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Blacks in Argentina: Disappearing Acts

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When songstress Josephine Baker visited Argentina in the 1950s she asked the biracial minister of public health Ramon Carillo, "Where are the Negroes?" to which Carillon responded laughing, "There are only two — you and I."

Scholars have long pondered the "disappearance" of people of African descent from Argentina, long considered South America's "whitest" nation. A 1973 article in *Ebony* asked, "what happened to Argentina's involuntary immigrants, those African slaves and their mulatto descendants who once outnumbered whites five to one, and who were for 250 years 'an important element' in the total population, which is now 97 percent white?"

One history book calls the country's lack of self-identifying black people "one of the most intriguing riddles in Argentine history," while another notes that "the disappearance of the Negro from the Argentine scene has puzzled demographers far more than the vanishing Indian." Was the Afro-Argentine community annihilated by disease and war, or absorbed into the larger white community?

Of course, whiteness itself is relative. Many Argentines who proudly consider themselves white come to America and are shocked to find that in American racial discourse they are considered "Latino," "Hispanic" or vaguely "Spanish," and not white. Says Paula Brufman, an Argentine law student and researcher, "Argentines like to think of themselves as a white nation populated by Europeans. I was surprised when in the US, people — especially Latinos — told me I was not white but Spanish."

Today in Argentina, there is a growing interest in the country's African past and Afro community, "la comunidad Afro," as it's called. The past decade

has seen black clubhouses, religious institutions and dance clubs crop up in the capital, Buenos Aires. A group called Africa Vive (Africa Lives), made up of Afro-Argentines, has spearheaded the campaign to raise awareness of the country's Afro-culture and history. At the Durban UN Conference on Racism, Africa Vive presented a widely circulated study about the socio-economic situation of Afro-Argentines. The report documented the high unemployment and difficulties with naturalization that many blacks in Argentina encounter.

"Minorities in Argentina — indigenous, Afro, etcetera — suffer from a problem of invisibility and poor organization," says Mercedes Boschi of the Buenos Aires City's Human Rights Commission, who worked with Africa Vive on the aforementioned report, as part of the municipal government's "Right to Identity" initiative.

So, how many people in Argentina today can claim African ancestry? The numbers are themselves difficult to calculate, says Alejandro Frigerio, an anthropologist at the Universidad Catolica de Buenos Aires. "People of mixed ancestry are often not considered black in Argentina, historically, because having black ancestry was not considered proper. Today the term 'negro' is used loosely on anyone with slightly darker skin, but they can be descendants of indigenous Indians, Middle Eastern immigrants. People in Africa Vive say there are a million 'afrodescendientes' in Argentina. Although many people are not aware that they may have had a black great-grandmother or -father, I think that this is an overestimation. I would estimate that there are 2 or 3 thousand Afro-Argentines, descendants of slaves, 'negros criollos,' 8 to 10 thousand in the Cape Verdean community, most born in Argentina, and I'd add another 1,200 Brazilian, Uruguayan, Cuban and African communities."

Created in 1996, Africa Vive has reached out to Afro-Argentine leaders with the aim of creating an organization that can battle poverty in Afro-Latino communities. It has single-handedly brought media and the mainstream's attention to the plight and legacy of Afro-Argentines.

"Different groups have emerged, including Grupo Cultural Afro and SOS Racismo, but Africa Vive is probably the most important group that has rekindled interest in things African in Argentina," says Frigerio. "It is the main group composed of Afro-Argentines, descendants of the original Afro-Argentine population. Africa Vive has successfully drawn the media's attention — they organized a conference against discrimination at the University of Buenos Aires in 1999, and were written up in an eight-page article in the daily *Clarín*. The article was significant because for the first time in almost thirty years, the term 'Afro-Argentine community' was used, instead of 'black' community."

Frigerio continues: "Last September, these black groups, led by Africa Vive, convinced a national deputy to organize a ceremony in memory of black soldiers who died fighting for Argentina's independence. The event took place in one of the traditional halls of the National Congress and was attended by the commander-in-chief of the army and the head of state. The national deputy spoke in honor of the fallen black soldiers and then awarded honorary degrees to the heads of several black organizations. It was quite remarkable that such an event could take place in Argentina."

War heroism, in fact, is one reason Argentina lags so far behind in recognizing its people of African descent. Even after the official abolition of slavery, many blacks were still slaves and were granted manumission only by fighting in Argentina's wars, serving disproportionately in the war of

independence against Spanish rule and border wars against Paraguay from 1865 to 1870. Blacks were also granted their freedom if they joined the army, but they were deliberately placed on the front line and used as cannon fodder. Historian Ysabelle Rennie notes that the government deliberately placed as many blacks as possible in "dangerous military service" and were sent into battle, "where they got killed off fighting Indians (another race Argentines were interested in exterminating.)"

Argentine sociologist Gino Germani chalks up the "disappearance" to racist immigration policies, saying that the nation's "primary and explicit objective" was to "modify substantially the composition of the population," to "Europeanize the Argentine population, produce a regeneration of races." Marvin A. Lewis, author of *Afro-Argentine Discourse: Another Dimension of the Black Diaspora*, concurs, saying that "there was an official, concerted effort to eliminate the blacks from Argentine society."

Many have argued that people of African descent simply "disappeared" by mingling into the waves of thousand of European immigrants. Argentine historian Mariano Bosch wrote in 1941 that Italian men had "perhaps an atavistic preference for black women: body odor led them to matrimony and the blacks accepted them as whites," or rather, "almost whites, because the Italian has much African in him, and his color is a dull pale."

"There is a silence about the participation of Afro-Argentines in the history and building of Argentina, a silence about the enslavement and poverty," adds Paula Brufman. "The denial and disdain for the Afro community shows the racism of an elite that sees Africans as undeveloped and uncivilized....The poverty in the Afro community was terrible. Although slavery was abolished in 1813, the death rate of freed blacks was always higher than that of white people and of slaves. Why is that? Because in Buenos Aires, slaves were very expensive, so the masters took real good care of them. Once a black got his freedom, his living standards collapsed even further."

The past few years, however, have seen a growing interest among young Argentines of all backgrounds in Afro-Argentine culture — in tango, the dance and music with such strong West African roots, and other dances such the milonga, the zamba and the malambo. For this, many thank immigrants from other parts of South America.

"Afro-Uruguayan and Afro-Brazilian migrants to Buenos Aires have been instrumental in expanding black culture — teaching Afro-Uruguayan candombe, Afro-Brazilian capoeira, orisha and secular dances to white Argentines," says Frigerio, who has written of various Afro-Argentine cultural movements, including dancing saloons owned by blacks, carnival societies and black newspapers. One such dancing saloon, "The Shimmy Club," was founded in 1922 and lasted until 1974.

Frigerio believes the newfound interest in Afro-Argentine culture is not only the result of immigration but also of a new state policy. In the 1970s and '80s, Argentina was ruled by a succession of military juntas who suppressed and almost eradicated black culture. "The military dictatorships from 1966 onwards prohibited or severely constrained the gathering of people in the street or in closed spaces — a practice which certainly negatively influenced carnivals, which almost disappeared; tango dancing, which died out until it was revitalized in the 1990s; and also black dance clubs such as The Shimmy Club. All genres of popular culture severely suffered during the dictatorships and many almost disappeared, but began resurfacing in the 1990s."

Still, he cautions against too much optimism regarding race in Argentina. "The new laws and institutes help celebrate ethnic diversity and help groups like Africa Vive emerge and operate," Frigerio says, "but they have not undermined the dominant national narrative of racial homogeneity and whiteness." While the racial situation is much better today than it was half a century ago — when a review of Josephine Baker's performance wrote of her "monkey rhythm" — Frigerio says that "today blacks are more exoticized than stigmatized.... What scholar Livio Sansone said of Brazil, we can say of Argentina: there are hard and soft areas of racism, or areas in which it may be advantageous or disadvantageous to be black. In Buenos Aires, being black is advantageous in finding a girl/boyfriend, but less so for finding a job, unless the person is a musician or dance professor."

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