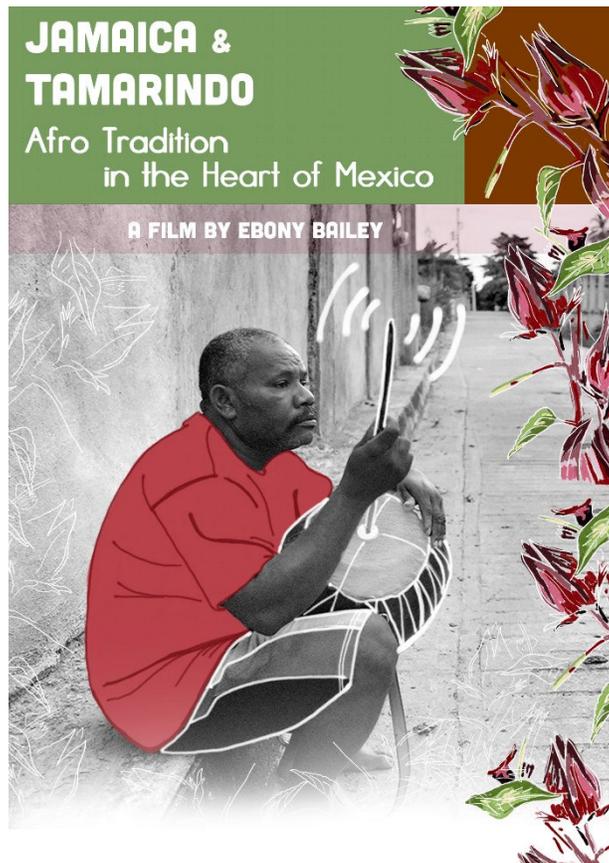




## JAMAICA AND TAMARINDO: AFRO TRADITION IN THE HEART OF MEXICO



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## **Jamaica and Tamarindo: Afro Tradition in the Heart of Mexico**

The Jamaica flower and tamarind are iconic ingredients in Mexico, but their history comes from a place much further away. This documentary explores African identity in Mexico City, an identity that goes beyond the color of one's skin.

Located in North America, Mexico has a population of about 125 million. It is thought to be the eleventh-largest country in the world by population. Mexico City is the nation's largest city and its capital. Located in south-central Mexico, Mexico City is one of the most populous metropolitan areas in the world, with a population of close to 9 million people. It is located atop the remains of Tenochtitlán, the center of the former Aztec empire, which was destroyed by the Spanish in 1521.

Before the arrival of the Spanish at the beginning of the sixteenth century, Mexico was inhabited by a number of different indigenous American Indian groups including the Zapotec, Maya, Olmec, and Toltec. When the area was conquered by Spain in the early 1500s, many of these native people were enslaved and forced to labor in the silver mines, ranches, factories, and other enterprises established by the Spanish. Unfortunately, the indigenous population lacked immunity to the diseases which the Spanish brought with them. This in combination with their harsh treatment by the Spanish, resulted in a massive population decline. In response to the drastic reduction in their labor force, the Spanish brought African slaves to work in their colony. While estimates vary, it is believed that at least 200,000 Africans were brought to Mexico as slaves. The majority were men.

### **African Slaves in Mexico**

The Spanish generally treated their African slaves harshly, and it was common for these slaves to fight back or even run away. Some escapees found remote, mountainous areas where they hid from the Spanish and created their own settlements. Former slave Gaspar Yanga founded one such community in the state of Veracruz. He fought against the Spanish for decades, and in 1618, after failing to capture him they finally negotiated a peace with Yanga instead, recognizing his settlement and its residents as free. Later known as Yanga, this town is thought to be the first free black community in North America.

Slavery continued in Mexico until 1829, when it was abolished by Mexico's second president, Vicente Guerrero. Guerrero was Afro-Mexican. In comparison, slavery was abolished in the United States in 1865.

### **Mexico's Ethnic Groups**

As a result of its history of slavery, today there are a significant number of people of African descent living in Mexico. Mexico also has many different indigenous groups, in addition to people of Spanish and other European descent. There are also a large number of people who are a mix

of these different ethnicities. Mestizo—a blending of European and Amerindian people—is thought to be the most common ethnic group in Mexico.

A large percentage of Mexico’s Afro-Mexicans live in the Costa Chica (meaning “small coast”) area, which is located on the Pacific Coast, in the states of Oaxaca and Guerrero. The state of Veracruz, located on the Gulf Coast of Mexico, is also home to a sizeable Afro-Mexican population.

### **Recognition of Afro-Mexicans**

While the part that the indigenous people play in Mexico’s history is generally common knowledge, there is less recognition of the existence and history of Mexico’s black population. In fact, it wasn’t until 1992 that Mexico’s government officially acknowledged African culture as the “third root” of Mexican culture, along with indigenous and Spanish people. In 2019, Afro-Mexicans were officially recognized in Mexico’s national constitution. This recognition gives them access to government resources and rights which they have not previously had.

Despite these recent acknowledgments though, there is still a lot of uncertainty about exactly how many Afro-Mexicans there are. Recently, there have been some official surveys aimed at finding out. For instance, in 2015 there was an interim census, which was carried out in preparation for the census that will take place in 2020. For the first time, citizens were able to identify themselves as Afro-Mexican. 1.4 million did so. In 2017, the National Survey on Discrimination led by the Governing Secretary and the National Council to Prevent Discrimination, found an even higher number of Afro-Mexicans. According to that survey, 2.9 million people in Mexico identify themselves as Afro-Mexican. The next national census will be take place in 2020.

### **Timeline**

- **16th Century:** The Spanish bring African slaves to Mexico.
- **1829:** Slavery in Mexico is abolished by Mexico’s second president, Vicente Guerrero.
- **1992:** Mexico’s government officially acknowledges African culture as the “third root” of Mexican culture, along with indigenous and Spanish peoples.
- **2015:** In an interim census, 1.4 million people identify themselves as Afro-Mexican.
- **2017:** In the 2017 National Survey on Discrimination, 2.9 million people identify themselves as Afro-Mexican.
- **2019:** Afro-Mexicans are officially recognized in Mexico’s national constitution.

## Glossary

- **charrasca:** A percussion instrument made from the jawbone of a donkey. It's also known as the quijada in other parts of Latin America.
- **chilena:** A type of music from the Costa Chica area of Mexico.
- **fandango:** The fandango is a type of music and dance, but the word is also used to mean a community celebration where people play music and dance.
- **Guerrero:** A state in southwestern Mexico.
- **Jamaica flower:** Jamaica, also called hibiscus, is a tart-flavored flower used in flavored water and various foods in Mexico.
- **Jola:** The Jola are an ethnic group who live in Senegal and a number of other parts of Africa.
- **Mexico City:** Located in south-central Mexico, Mexico City is the nation's largest city and its capital.
- **Mixteca:** The Mixtec are the third-largest group of indigenous people living in Mexico.
- **nixtamal:** Maize that has been partly cooked and treated with lime. It can be used to make tortillas or pozole.
- **Oaxaca:** A state in southern Mexico.
- **Senegalese:** From Senegal, a country on the west coast of Africa.
- **Son Huasteco:** A style of traditional Mexican music that is typically performed by three musicians, one on a violin and two on guitars.
- **Son Jarocho:** A style of folk music that is influenced by a blend of African, Mexican, and indigenous cultures in Veracruz. The jarocho song, "La Bamba," was turned into a rock-and-roll song that became popular in the United States in 1958.
- **tamarind:** The tamarind tree is native to Africa. The pods of the tree contain a sweet-sour pulp that is used to flavor a number of different Mexican foods.
- **tamarind atole:** Atole is a warm drink made with corn. It can be flavored in various different ways including with tamarind.
- **Veracruz:** Veracruz is both a port city and a state, and is located on the Gulf Coast of Mexico.

## Additional Resources

### Books

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- Anita Gonzalez (2010). *Afro-Mexico: Dancing Between Myth and Reality*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Laura A. Lewis (2010). *Chocolate and Corn Flour: History, Race, and Place in the Making of “Black” Mexico*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Christina A. Sue (2013). *Land of the Cosmic Race: Race Relations, Racism, and Blackness in Mexico*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ben Vinson III (2001). *Bearing Arms for His Majesty: The Free-Colored Militia in Colonial Mexico*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
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- Rebecca Smith (no date). “From Bananas to La Bamba: Cultural Ties Between Africa and Mexico,” *Texas Institute for the Preservation of History and Culture*. <https://www.pvamu.edu/tiphc/research-projects/afro-mexicans-afromestizos/from-bananas-to-la-bamba-cultural-ties-between-africa-and-mexico/>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/335rank.html#MX>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mx.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2016/02/06/465710473/now-counted-by-their-country-afro-mexicans-grab-unprecedented-spotlight>

<sup>4</sup> <https://pulitzercenter.org/reporting/afro-mexicans-fight-visibility-and-recognition>



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