

A

VISUAL

ESSAY

BLACK GUATEMALA





AFRICANS IN GUATEMALA

African presence in Guatemala dates to Spanish colonization. Enslaved Africans labored in the mines, agriculture, and households of Santiago de Guatemala as early as the 1560s.

Historian Robinson A. Herrera documents free and enslaved Black people filling nearly every role in the colonial city, semi-skilled domestics, trained artisans, overseers of cacao lands, working alongside and between Spaniards and Indigenous peoples. Their presence is documented in land sales, criminal cases, and testaments.



THE GARIFUNA

A separate Black Indigenous people arrived on Guatemala's coast over two centuries later.

In 1797, the British exiled the Garífuna, descendants of Africans and Carib and Arawak peoples from the island of St. Vincent, to Roatán, off Honduras.

From there they spread along the Central American coast, founding Livingston, known as Labuga in Garífuna, one of Guatemala's major Black settlements.

THE GARIFUNA



WHO BELONGED IN THE NATIONAL STORY

As Guatemala moved toward independence, national identity increasingly centered on mestizaje, the mixture of European and Indigenous ancestry, while African ancestry was pushed to the margins.

Historian Paul Lokken's research on colonial Guatemala found that free and enslaved Black people used marriage, militia service, and the courts to reclassify themselves out of the tribute-paying "mulato" category and into the broader category of gente ladina, a category that in our modern era means there is no African ancestry at all.

RECOVERING THE NATIONAL STORY



A WAR THAT LEFT THEM OFF THE RECORD

Guatemala's civil war, 1960 to 1996, is remembered as a war against Maya and Ladino Guatemalans. In Livingston, young Garífuna men were also forcibly conscripted into the military, and some were killed.

Yet the UN-backed Commission for Historical Clarification, which documented the war for its landmark 1999 report, ran outreach campaigns in nine Mayan languages and none in Garífuna.

Their testimony was left out of the country's own reckoning with its past.



LEGAL RECOGNITION, DECADES LATER

In 1995, the Garífuna won legal status as one of Guatemala's Indigenous peoples under the Agreement on Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples, a year before peace accords formally ended the war.

Guatemala now recognizes four peoples: the Ladino majority, and three Indigenous peoples, Maya, Xinca, and Garífuna.



WHY IS THIS HISTORY DIFFICULT TO FIND?

The limited recognition of Black Guatemalan history does not mean African-descended people were absent. Colonial records document their presence directly.

But over centuries, several forces worked against remembering it: racial classifications shifted, mestizaje absorbed African ancestry into a broader Ladino identity, and 19th-century scientific racism actively encouraged forgetting African origins in the historical record.

Even in the 20th century, a truth commission built to document a genocide had no plan in place to hear from one of the country's own Black communities.

FORGOTTEN



STILL HERE

Guatemala's National Garífuna Day, held every November 26, draws Garífuna home from New York, Miami, and Los Angeles.

The DIBASEI Garífuna Cultural Center in Livingston keeps running educational programs and community events. In 1995, young Garífuna professionals founded ONEGUA, the Organización Negra Guatemalteca; one of its founders, Mario Ellington, became the first Garífuna law graduate of the University of San Carlos and later Guatemala's Deputy Minister of Culture.

My research makes me conclude that Black Guatemalan history was pushed to the margins but it is resilient and is still being written by the people who lived it.

RESEARCH



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