

## Afro-Peru: A Legacy of Black Labor and Culture

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### Abstract:

This article discusses the history and cultural impact of the African diaspora in Peru.

**Keywords:** Afro-Peruvians | Culture | History | Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade | Lima, Peru

### Article:

For over three centuries, streams of people, the smoke of incense, and the sounds of horns, bells and hymns have filled the streets of Lima in late October. Each year tens of thousands of Peruvians pay homage to a fresco of a crucified Christ painted by a 17th-century Angolan slave.

Local tradition tells how the painting survived several powerful earthquakes, including one in 1687 that left all but the fresco and the altar beneath it standing. Each year the faithful, many wearing purple-colored robes, or habits, like those of the Nazarene nuns charged with taking care of the painting, follow a replica of *El Señor de los Milagros* (“The Lord of the Miracles”) through the streets of Lima in what is the largest religious procession in all of Latin America.

Among the masses was my *abuelita*, a skilled doll-maker and a devout Catholic. Donning her purple dress, white veil, and carrying a small copy of *El Señor de los Milagros*, my grandmother Carmela would join the flow of Peruvians of all races, ethnicities and backgrounds trailing the “Black Christ”—as the painting is also known.

And while the name of the 17th-century painter of *El Señor de los Milagros* has long been forgotten, his creation stands as a testament to his life and to those of his countrymen and women who survived the centuries-long devastation of the transatlantic slave trade.

The human cost of the transatlantic slave trade cannot be quantified and no reasonable compensation is ever possible: any attempt would pale in comparison to the depth of its horror.

Yet we know that much of the wealth of the Spanish empire was produced by enslaved black labor.

In addition to building much of Lima's infrastructure, West and West-Central Africans and their descendants infused their traditions and practices into Peruvian society-in-the-making. Theirs, however, is a lesser-known story in Latin America, and remains little known even among Peruvians today.

My own journey into the history of Afro-Peru started some twenty years ago when my mother gave me a pendant to help me recover after being hit by a car. On one side of the pendant is an image of *El Señor de los Milagros*, on the other, an image of San Martín de Porres.

One of Peru's most celebrated saints—especially venerated for his healing powers—San Martín was the son of a black slave and Spanish colonial official. Stories of the Afro-Peruvian miracle-worker had long circulated in my family but little was ever discussed about Peru's African past or its living legacy.

The African diaspora in Peru goes back to 1527 with the arrival of the first black soldiers (*ladinos*, Hispanicized Africans) under Francisco Pizarro's command. As part of imperial Spanish forays into imperial Inca lands, *ladinos* were used to conquer Peru's indigenous peoples. Soon, unassimilated African slaves (*bozales*) were being imported. In time, many black captives took flight, forming maroon settlements (*palenques*, runaway slave communities), some on the outskirts of the *haciendas* on which they had worked but now raided for food and supplies.

Engaged in protracted war in Peru, and without immunities to smallpox and other infectious diseases (the foreigners' most deadly and invisible army), entire indigenous communities were wiped out. African captives of war were brought in from across the Atlantic to work Peru's mines and plantations—that is, to supplement the labor of Quechua and Aymara Indians. Over the next three centuries tens of thousands of enslaved Africans were taken across the Atlantic, marched over the Isthmus of Panama, and shipped down the Pacific coast to Peru.

From Lima's port of entry, Callao, Africans were taken to Malambo where they were prepared for auction and distribution. Approximately one quarter of the Africans brought to Peru via the Pacific remained in Lima; the rest were sold to plantations, such as the dreaded Hacienda San José, with up to 800 men, women and children working the land at any one time. But many also escaped. In time, maroons from the hacienda formed their own *palenque* near the town of El Carmen in the province of Chincha.

While most enslaved Africans were taken to Peru through the Caribbean port of Cartagena in New Grenada, others came by way of Buenos Aires on the Atlantic, where they were marched across the searing *pampas* and up the freezing Andes to work in the mines. Angolans—which included a wide range of people and cultures—were the most prominent captives in Peru, followed by those from the Congo, Mozambique, the Gold Coast and Senegambia.

Several chroniclers explain the visible black presence in Lima during the early colonial era. As the Peruvian historian Carlos Aguirre notes in the PBS documentary *Black in Latin America*, narrated by Harvard's Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Lima was once considered a "black city." The imperial seat received tens of thousands of enslaved men and women, whose traditions, skills, cultures, religions and spiritual practices varied widely. Some were animists, others practiced ancestral veneration, still others were polytheist, and there were monotheists—notably, Muslims from Senegambia; many practiced a combination of these religious and spiritual practices.

As the historian Frederick Bowser describes in his classic study *The African Slave in Colonial Peru, 1524-1650*, African captives in Peru cleared land, laid the streets, carried supplies and built the churches, homes and palaces of the Spanish elite; indoors, they served as cooks, cleaners, nannies and domestic servants. Meanwhile, urban black labor ran much of Lima's daily business; Africans and their descendants worked as artisans, street vendors, bakers, water carriers, gardeners and fruit and vegetable sellers.

Their lives were in marked contrast to slaves working in the mountains. In the Andes, mortality rates among the enslaved black populations were especially high, the hope of freedom, especially dim. There, deep in the mines, overseers broke the backs and spirits of black people, maximizing the extraction of silver that fed the wealth of the Spanish empire.

And yet resistance to slavery, which began in western Africa, took place at every point in the slave-trading process: inland, at first point of contact, while on the forced marches to the coasts, while boarding the dreaded slave ships, on the high seas, and continuing in the Americas in the form of flight, feigning illness, destroying tools, setting fire to crops, and less frequently, armed revolt.

Men and women resisted slavery in a number of ways. Spanish archives are filled with such suggestions or explicit cases, the most common record being that of runaways: in 1595 one Domingo Biafara took flight for weeks at a time (his name indicating that he came from the Bight of Biafara—now in modern-day Nigeria); in 1645, Francisca Criolla was sold "without guarantee" because of her reputation for escaping. Official punishment for running away changed over time, but 100 lashes, to start with, was not uncommon.

While Lima may have had the largest concentration of Africans and their descendants in Peru, black and otherwise African-descended peoples were equally significant in other cities. For instance, as late as 1763, nearly one-third of the northern city of Trujillo and its immediate surroundings comprised people of African descent. In all, more than 100,000 West and West-Central Africans were forcibly taken to Peru.

Unlike the plight of Africans who ended up in the mountains, slavery in coastal urban Peru permitted a degree of social mobility. One particular kind of urban slave, the *jornalero*, a day worker who gave a portion of his earnings to his owner, worked with little or no supervision. Under such conditions, day workers were slowly able to save enough money to buy their

freedom and that of their loved ones—creating an ever-larger free population of African-descent in Lima.

The 19th-century Afro-Peruvian painter Pancho Fierro provides an invaluable glimpse into the lives of Afro-Limeneans. A painter as much as an ethnographer, in his paintings, he depicts daily scenes of the black, mulatto, *mestizo* (Indian-Spanish) and other racially-mixed people that formed the city's vibrant multi-racial, multi-ethnic fabric. (Over time a dizzying array of categories, *castas*, were created in Peru, defining racial combinations and boundaries.)

Linguistic analysis, as well as that of music, dance and religious practice, points to African and African-inspired influences in Peruvian culture and society. But it is also the case that Africans were themselves transformed by Spanish and indigenous peoples' traditions and practices. As Fierro's paintings make plain, Afro-Peruvians created new culture out of what they or their ancestors brought and what they encountered. Among the most notable manifestations are the celebrations "Amancaes" and "Pinkster," the latter being a kind of Mardi Gras coronation. The fusion of musical styles, dances and costumes speak to the syntheses of cultures in Peru.

Today there are an estimated three million Afro-Peruvians. This amounts to less than ten percent of the nation's total population—a significantly lower percentage than in the early colonial period. The ending of the slave trade (and therefore new Africans), the migration of indigenous peoples from the highlands to the coastal cities, and pressures to assimilate into the dominant society are all factors for the drop in the visible black population. Adding to this was the increase of new immigrant groups, including Chinese indentured laborers after the abolition of slavery in 1854, followed by Italian, German, Polish, Czech and Japanese immigrants.

An overriding reason for the lower visibility of Afro-Peruvians, however, is the ongoing glorification of Iberians and other white Europeans, accompanied by social and institutional forms of discrimination towards people of African-descent. In 2009 the Peruvian government issued a formal "apology to Afro-Peruvian people for the abuse, exclusion and discrimination perpetrated against them since the colonial era"—a symbolic gesture, but as the Afro-Peruvian artist-activist Mónica Carillo emphasizes, when it comes to being given equal treatment: "We do not ask, we demand; it is not a favor, it is our right." She and other Afro-Peruvians have used art as a means of documenting their history and living presence.

Afro-Peruvian music, dance and cuisine have become increasingly known (although not always produced on the terms of Afro-Peruvians themselves). *Manos Morenas* ("Black Hands") a *peña*, or restaurant with live music, was long a favorite site in the Barranco neighborhood of Lima featuring Afro-Peruvian music and cuisine—*comida criolla*.

In terms of dance, *landó*, with the powerful rhythmic sounds of *cajónes* (box-like wooden drums), has been popularized by the "queen of the *landó*," Eva Ayllón. This is a particularly elegant Afro-Peruvian music and dance form, which ethnomusicologists trace to the

Angolan *lundu*. It, like other genres of Afro-Peruvian music, such as *Festejo*, are an integral part of celebrations, including Independence Day (July 28) and Emancipation (December 3).

Perhaps no other person did more to bring Afro-Peruvian culture to public attention than the 20th-century musician and poet Nicomedes Santa Cruz (other cultural ambassadors would include the late Ronaldo Campos of the Afro-Peruvian musical ensemble *Perú Negro* and two-time Grammy Award-winning singer Susana Baca).

Despite increasing awareness of Afro-Peruvians, their history and challenges still tend to be left out of most narratives and characterizations of the nation, which minimize their contributions to the making of Peruvian society—an uneven fusion of multiple traditions, including Indian, African and Spanish traditions.

But, as is the case in the construction of all racial and ethnic identities, such terms are political in their origin. As the historian Rachel O'Toole argues in *Bound Lives: Africans, Indians, and the Making of Race in Colonial Peru*, Spanish authorities labeled diverse African populations as “Black” to denote an enslaved status while exacting tribute and labor from diverse indigenous communities or “Indians.” All-encompassing racial and ethnic identities, therefore, belie the complexity of our shared and diverse humanity and history.

Notwithstanding the limitations of racial identification, the lives of the painter of *El Señor de los Milagros*, the miracle-working of San Martín de Porres, the visual vignettes of Pancho Fierro, the music and poetry of Nicomedes Santa Cruz, and the social and political activism of Mónica Carillo, point to the multiple roles and contributions of people of African descent in the making and re-making of Peru.