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African Cultures in Spanish America. An Introduction

On March 25 in 1807 the House of Common in London passed the bill to abolish the slave trade in the then British Empire. Although it needed another thirty years to abolish slavery in the British colonies – and even longer to abolish slavery in Spanish America –, the end of the trade marked an important step in our history. Throughout the year, Britain has celebrated the act, in particular the members of parliament who campaigned for the abolition. But it often ignored that the abolition was not only a political victory of members of the parliament but a sign of changing economical conditions and in particular the victory of millions of people fighting against slavery from the moment of their capture. Though enslaved people were treated as commodities, hence were not allowed to campaign for their own rights, they always maintained their humanity. In every moment they resisted against their suppression and tried to find a way out of the horrible situation they were forced into. They used everything at hand – violence, flight, passive resistance, even suicide and abortion, but also religion, poetry, adaptation to the culture of the surroundings and the creation of new cultural forms, languages and folklore. By singing, dancing, worshipping and even just by speaking in a new way enslaved people created their own space in a hostile environment; they created their own voice.

With this dossier INDIANA wants to draw the attention to these voices and the cultures they created. Scholars often focus only on the Caribbean and Brazil as the countries with the largest African influence. Students even think that Latin America cultures represent only a mixture of indigenous and European elements. But Latin America was and still is also influenced by people of African descent. The Spanish king Charles I granted in 1518 the first *asiento* (license) to ship enslaved Africans directly to Spanish America; at the beginning Portuguese traders won this exclusive right, but soon they got competition by English, Dutch and French traders. One of the first rebellions of enslaved Africans that worried Spanish authorities so much that they temporarily suspended the trade happened already in the mid-sixteenth century on the continent, in Panama. Between 1569 and 1580 violent insurrections covered nearly the entire Spanish colony around Mexico City. Even during this early time, not all Africans living in America were enslaved: Juan Garrido, for instance, who took part of the conquest of Tenochtitlán, was a free Black man. Though the number of enslaved people did not increase in continental Spanish America as dramatically as in Brazil and some parts of the Caribbean during the 16th and 17th centuries, enslaved people out-

INDIANA 24 (2007), 09-14



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numbered European settlers also in some places in Spanish America which are today usually not connected to African cultures, for instance in Peru and New Spain. As I mention in my article about Afro-Peru, enslaved people made half of the population in Lima in 1593, and in 1640 they outnumbered the Europeans (see Schmidt in this dossier). Silke Hensel reports in her article a similar development about New Spain. Though the number of enslaved people in New Spain was never more than 2% of the population, in 1570 they outnumbered Spaniards in the capital (see Hensel in this dossier). Nonetheless, at the end of the seventeenth century Peru and New Spain decided because of various reasons which will be discussed later in Hensel's article to decline the number of enslaved people while other regions increased the number dramatically in the following decades. Consequently the number of Africans and their influence in creating national cultures dropped in Peru and New Spain. However, as the contributions of this dossier illustrate, African cultures have influenced the creation of Spanish American nations, though not as visible as in Brazil and the Caribbean. The question is therefore when and why African cultures became invisible in most of the Spanish American countries on the continent. Lack of space prevents a detailed discussion but I will at least refer shortly to a possible reason.

During the independent movements people of African descent participated and fought in the war against Spain. They were promised general emancipation, the end of slavery, but they were deceived and the slave system continued in most countries until the middle of the nineteenth century. Despite their efforts in fighting for freedom of colonial suppression, they were denied the acknowledgment of their contributions. After gaining independence from Spain most former colonies construed national identities based on similar social stratifications as during the colonial time. The only difference was that white Creole ruled instead of Spaniards. A dark skin colour was still regarded as socially pejorative because of its association with slavery. In order to get rid of the negative stigma of being born as slave, freed former slaves and their descendents tried to erase the remembrance of slavery from the collective memory. Instead of declaring that they were 'African' or 'mulatto', they often preferred the self-declaration 'mestizo' in the national census. Consequently, the official number of people of African descent dropped dramatically after the independence – and they became invisible, excluded from the collective memory of the nation. In some of the following contributions (e.g., in the articles by Hensel, Schmidt and Peñaloza) the question of the invisibility of Africans in Spanish America is discussed in more detail.

My aim as editor was to bring together authors from different disciplines in arts and humanities who work about the African presence in countries that are often overlooked in Afro-American Studies. The dossier shall contribute to fill the gap in scholarship that still exists today. I excluded therefore the Caribbean Islands and Brazil on purpose; there are already many monographs and collected editions about these two areas focusing on African cultures today but little about Hispano-phone

America.¹ Unfortunately it was not possible to include articles about every country in continental Spanish America. In particular I regret that the dossier misses an article about Afro-Mexico.

In spite of Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán's (1908-1996) pathbreaking works on the African presence in Mexico,² for a long time, Mexico was connected only to the debate about indigenismo. It was ignored that Veracruz was an important slave market during the colonial time, perhaps because the African elements were so well adapted into the national culture that it was easy to miss. Consequently, the contribution of Afro-Mexicans in the development of the nation is still not recognised. Though the Afro-Mexican past and presence still lacks official recognition, Mexico experiences a Black movement in recent years that led even to the establishment of an Afro-Mexican cultural centre in Veracruz. Afro-Mexico is even more visible in the Diaspora (for instance, in Los Angeles) where one can visit art exhibition of Afro-Mexican artists as well as cultural exhibition about the Afro-Mexican culture. Sagrario Cruz-Carretero, who studied under Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, was supposed to write an article for the dossier but could not make the deadline. She is the curator of the Main Gallery exhibition from the University of Veracruz. Her exhibition about the African heritage in Mexico that opened last year in the Mexican Fine Arts Centre Museum in Mexico City symbolises an important step towards the national recognition of Afro-Mexico.

An exceptional case in Afro-American studies is Columbia. Afro-Columbia is today a relatively well-studied area because of the work of the Columbian anthropologist Nina S. de Friedemann (1930-1998) and her students. She devoted her life to the study of indigenous and African cultures in Columbia and helped to break the silence about Afro-Columbia. In order to characterise the history of Africans in Latin America she coined the term 'invisibility'.³ Unfortunately, the author who was supposed to write about Afro-Columbia had to withdraw because of time problems but another author refers to Columbia in his comparative analysis. Other countries that are unfortunately not present in the dossier are, for instance, Venezuela and Uruguay. This is not an indicator that there are no African cultures in these countries, quite the opposite. Venezuela has – similar to Colombia - a strong African heritage but they are often still ignored. Even the María Lionza cult is sometimes still interpreted as mixed indigenous-Catholic religion, the African elements are overlooked.

Despite these gaps the contributions manage to illustrate the richness and diversity of the African heritage in Hispanophone America. Apart from two contributors, Silke

1 Exceptions are, for instance, the reader edited by Whitten/Torres (1998), and the one published by UNESCO (2004).

2 See, for instance, *La población negra de México* (first edition 1946) or *Cuijla, esbozo etnográfico de un pueblo negro* (1958).

3 See for information about Afro-Columbia the works by Nina E. de Friedemann and Jaime Arocha and by Peter Wade (e.g., Friedemann/Arocha 1986, Wade 1993).

Hensel who was asked to present the historical background of Africans in Spanish America, and Wolfgang Gabbert, who was asked to write about the background of Africans in Central America, the articles focus on the African presence in Spanish America; hence they present contemporary cultural aspects. The authors combine in their articles background information about the African culture of the country they are studying with their own research interests. The dossier presents therefore a mixture of approaches and research topics about Africa in Spanish America. I decided against an order based on approach; the articles will follow instead in a geographical order, from North to South.

Silke Hensel, a historian, discusses the creation of identity during the colonial era. She refers to different examples, from Mexico to Columbia, from the Spanish Caribbean to Peru and shows the immense contributions Africans had in creation of Latin America. Her article also illustrates the process of identity formation, hence, that identities were transformed over time and in different directions.

The next two articles (by anthropologists) are about Central America. Wolfgang Gabbert discusses the history of African descendants in Belize and in Mosquitia, the Atlantic region of Nicaragua. His focus is on free Africans and Creole groups in both countries, hence the development after the end of slavery. He explains the position of African descendants in the regional societies, from the time of slavery until today. Maren Mohr de Collado then focuses on the Garínagu, an ethnic group who migrated in the sixteenth century from the Lower Antilles to Central America, in particular to Belize, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua. The author focuses, after explaining the ethnogenesis of the Garínagu, in particular on Guatemala and the Diaspora, hence on the migrants in the U.S. She shows that the religious rituals play an important part in the revitalisation of identity.

The next two articles are mainly about the northern part of South America but both include references to other parts, too. Both authors are linguists who draw our attention to the language formation and its importance for identity issues. Iris Bachmann focuses on Papiamentu, a language often ignored by Afro-American Studies, Latin American Studies and even Caribbean Studies, because it falls between all categories. Though it is spoken on the ABC islands at the coast of Venezuela (hence, Dutch Caribbean) it is influenced by Spanish. For a long time it was not even accepted as a language as the author shows. She discusses in her article in particular the research about Creole languages in the nineteenth century and looks at the intersection between philology and anthropology, but also at the influences of so-called folklore studies on our understanding of these languages. Armin Schwegler presents then results of his investigation about ritual insulting in the Americas. He compares in his article examples from Colombia, Ecuador and the U.S.A. and shows the importance of snapping for the African cultures in the Americas. Snapping consists of an exchange of ritualised insults directed at a relative of the opponent and requires excellent verbal skills. He

shows that these ritual insults are used to establish social distance (or proximity) and social rank, not only among African Americans in the U.S.A. but also in other parts of the Americas though these areas are normally ignored by scholars. His article includes several text examples in order to illustrate the richness of this ritual.

The following four articles focus on countries that are also usually ignored in Afro-American Studies, the Andean countries of South America. As the first three articles illustrate, Africans made a lively contribution to the Andean folklore, still visible at various festivals today. Nonetheless, they also show that despite of this evident part Afro-Andeans are still denied any contribution to the national culture. They are ignored, their past as well as their presence as all four articles show. Daniela Schneider looks at Ecuador, in particular at the festival *Mama Negra* in Latacunga. Though the festival has an obvious reference to the African past it mainly celebrates the mestizo identity by excluding the African part. The author shows that the festival as symbol for the multiculturalism of Ecuador gives a misleading impression of the national character of Ecuador. Despite romanticised ideas about Africans in the past Afro-Ecuadorians are still stigmatised and their contributions to the national heritage are denied. The following article looks at Bolivia. Lioba Rossbach de Olmos investigates the representations of Afro-Bolivians in the Bolivian folklore, in particular the *saya* rhythm. *Saya* is a popular song and dance style in Bolivia created by Afro-Bolivians that gained international recognition as an Andean folklore style. The author discusses this ambivalence and presents a more positive image than the latter author about Ecuador because she argues that the international recognition of *saya* has supported the revival of cultural traditions of Afro-Bolivians. The next article by Bettina E. Schmidt focuses on Afro-Andeans in Peru. Similar to the other two articles it discusses a folklore tradition, in particular the 'negritos', and its interpretations in Peru today, hence it shows the contradiction between folklore and reality in contemporary Peru where Afro-Peruvians are still neglected, even excluded. In distinction to Rossbach de Olmos this article is not so positive about the ability for Afro-Peruvians to start a revival of their traditions based on folklore; instead it ends with emphasising the significance of political actions in order to overcome the ongoing marginalisation of Afro-Peruvians. This journey through South America ends with the contribution of Fernanda Penaloza about Afro-Argentines. In distinction to the countries presented in the three articles before Argentina went through a radical process of whitening, hence has excluded the indigenous past as well as the African one. Instead of looking at folklore the author analyses therefore literature produced by (white) Argentines that construed Argentinean national identity at the beginning of the twentieth century. She discusses in particular the emphasis on invisibility and argues the need to move beyond this paradigm to a critical engagement with representations of blackness in Argentina.

All contributions in this dossier illustrate the diversity of African cultures in Hispano-phone continental America. Africans having being forced across the Atlantic have managed to creatively influence America. Instead of looking at them as passive victims this dossier demonstrates the creativity in adapting to the new environment, but it also shows the problems people of African descent still have to face today.

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