1983

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Carla Mundt
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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AFRICAN INFLUENCE IN MEXICAN FOLKTALES

by

Carla Mundt
Despite the fact that many African slaves were brought to the New World, there have been very few studies done on how their presence affected and influenced the indigenous cultures. The studies that have been done concentrate on the areas where there was an extremely large Black population like Cuba and Brazil. Very little has been done in places like Mexico or Chile and those that have been done are often inaccurate. This paper is an elementary attempt to take a close look at how the importation of African slaves affected the culture of the New World.

There are a great many problems connected with doing any study of folklore, but especially one concerned with Negro influence on Spanish Latin American folktales. Very few studies have been done in this area and many say that what appears to be African influence is really European influence. This conclusion appears to have been affected by a certain amount of racist thinking even though it might have been unintentional. Many of these studies were done in the 1920's and 1930's before civil rights became an issue.

Another major problem connected with this topic is the lack of raw data. There are not that many collections of folktales from Latin America and those that exist have a built-in bias. Most of the ethnographers and folklorists were interested in
finding indigenous folktales and therefore concentrated their efforts in places with a large indigenous population, but the places with the smallest chance of receiving Negro influence. As a consequence, many tales which have African influence have been recorded.

Even if one has a large data base how can one tell if African elements are present in a folktale or if the motifs have an Indian origin? One would need to have thoroughly studied African and European literature to do so, but even folklorists who have spent their entire lives categorizing folklore motifs and their origins cannot agree on the origins of some Mexican motifs or if the reason for their presence is due to diffus parallelism.

Keeping these problems in mind this paper will attempt to demonstrate that the presence of African slaves in Mexico had an influence on the folklore there than previously thought. It will attempt to do this by isolating centers with substantial African populations and examining the frequency of tales with apparent African motifs in these centers.

The Black presence in the New World is almost as old as the Spaniards. Many of the first white men brought their Negroes from Spain some of whom were Black (Aguirre Beltran 1972). There is evidence that by 1503 Blacks had contact with the Indians, especially when doing work in the copper mines. These slaves,
were christianized and came from Spain or one of her island possessions. Although the slaves might have retained some of the folklore of their ancestral country, most had their roots in the Spanish culture. When the Spaniards became afraid that the christianized Blacks were stirring up trouble among the Indians and also realized that under some climatic conditions Blacks worked better than the native population, they started to directly import unchristianized Blacks from African around 1518. By the 1530s when licensing had become less strict, slaves were brought into all parts of Mexico. Some were sent to Mexico City and the Yucatan for common field and domestic work.

Vera Cruz was the main port of entry for most African slaves coming to Mexico but they were also brought to Campeche on the Yucatan and Acapulco on the Pacific coast. The great flow of African slaves to Mexico slowed down considerably around 1740. Mexico, who had been a big slave importer, had increased its own population so that there was not a large enough population of poor freemen who were willing to work cheaply which made it no longer necessary to import expensive African slaves (Auirre Beltran 1972).

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<th>BLACK POPULATIONS IN MEXICO</th>
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<td>Bishopric</td>
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(Ibid.)
These figures are only general and do not include run slaves, but it is possible to discern the largest population for Blacks in Mexico at this time. It is natural that Tlaxcala had the largest numbers of slaves; both were important cities and the bishoprics included part of the coastal area of Vera Cruz. Michoacan included a large portion of the Pacific coast including Acapulco, an important port. Nueva Galicia had a large territory north and northwest of Zacatecas and Guadalajara, which included the mining regions. To generalize, Blacks were most concentrated along the coasts and major population centers.

The large increase in the number of slaves which took place between 1570-1646 was due to the great increase in the importation of African slaves. The population drop which took place between 1646-1742 reflects the slowing down of Black importation and increased use of the poor freeman.

Before one can look for African influences in Mexican folklore it is necessary to know something about African folklore itself. There are basically six types of folktales: (1) Trickster tales usually involve an animal such as a spider, hare or turtle which defeats its usually physically stronger adversary by wit and cunning. Sometimes the trickster can be extremely cruel with their pranks often for no apparent reason. These tricksters are seen as culture heroes because of their ability to defeat their adversaries by cunning instead
physical force. This is a trait highly valued among many African groups.

Explanatory tales describe how things came to be; they serve as a means to pass on tribal beliefs and traditions. One example is "Why Man Dies Instead of Having Eternal Life." This happened because God sent his animal messenger to Man with the message that Man would live forever. But on the way the animal became confused and changed the message so that he told Man that he would die. That is why Man does not live forever.

The third type of tale describes the relationship between Man and animals. These tales usually involve a person who helped or was helped by a friendly animal. This genre seems to be a reflection of the relationship that some tribes have with the animal kingdom and how the relationship is necessary to their existence (Feldman 1963).

One of the most interesting types of tales is the dilemma tale. These tales pose a problem then leave a choice for the listeners. Some tales have a correct answer, but often they do not and will provoke a debate among the listeners. One example which also has a Mexican counterpart is about a princess who will marry the man who brings her the rarest thing in the world. Three brothers go out and find a magic telescope, carpet and apple. With the magic telescope they see that she is dying, with the carpet they fly to her quickly and with the magic apple they cure her. The tale ends by asking which one she should marry. The answer would be found by debate among the listeners (Dorson 1972).

Myths are tales about the various gods and their relation to one another. Stories about creation and the establishment of
order in the universe are also included in this category. Of these tales are similar to Greek, Roman and Biblical myths, but others are unique. One creation story says that God created Woman. When He found out that she was lonely He "created Man (Clarke 1958). This is an interesting story in that it is completely opposite from the traditional Biblical version of creation.

The fifth type of tale is the retribution tale which describes how an evil person is punished for his deeds while a good person in rewarded. These tales usually have a moral and sometimes serve as an indirect means to criticize some unacceptable conduct without publicly embarrassing him. Retribution tales are also a means for the tribe to teach their children while at the same time reinstructing the elder (Feldman 1963).

One African motif type which is very common and popular in Mexico is the "tar-baby" story. This involves a rabbit or another animal being caught by means of a doll figure covered by a substance. The rabbit usually manages to escape, many times by tricking another animal, often a coyote, into taking his place. The following is a summary of a Mazatec version of this type of story from Oaxaca. It is unusual in that the rabbit is killed.

An old lady went to her bean patch and found that a rabbit had eaten it. She was going to court to complain when she met a man on the way who was also going to court. He told her to take a wax figure, put a piece of bread in its hand and stick it in the middle of the road. The rabbit came along, saw the figure and said "Buenos dias negrito". The figure did not respond so
slapped it with his paw which stuck fast. He got mad and hit it with his other paw so that both of his paws were stuck to the figure. He kept on kicking until his whole body was stuck. When the old woman returned and found him stuck to the wax figure she killed him (Bassett Johnson 1940).

There has been much disagreement as to the origin and spread of the "tar-baby" tale. Variations of it are found in the Americas, Africa and Europe, but it is most common in Africa and the Americas. A.M. Espinosa has spent many years of his life collecting variations of the story in Spanish America and the Iberian peninsula. He believes the theory that the tale originated in India, spread to Europe and Africa, and from these places to the New World. The wide presence of this tale in Mexico is attributed to the Spaniards not to the African slaves despite the tale's great popularity in that country (Espinosa 1930).

Sometimes the "tar-baby" tale is the first in a string of tales where one animal, usually a rabbit, repeatedly dupes another animal. The individual stories in these strings are recombined with other trickster stories to form different sequences. The following summary involves the rabbit (conejo) and the coyote who are the most common animals found in these trickster sequences.

Tio Conejo has been eating a farmer's field so the farmer makes a tarbaby. The rabbit is captured by the tarbaby and the farmer takes him home and hangs him up so he can boil him. Tio Coyote walks by and the rabbit persuades him to trade places. The
farmer takes the coyote and throws him in the pot of boi. He manages to escape and goes to look for the rabbit. The farmer takes the coyote and throws him in the pot of boi. He manages to escape and goes to look for the rabbit. He finds him sitting on a cactus eating prickly pears and tells him he is going to eat him. Tio Conejo begs the coyote not to eat him and says he will feed him prickly pears. Tio Coyote opens mouth for the fruit, but instead he gets a mouthful of spines. The rabbit runs away. Looking for Tio Conejo he finds a rock which the rabbit tells him to hold so the world will end. He finally tires of waiting for the rabbit and throws the rock down. When he again finds Tio Conejo, Tio Coyote is into holding a wasp's nest and gets stung. Tio Conejo tells coyote that his brother is getting married and asks him to an instrument while the rabbit gets a chicken for the feast. The rabbit sets fire to the grass around Tio Coyote and he gets burned. Finally, the coyote finds Tio Conejo by a lake with reflection of the moon. The rabbit tells the coyote that the reflection is a piece of cheese. In his attempt to get the Tio Coyote is drowned (Paredes 1943).

All the motifs found in the previous summary are very in African tales. Trickster tales, especially those involving rabbit and coyote, are very popular in Mexican folklore. There are two stories collected from an area very near Vera Cruz. They are almost undistorted versions of African tales and as examples of Mexican trickster tales which are not as widespread as the Tio-Conejo and the Tio Coyote versions.
Toad challenges Rabbit to a race. Toad puts 500 of his relatives in a straight line along a course. Since Rabbit always believes that Toad is in front of him, Toad wins the race (Boas 1912).

Rabbit tricks Alligator into taking him across the river then runs to his house to sell his corn. Tia Cockroach comes for her corn but Rabbit suggests they eat first. He sees Tia Hen and tells the cockroach to hide so Tia Hen will not eat her. Tia Hen comes for her corn and Rabbit asks if she would like to eat a cockroach. She eats Tia Cockroach then herself must hide because Tio Dog is coming. The process is repeated with the dog and the lion who is shot by the hunter. Rabbit then runs away (Ibid.).

Not all tales of African influence are of the trickster type, though this type seems to be prevalent. Following is a summary of a tale from the state of Jalisco which is very similar to the one given as an example of African dilemma tales.

Each of three princes falls in love with an orphan girl. They are commanded by the king to seek each one a marvelous object and he who brings back the best can have the girl as his wife. One of the three princes gets a magic sheet, another a magic mirror, and another a magic club. The girl dies, her death is witnessed in the magic mirror, the three princes fly to her side on the magic sheet, and she is restored to life by the magic club. Unable to decide who deserves the girl, the king commands that each one shoot an arrow at a mark, but, since none of the princes can hit the mark, no one marries the girl (Wheeler 1943).

The final test of shooting an arrow at a mark to decide who wins the girl and the king's decision that no one gets the girl is not commonly found in dilemma tales, but the rest is very typical of Africa.
Some of the collections from Mexico included tales with morality and retribution. The following tale also included the motif of the younger son beating his older brothers, a motif found in African folklore.

A man had three sons. The eldest one said, "Dad, I'm going to look for my fortune." He came across an old man (God) and asked him if there was any work to do. God said yes that he would talk to the nuns. The boy came to a red river, became frightened and threw the letter in the water. He returned so he had delivered the letter. God asked if he wanted money as payment. The boy replied, "money," so God gave him a magic napkin which could produce riches and food. The second son, the luck of his brother, also went to find his fortune. He did like his brother, throwing the letter into the river and receiving a magic trunk in answer to his request for money as payment. The youngest one went out and delivered the letter after seeing marvelous things. When he returned from his task, God inquired if he would like grace or money. The boy asks for grace so he is given a crucifix which delivers two things every day and the boy is content. One day the brothers are and an old man with ulcers wrapped in a sheet comes to the door. The two eldest brothers are disgusted but the youngest gives old man food. God (the old man) rewards the youngest by taking him to heaven and leaves the two brothers with a snake in the and food full of grubs (Boas 1912).

The crucifix and being rewarded by being taken to heaven obviously reflect the influence of Spanish Catholicism, but the
basic story of a younger brother being rewarded for doing a good deed is common among the people on the West Coast of Africa (Clarke 1958).

We have seen how there was a substantial Black population in colonial Mexico especially along the coastal regions, central Mexico and Oaxaca. It has also been shown how many of the tales from these same regions have motifs which are typically African and that a few tales are almost identical to certain African folk-tales. A.M. Espinosa said that the "tarbaby" tale came from Spain and not Africa. Franz Boas believed that much of the Spanish American folklore and American Negro folklore was derived from Spanish sources. He attributes many of the tales found in Africa to the Portuguese because of their early presence in the continent. As for the "tarbaby" story he agrees that it originally had an East Indian origin which spread to both Europe and Africa, but that its presence in the New World was caused by the Spaniards (Boas 1912).

I strongly disagree with both of these men. Both have ignored the influence of the importation of African slaves to Mexico and overemphasized European influence in Africa. Boas believed that many tales were brought to Africa from Portugal. What he forgot was that Africans had been present in Spain at least since the Moorish invasions in 711. There were also a large number of slaves brought into Sevilla and Lisbon during colonial times for the purpose of export. Hernando de Ochoa wrote in 1552 of Lisbon, "The slaves go about all parts; I am tempted to believe that they are
more numerous in Lisbon than the Portuguese freemen" (Agostinho Beltran 1972). It seems more reasonable to believe that Africans may have influenced the Iberian peninsula and that stories which are found there may have originally come from Africa and are not indigenous to the peninsula. This seems even more probable when one looks at the number of variations of the "baby" story found in Africa, the New World, Spain and Portugal. Both Africa and the New World have over a hundred variations. Spain has nine and Portugal has two (Espinosa 1945). It is therefore more logical to believe that a tale originated in the place where there are more variations.

Further evidence that many folktales in Mexico have African origins is provided by the distribution of these tales. Many tales which appear to be like African tales occur in the regions where Black slaves were most numerous. The presence of African-like tales in regions where there were no Blacks can be explained by the Blacks' contact with the Indians. It has been documented that Blacks in the Southeastern United States had contact with the Indians and introduced some of their folklore (Dundes 1965). Blacks had earlier and more widespread contact with the Mexican Indians; undoubtedly these tribes learned new tales from them and then passed them on to other tribes who may never have had a Black slave. This accounts for tales like Tio Conejo and Tlaloc Coyote in places like Sonora where there were few if any African slaves. In the case of Sonora, the tale could have diffused from the Southeastern United States or else over from the California Coast where there were many slaves.
From the previous evidence it appears that Mexican folktales may have received their African influence at first from Spanish-speaking Blacks. Later on, there was stronger influence from the directly imported slaves. There is no substantial evidence that demonstrates Spanish roots in these tales although the Spaniards influenced the majority of Mexican folklore.

There are two alternate possibilities for these tales' presence in Mexico. One is that these tales are of Indian origin instead of African. This is very unlikely because it does not account for the regionalism of the tales nor for their widespread distribution in Africa. The second possibility is that these tales are a product of parallelism. This is equally unlikely because the chances are very low that several different stories will have similar versions in Mexico and Africa. Parallelism could account for the popularity of the hare as a trickster because many tribes did have a hare in their folklore which was a trickster figure, and they may have found the African versions especially appealing because of this. But this does not account for stories or entire strings of stories being almost the same in both places.

In conclusion, this study is an elementary attempt to show how African slaves have affected the folklore of the New World, especially Mexico. There is still a great deal of work which needs to be done in collecting, transcribing and finding the origins of these folktales. Care should be taken so that this research is done with an open, unbiased and non-racist attitude.
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