).

James Augustine Healy, a Catholic bishop, was the first Bishop of African descent in the United States. He presided over a diocese in two states. "Sixty eight mission stations, eighteen parochial schools and fifty church buildings were erected" during his tenure (Adams, 1964, p. 84).

Dr. Charles Drew, a physician, discovered a method for preserving large quantities of blood plasma (Adams, 1964, p. 61). Many more African Americans deserve mention here, but because of the limits placed on this article, the aforementioned individuals must serve as a representative sample.

CONCLUSION

It may be argued, what good is it to study a tragic or even glorious past when present realities carry so much weight? Knowledge of the past is certainly not the *Afromestizos'* sole salvation, but it is the first affirmative step toward overcoming the historical shackles of human suffering and exploitation. The people of African descent in the Americas do not have a sense of themselves or their history. They lack the ability to respect themselves and their culture. They have been taught the contributions of others and they know the place of the people of European descent in our society. However, they are unaware of their place and the contributions of people like themselves to ancient civilizations or the Americas.

On a continuum, the past, present, and future are inextricably linked. The descendants of the Africans are not ahistorical; they are not a rootless people. Their past, even before the Americas, is rich and important to the development of humankind. History tells us what is important. If a segment of the population is excluded from history, that segment is seemingly not important.

The people of San Nicolás and all of the descendants of enslaved Africans must have a sense of self before they can take their rightful place in all aspects of life in the Americas.

NOTE

1. *Camionetas* are one and one-half ton flat bed trucks, equipped with stakes that support 2 × 12 boards across the bed of the truck for seating and are covered with a tarpaulin.

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