

African Influence in the Music of Mexico's Costa Chica Region

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Abstract

While European and Amerindian contributions to Mexican folk music traditions have been thoroughly acknowledged, the African influence has not been as widely publicized. However, ample evidence of African influence on folk music in Mexico exists, especially in the densely black-populated *pueblos* within the states of Guerrero and Oaxaca in the Costa Chica region. Instruments such as the *marimbola* (finger piano), *quijada* (jawbone), and *tambor de fricción* (friction drum) specifically point toward African influence in the folk music of Costa Chica. The main objective of this paper is to identify the African influence on the folk music in the region. By tracing the roots of certain instruments and folksongs that use these specific African instruments, this study seeks to address the underrepresentation of African influence in the Costa Chica region.

Costa Chica Region

The Costa Chica region of Mexico is a 200-mile long area beginning just southeast of Acapulco in the state of Guerrero and ending at Huatulco, in the state of Oaxaca. Guerrero is named after the *Afromestizo* (African, Spanish and Amerindian descent) general, Vicente Ramón Saldaña Guerrero. Guerrero led the Mexicans to independence against the Spanish. Later, as the second president of Mexico, he abolished slavery in 1829. The very hot climated Costa Chica region has been home to the largest population of *Afromestizos* since the slave trade brought Africans from West Africa to Mexico via the port of Veracruz dating back to the 1500s. These enslaved Africans were taken from regions of West African countries like present-day Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Angola, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria, among others.

Music and Religion

When discussing traditional music from Africa, the inclusion of religious influences is essential. To better understand the music's origins, researcher and expert on Mexican percussive instruments Arturo Chamorro states:

African traces are not present in an obvious manner in traditional Mexican music and those that have such traces are found in levels less obvious. One can argue that through traditional oral music, the panorama of African heritage is much more optimistic than that of strong documents. (Brian K. Smith translation [*La herencia Africana*, 440])

With this in mind, it is important to survey some historical accounts of African music. Some West African instruments are made strictly for religious purposes. The religious practices of what is now known as Nigeria became the basis for various New World syncretic forms. In the vast geographic territories where Yoruba religious practices are observed (including the New World African Diaspora), the names of such practices differ. The term voodoo is particular to North America and the Caribbean.

In Spanish speaking countries, such as Mexico, South America, Cuba, and Puerto Rico, the Yoruba-based religion is known as *magia negra*, *santería*, *brujería*, *hechicería*, *chamanismo*, or *curandismo*. The music associated with these Yoruba-based religious ceremonies includes the *tambor de fricción* (friction drum), which was specifically used to summon spirits that eventually possess certain practitioners. The most recognizable New World manifestation of this friction drum is associated with samba music of Brazil. Popularity of this religion proliferated as the African diaspora expanded to new territories, as is the case in Mexico where *santería* is present. In Joseph E. Holloway's *Africanisms in American Culture*, a description of *santería* as well as its global expansion is explained. Holloway elucidates the syncretism of the Yoruba religion:

Santería is a New World African-based religion with a clear dual heritage. Imported into the United States from

Cuba, its component traditions include European Christianity (in the form of Spanish folk Catholicism), traditional African religion (in the form of *orisha* worship as practiced by the Yoruba of Nigeria), and Kardecian spiritism, which originated in France in the nineteenth century and subsequently became fashionable in both the Caribbean and South America.

According to Dr. Kwame Nantambu, “*santeria* is currently concentrated in: Cuba, and other Caribbean countries and the Hispanic populations in Florida, New Jersey, New York City and Los Angeles in the United States, Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Venezuela, France, the Netherlands and Puerto Rico” (2). In *santería* there are cultural practices that are directly derived from those of the Yoruba. These modern-day practices include “drums, dance, and song, where one makes an offering to the ‘gods,’ confesses one’s sin, and receives counsel from those—‘possessed’ by the Deity” (Nantuambu 2).

In addition to these practices, animal sacrifice is also a common practice. The music during the ritual possession ceremonies tends to increase with intensity to underscore the possession of souls by the *orishas* or polydiosis.

Pioneering Investigations

Even though the African presence in Mexico’s folk music has not been greatly promoted tantamount to that of European and Amerindian populations, there is evidence that music of the Costa Chica region has been impacted by African influence that dates back to slavery. This influence is prevalent in today’s music in the Costa Chica region as well as other states in Mexico. Until the pioneering investigation of Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán in 1946, there was not much research done in regards to the African diaspora and its influence in general and even less in the Costa Chica region. Even though there is supportive evidence of an African past in Mexico’s folk music history, some investigators share contrasting viewpoints. For example, “suprisingly, Vicente Teóduo Mendoza, the most prominent scholar of folk music in Mexico, dedicated minimum attention to the African contribution in traditional music” (Brian K. Smith translation [Rodríguez, 5]).¹

Conversely, other scholars such as Robert Stevenson (1952) and much later Gabriel Moedano (1980) both concur that there is significant African influence in some genres of Mexican music. Within the music of the Costa Chica region, there are specific instruments of African origin that are also particular to the regional sound. Many of these instruments such as the *marímbola* (finger piano), *quijada* (jawbone), and *tambores de fricción* (friction drums) are documented in Chamorro's *Los instrumentos de percusión de México* (1984).

Instruments

The friction drum (*tambor de fricción*) is a percussion instrument consisting of a single membrane stretched over an open-ended hollow sound box. The player produces sound by causing the membrane to vibrate by friction. The membrane vibrates by 1) being rubbed with the fingers or with the use of a cloth, stick or cord that is attached to its center, or by 2) spinning the drum around a pivot to produce friction. To vary the pitch, the membrane may be depressed with the thumb while playing. The friction drum was primarily used for religious ceremonies and associated with groups descending from the Yoruba and Bantu cultures. The *tambor de fricción* is also known as the *bote de diablo* or *tirera* in Mexico. As Chamorro states: "The use of the friction drum, which is recognized as also having African aspects in its manufacture, appears to have extended itself among various indigenous and mixed communities from the Costa Chica region" (Brian K. Smith translation [*Los instrumentos* 255])² Among these communities is the *Amuzgo*, the Amerindians who called the instrument *teconte*. Bill Jenkins concurs with Chamorro's statements, that "many friction drums in the New World were of Africa origin."

The *marimba* is currently a prominent folk instrument in the state of Oaxaca and also apparent in the state of Veracruz (Jenkins). The instrument has been manifested in different parts of the world and is referred to by different names. *Marimba*, which means "voice of wood," is a wood or metal instrument whose sound is generated by thin tongues known as lamellae. A derivative of the *gyl*, the *marimba* has fourteen wooden keys that are fastened by leather and antelope sinew with calabash gourds beneath the keys. The *marimba* is not used as a solo

instrument, but functions as an accompanying instrument. It also provides the harmonic background in addition to setting the tempo for the band. From the state of Guerrero, the song “La Llorona,” which features the marimba is a good example of the instrument’s prominence in contemporary music. It also exists in other countries within the African diaspora, such as Guatemala, Peru, Venezuela, and Colombia.

Also in Guerrero, the *marímbola* (similar to the *marimba*), is used in a style known as *chilena*. This genre of music got its name from the immigrants who came to Mexico in search of gold on their way to California. The *chilena* is also a famous couples’ dance with Afro-Hispanic rhythms and Spanish stanzas. It is the product of the African influenced *cueca*, a folk dance popular in various Hispanoamerican countries such as Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador and Peru. The *marímbola* has ties to the *balafon* in Mali, and the *balaphone*, *balani* and *balangi* in Sierra Leone. Palauk and mahogany wood from Africa gives the instrument its distinct sound.³

In 1980, a study carried out by André Fara from Mexico’s National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) published findings that established the *marimbol[a]* as being clearly of African origin as well as being linked to the history of the *sanza*, which is currently known by its modern name *mbira*.

The *quijada* (jaw bone of a donkey, cow or horse) is an instrument that is also called by other names in different countries (e.g., *charrasca* in Venezuela, *cacharaina* in Chile, or *quijada quina*). The jawbone is weathered until the molars rattle in place. Methods of playing involve striking the large end of the jawbone with the palm which rattles the teeth, and/or scraping the instrument with a stick. When analyzing the song “Hurra cachucha y los enanos” a song specifically used in the *danza de “los diablos,”* (the dance of the devil), the use of the *quijada* is recognized as being dominant. This dance is a celebration that takes place most often during *El Día de los Muertos* (the Day of the Dead) in Mexico. In countries where the *quijada* is known, there tends to be a large population of African descendants. According to the *Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, among the African influenced instruments of Mexico, the *quijada de burro* is one of the *Mixtec* (indigenous Mesoamerican) idiophones with African influence (8).

African Influence in Latin American Music

Through comparing and contrasting similar instruments used by the enslaved African population of Mexico and that of other Latin American countries such as Peru, Colombia, Cuba, and Venezuela, it is apparent that these diasporic groups share some cultural practices. The two main groups of Africans brought from West Africa were from the Bantu and Yoruba cultures. This is more than likely the reason why the same instruments are used in several different countries within New World African diaspora (Holloway 1-2).

Besides the enslaved West Africans in Mexico having influenced the folk music of the country, enslaved Africans who were transported to other countries also exerted noticeable influences on music in their specific regions. Given the extent to which Yoruba and Bantu cultures were transplanted to the New World, it is understandable that there would be similarities in the influences on the music in other countries of African diaspora. There is evidence that substantiates cultural similarities between the descendants of these Africans in the New World.

Connections to other African-derived Instruments in Latin America

There is direct correlation with the instruments of African influences in Mexico's Costa Chica region and that of many Latin American countries where Africans from West Africa were brought, although in many instances the names of the instruments may vary. The friction drum in Colombia is known as the *zambumbia*, *marrana*, *puerca*, or the *furruca*. Friction drums are also very distinct to Afro-Brazilian music, and especially samba. Additionally, in the *Candomble* religion (a mixture of traditional Yoruba beliefs and Catholicism) of Brazil, use of the friction drum is especially noted in Rio de Janeiro and Bahia where these drums are central to the samba sound. In Cuba, however, the same drums are referred to as *ekue* and are used in *santería*. In Venezuela, the drums are also known as *furro* and are used in the *parranda* and *gaita* music styles. In Haiti, Trinidad and Puerto Rico the friction drum is prominent in African-based religious ceremonies.

Besides the *quijada* being used in *son jarocho* in Mexico, it also has a significant presence in the Venezuelan folk music, particularly in

aguinaldos (Christmas carols). This instrument as well is known in other areas of the African diaspora such as Colombia and Cuba. In Peru and Brazil a similar instrument is known as the *carraca*. More modern forms of the *quijada* are made from metal and wood, such as the vibra slap in the United States. Latin music styles such as salsa and Cuban *son* are best known for using this particular instrument.

Conclusion

When the enslaved West Africans were transported to the New World they brought with them religious customs which included music. Although there were obvious modifications and adjustments, the enslaved Africans maintained many of the same traditions they were accustomed to and therefore ended up devising instruments based on an African prototype. This information is important in understanding the relationship that many countries within the African diaspora have with each other, especially those elements that derived from religious context.

Investigating the music of Guerrero is more difficult than the music of other states because of “inadequate communications and other physical and immanent reasons, but even more [so] because there seems to be no good study of the subjects, particularly of the music, anywhere in the state, or anywhere else, for that matter” (Hellmer 249). Although there are more scholars doing research on this particular topic, the information on any African influence in Mexico, be it in the music or otherwise, is not widely known or publicly disseminated. Moreover, it tends to be ignored altogether. Author Chris Heim, quotes Juan Díes, the Executive Director of Sones de México Chicago Ensemble: “[T]here are many aspects of black culture in Mexico, even in Mariachi possibly, that are not acknowledged. But once you mix cream in your coffee, you can’t separate it. Black culture is in many areas of Mexican music.” This is also true of art. The pre-Columbian Olmec statues that were found in the Gulf Coast of Mexico, depicting what has been identified by some prominent scholars as images of people with African features and strong evidence of an African presence in the region has not been widely acknowledged, however, it is interesting to note that the statues were found in areas most heavily populated by *Afromestizos*.

Having focused on “whitening”⁴ Mexico’s image by dissembling substantial evidence of Africaness, Joseph R. Hellmer states that Mexico’s former Minister of Education, José Vasconcelos, may have contributed to this lack of acknowledgment. Blackness or *negritud* as it has existed in Mexico is a topic that is seldom highlighted. When it is acknowledged, it is often with negative sentiment. Nevertheless, the African contribution to the country’s rich musical heritage should be promoted and therefore serve to enlighten the public to the African involvement in the formation of what *la música de México* is today.

¹ Carlos Ruiz Rodríguez, *Estudios en torno a la influencia Africana en la música tradicional de México: vertientes, balance y propuestas*. “Sorprendentemente, Vicente Teódulo Mendoza, el mayor representante de los estudios sobre el folklore musical en México, dedica mínimo interés al aporte africano en la música tradicional” (5).

² Arturo Chamorro. *Los instrumentos de percusión de México*. “El uso del tambor de fricción, del que se reconocen también aspectos africanos en su manufactura, parece haberse extendido entre varias comunidades indígenas y mestizas de la Costa Chica” (255).

³ www.bonesdrums.com/images/Marimba.pdf (page 2).

⁴ Marco Polo and Hernandez Cuevas. *African Mexican and the Discourse on Modern Nation*. (University Press of America, Inc. Maryland 2004. Conclusion), 101.

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