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Authors	Weik, Terrance
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Mexico's *Cimarron* Heritage and Archaeological Record

By Terrance Weik

Introduction

Little research has been conducted on the archaeology of the African Diaspora in Latin America (Castano 2000; Schavelzon 1999; Singleton 2001; Weik 2004). Mexico is one area that could rapidly help fill this research void, with its numerous plantations and free Afro-Mexican towns. *Cimarrones* (known as maroons in English), Africans who escaped from slavery, present archaeologists with opportunities to examine social and cultural transformations that resulted from the Transatlantic Slave trade. Investigations of *Cimarrones* allow us to examine the complexities of human organization, survival strategies, resistance to slavery and racism, and colonial period interactions. Studying *Cimarrones* also provide an opportunity to understand experiences of (self) emancipated Africans, who receive less attention than enslaved Africans in archaeological research on the African Diaspora. Interesting parallels and connections can be found in antislavery resistance occurring in places as far apart as the Southeastern U.S. and Mexico. A few preliminary archaeological studies have explored the emergence of small towns on the Texas-Mexico border during the 19th century, where *Cimarrones* and Native Americans clashed and collaborated near settlements such as Bracketteville and Nacimiento. Further south, in the state of Veracruz, brief field research conducted during the summer of 2003 has documented the modern pueblos of Amapa and Yanga, which contain material culture, structures

and traditions that relate to 17th to 19th century Cimarron history. This paper describes some of the evidence that was encountered and the potential these places hold for future research.

African Seminole Maroons on the Anglo-Spanish Frontier of the Southeast & Southwest

African sailors, soldiers, domestic servants, slaves, and guides accompanied European colonists on their earliest expeditions to North America (Dubois 1915: 160-161). Enslaved Africans rebelled and escaped from early Spanish settlements. By the late 17th century, some Africans that fled English enslavement in the Carolinas were able to obtain asylum in Spanish Florida, in exchange for their conversion to Catholicism and their service in the defense of the colony against Anglo- and French forces. A number of enslaved Africans fled to Native American territory, as opposed to building Euro-American alliances, resulting in the formation of new societies. Florida's African Seminole, a group of Maroons and people of African-Native American parentage, lived at a settlement called Abraham's Old Town or Pilaklikaha (1813-1836). Archaeological research suggests that they engaged in regional exchanges and that most of their bowls and cookwares fit the Seminole Indian potting tradition (Weik 2007). Africans and Seminole Indian regional interactions were varied, and included tribute, slavery, kinship, and military alliances. Pilaklikaha's 100 residents lived in timber, thatch, and daub buildings. By 1835, a war between U.S. and Seminole forces erupted in the wake of Euro-American encroachment on Seminole territory. The Seminole were forced to leave Florida in 1842, after a bitter seven-year struggle. As a result of slave raids and wars with the U.S., African and Seminole people went to Oklahoma, Texas, and Mexico. An exception is a group of African Seminole who fled to the Bahamas after a previous U.S. military invasion in 1817.

During the 1840s, John Horse, a Florida native of African and Seminole Indian parentage, led 1000 of his peers into Oklahoma. Horse's group established settlements at Canadian Fork and Wewoka (Mulroy 1993, 2004; Schwartz 1975: 38-40, 60). African Seminole built houses, cleared land, and planted corn in these locations. By 1850, John Horse and a Seminole Indian leader called Wildcat led Africans and Seminole into Mexico. They fled pressure from pro-slavery forces in Indian Territory and the powerful political interference enacted by the Muskogean ("Creek Indians") in Oklahoma. The Mexican government welcomed the African and Indian Seminoles. However, the newcomers were required to serve in borderland military expeditions against Texas, U.S. and indigenous raiders. African Seminole maroons and Seminole Indians from Florida joined Kickapoo Indians and Texas maroons in forming a 19th century Mexican community called Nacimiento. This settlement is located in what is today the state of Coahuila, Mexico.

While out west, African Seminoles' material culture, social composition, and cultural practices had to change or transform to accommodate new circumstances. For instance, the timber and thatch cabins that they built in Florida, gave way to adobe and thatch-covered, "chink" houses in the West. Chink houses had double frames of wood that are packed with a mix of clay, pebbles and rocks (Boteler-Mock and Davis 1997). During a brief visit to Nacimiento, I observed a blend of cinderblock, clapboard and adobe buildings. These architectural forms hint at ongoing architectural changes that parallel other long-term transformations in the community, such as out migration and worsening relations with neighboring Kickapoo Indians. The remoteness and harshness of the location have prevented the town from growing much above 100 people. Herb Eling, a U.S. archaeologist who works for INAH, Coahuila, has conducted limited site location surveys around Nacimiento (Eling, personal

communication 2003). The highly mobile Cimarrones and border scouts left few material traces in the camps that have been archaeologically surveyed.

After the Civil War was over in the U.S., a segment of African Seminole returned to the United States, where they lived at forts or towns in Oklahoma and Texas. At Fort Clarke, Texas, (1840 to 1914), African Seminole served the U.S. cavalry in its battles against the indigenous groups such as the Apache. Shirley Boteler-Mock's oral histories are helping to balance male-centric oral and written histories concerning the area. Mike Davis' brief archaeological survey of Fort Clarke uncovered house foundations, bottle glass, and metal fragments. The ephemeral nature of their settlements has impeded the development of this type of research throughout the hemisphere (Boteler-Mock and Davis 1997).

The Florida African Seminole legacy is carried on by descendants in the West. For example I interviewed a woman in Del Rio, Texas (2001), whose maiden-name is July. The surname July was derived from a Florida ancestor whose first name was "July." Some current descendants claim a lineage leading directly from this leader at Pilaklikaha (Porter 1996: 100; Rivers and Brown 1997). Oral histories collected in by late historian Kenneth Porter make reference to July's descendants (e.g. Sampson July), and how their ancestor's first name became a surname in Texas and Mexico (Porter n.d.). Descendants hold festivals and tell oral histories that commemorate African Seminole survival and the skills they exhibited in agriculture, warfare, and rural life. The future existence of African Seminole groups is threatened by out migration, assimilation into mainstream societies, and lack of interest by many young people. The politics of these localities has prevented me from pursuing further research at this time. For example, Fort Clarke is now a country club. They allow visitors at certain times and permit African Seminole commemorative events.

Cimarrones in Veracruz, Mexico

In order to understand the full scope of life in free and enslaved Afro-Mexican communities, their development in more southern regions must be assessed (Aguirre Beltran 1946). In the state of Veracruz some of the earliest examples of slavery and rebellion in the Americas emerged in the sugar plantation zone (Garcia Bustamante 1988). From 1521-1639, Mexico received half the bond persons shipped to the Spanish colonies, and many of the enslaved people sent to the Americas. Around 150,000 people were shipped to Mexico by 1650 (Palmer 1976, 1993). Mexico participation in African enslavement was minor compared to later Caribbean and South American slavery. However, by the end of the 18th century, hundreds of thousands of people of African descent were in Mexico. These Afro-Mexicans mainly served as domestics, mineworkers, ranch-hands, and sugar cultivators. A significant number of freed persons labeled “Negro” and “mulatto” also comprised Mexico’s later colonial population. By 1829, slavery was abolished in Mexico. Like Africa and Canada, Mexico became a destination for people of African descent fleeing 19th century U.S. slavery and racism. For example, Luis Fouche, a free black man from Florida, was granted land for 100 families by the government of Vera Cruz. He established a colony that was called “Eureka” (Schwartz 1975: 40).

Like other parts of the world, Mexican *Cimarrones* emerged wherever Africans were enslaved. Generalizations about *Cimarrones* are hard to make: they escaped alone or in groups; all age groups escaped; they were both skilled and field laborers; some were Creole and others African-born. Most *Cimarrones* escaped for brief periods, before returning or being recaptured. Some formed long or short-term communities. Those who were able to resist most effectively, ran to the mountainous areas. Different methods were devised to stop African escape and

rebellion, such as multicultural slave-catching expeditions or horrific torture. These strategies failed to completely stop resistance and rebellion during the slavery period (1500s-1829).

I visited the west-central part of Veracruz in 2003, in order to gain a sense of the nature of the archaeological record of the slave and *Cimarron* populations. My study area encompassed the zone between the city of Cordoba and the town of Amapa. By the 18th century, there were 17 haciendas, 149 ranchos, and 1200 enslaved Africans near Cordoba (Naveda Chavez-Hita 1988). Amapa was more of a frontier area in the 1700s. During my 2003 trip, most places were visited for a day, during which time general surface remnants of buildings and artifacts were noted and pictures were taken. Landowner permission had to be obtained while in the field. Local scholars and officials were consulted. I obtained the assistance of INAH (Mexico's National Institute of Archaeology and History) archaeologists in Veracruz. Although my communications with INAH staff were largely logistical, I had hoped that they would contribute to the increasing dialogue between Mexican and U.S. archaeologists over the last few years (Sebastian 2007: 11-13). Out of respect for Mexican laws – which force foreign scholars to analyze artifacts inside Mexico – I analyzed artifacts as they were encountered, and then left them in place. No collections were made because my goal was to assess the potential of the archaeological record for future research.

Three of Veracruz' rural slaveholding estates were visited during my trip: Senora de la Concepcion, San Joachim, and Palmillas. Churches, storage buildings, walls, work yards, fields, estate houses and enslaved laborer quarters were observed. The buildings in these photos are in need of more detailed archival research and excavations so that dating and contemporaneity can be established. Africans fled from enslavement on plantations like these for a variety of reasons.

Besides the realities of captivity and separation from Africa, enslaved people fled because of abuse, harsh labor requirements, and their desires for freedom.

An African from the Bram cultural group named Yanga led a group of Cimarrones to freedom in an area south of Cordoba by the 16th century (Aguirre Beltran 1988; Herrera Moreno 1988 Sanchez de Anda 1998; Winfield Capitaine 1988, 1992). Yanga's settlement included West Africans and Angolans. Their mountain settlement included religious structures and 70 houses. Their society had a sexual division of labor where men provided labor for defense, construction, and hunting. Women did the primary child raising and agricultural duties. Crops grown by Cimarrones in the area included banana, maize, beans, squash, potatoes, and cotton. Chickens and other livestock were raised in Cimarron settlements. By 1609, Spanish officials ceased their attempts to destroy Yanga's group, and offered them peace under a treaty that gave them a royal license to form a town. The settlement became known as San Lorenzo de los Negros; it was later transplanted nearby. Today, in the modern pueblo of Yanga, there are occasional festivals celebrating Cimarron heritage (Aguirre Beltran 1990). Physical evidence of Yanga's original mountain enclave and the original settlement called San Lorenzo have not been located through archaeological research.

Amapa is another settlement in the region that was established by Cimarrones who signed treaties with the Spaniards. A significant documentary record exists for Amapa that allows glimpses into the changes in society over time (Corro 1952; Taylor 1970; Winfield Capitaine 1992). They agreed to terms similar to those offered to Cimarron communities in places like Fort Mose (Florida), which required them to return future Cimarrones to slavery, convert to Catholicism, and serve defensive forces against Spanish enemies. By the 1760s, 33 houses and church existed at Amapa (Pereira 1994: 103). From 1743 to 1827, the population increased from

23 to 148 (Carroll 1977: 500). A shift in the male to female ratio suggests that a self-reproducing population emerged by the 19th century. Oral history has been collected among the few elders that remain. I met one elderly descendant who told me he was nearly 100 years old and was a direct descendant of the Cimarron town founders.

My field observations at Amapa focused on surface-level material culture having temporally or culturally diagnostic characteristics related to the town's 18th and 19th century occupations. Most surface observations were done in the public areas and central streets of the town, or in the yards of an elder and a merchant that I interviewed. This observed area and the few artifacts that are described below, constitute a quite small portion of the overall surface area and assemblage related to the historic town. The judgmental sample of artifacts that were noted includes English ceramics, clear glass medicine bottle shards, dark green beverage bottle shards, unidentified metal fragments, and thin red-brown brick. A number of 18th and 19th century potsherds belong to the Majolica pottery traditions of Puebla, Mexico City, or Oaxaca. The Majolica sherds had blue and white, polychrome, or Green and White hand-painted coloration (see Mexican Majolica discussions in Deagan 1987, Lister and Lister 1974, and Charlton and Fournier 1993: 209-218). The surfaces had clear glazes. The pastes were pink or orange. Few hand painted English pearl wares or semiporcelainous wares were present.

A church appears to be the only 18th century structure that still exists at Amapa. According to residents, the government altered the church by adding concrete to it decades ago. The church's bell is locked in a storage room of an abandoned structure. Most current buildings are made of cinderblock and corrugated metal roofs, although a number have thatched roofs. Many modern homes may be located on top of 18th and 19th century structures that appear on an 18th century map and church records. Prior to the 20th century, buildings were mainly

constructed of timber and thatch roofs (Winfield Capitaine 1992: 14). The mountain enclaves – located in a nearby area known as “Mandingo” – that were precursors to Amapa have yet to be located, but topographic maps suggest enticing possibilities in the realm of toponymic evidence. Place names on these maps such as *palenque* (the Spanish colonial word for runaway slave town) and *Cimarron* identify hilltops and streams in the region.

Conclusion

My brief field season in Cuahuila and Western Veracruz suggest that there is great potential to study Mexican *palenques*, plantations, and free towns. This research could help us understand the transition from more autonomous mountain Maroon enclaves to more interdependent colonial pueblo life. Clues to the mundane aspects of *Cimarron* daily life are also present in some of these physical remains. Great comparisons can be made in the future with similar archaeological sites such as Fort Mose, Florida or Mooretown Jamaica. Important strides are being made across the country to bring to light the long-neglected Afro-Mexican heritage (see the work of Price et al 2006). Scholars and descendants in communities such as Cuijla, and in the states of Veracruz, Guerrerro and Oaxaca are ensuring that Afro-Mexican struggles in slavery and in freedom are not forgotten (Silva Castillo 2007: 122).

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