

Afro-Mexican Women of El Coyolillo: Bodies, Dance, and Resistance

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Abstract

The article analyzes the participation of Afro-Mexican women in the carnival of El Coyolillo, through their bodily experiences in three domains: the challenge to gender mandates in the context of their participation in the organization and dances of the carnival, the reappropriation of non-hegemonic beauty as racial vindication and resistance, and as custodians of Afro-descendant gastronomic memory, activities that they embody in the name of cultural tradition. A qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews, and participant observation were used in the 2024 and 2025 carnivals. The analysis was conducted from the perspective of anti-racist feminism. From the conclusions, it stands out that the work of Afro-Mexican women is substantive for the carnival festivities, their participation implies the appropriation of spaces for the vindication of black identity and resistance to sexism and structural racism, but it also entails a greater workload, physical exhaustion, and less available time.

Introduction

The carnival in Mexico constitutes a collective act of festive character; it is a space where communities express their history, cultural practices, and forms of social organization. In regions with Afro-Mexican presence, such as in some municipalities of Veracruz, the festivity becomes a territory of memory, resistance, and identity reaffirmation. Within these dynamics, the involvement of women has been fundamental, although frequently invisibilized by official discourses and sometimes, by studies on the carnival itself.

In Mexico, several studies have explored the symbolism and rituality of carnivals from an anthropological and sociological perspective, however, few have addressed the intervention and experience of women, taking into account the bodily commitment in the necessary and indispensable activities for the realization of the festivity. From an Afro-feminist reading, bodily commitment implies recognizing the body as a political territory, where coloniality is inscribed; it is to dispute bodily control, it is the act of thinking, feeling, and fighting from and with the body, as a territory of knowledge and transformation.

The carnival festivity is a space of knowledge, with the potential for change, reappropriation, struggle, and overcoming of gender roles and stereotypes. In Argentina, for example, there are *murgas* (groups that express themselves through dance, singing, music, and acting) exclusively composed of women: many of them are lyricists, directors, and drummers, occupying places that had been associated with masculinities during a large part of the *murga's* history. In Barranquilla, Colombia, there is a strong incorporation of women in the organization of carnivals, as directors of dance groups, choreographers, makeup artists, designers; that is, they are located in vital tasks for the continuity of the cultural tradition.

In Mexico, in the municipality of Tepoztlán, Morelos, Alberti and Nava (2020) record a greater presence of women as *chinelas* during the carnival. The authors understand the carnival as a liminal space in the sense proposed by Victor Turner (1974, 1982), as a moment of partial suspension of the everyday social order where certain hierarchies and roles can be temporarily inverted or renegotiated. From this perspective, liminality does not imply a permanent structural transformation, but a symbolic opening that allows occupying positions of leadership, visibility, and agency that, at other times of the year, may be restricted. They use the concept of liminality in a situated way to think about how racialized corporalities and the festive expressions of the carnival negotiate visibility, power, and belonging within unequal social structures.

The carnival is an expressive space that allows people through the body, dance, costumes, and disguises to reappropriate and resignify their presence and power in everyday life. Both Turner and Bajtin warn that the subversive character of the carnival is temporary and symbolic; liminality finally leads to reintegration into the social structure, while the apparent freedom of the carnival can coexist with oppressive contexts.

In this sense, studying the participation of Afro-Mexican women in Mexican carnivals allows us to understand how cultural practices, power relations, and historical processes that have marked Afro-descendant communities are articulated. Likewise, it offers a broader reading on the ways in which women exercise cultural agency, challenge stereotypes, and turn the body into a space of pride and aesthetics. Analyzing their participation implies recognizing them as creators, bearers, and transformers of tradition, not just as secondary figures within the festive ritual.

This study focuses on the community of El Coyolillo, belonging to the municipality of Actopan, Veracruz. A locality known for its carnival of African roots, which according to the inhabitants themselves, is more than 180 years old. This festivity celebrates the freedom of slaves of African origin, thereby conferring a sense of collectivity and social cohesion. In this space of "transitory liberation and the abolition of rules", male performance is favored, as the male body is the central figure of the carnival, while women engage in activities considered secondary, carried out in the private or domestic space, but which are indispensable.

In recent years, Afro-Mexican women of El Coyolillo have begun to occupy spaces of leadership and visibility. The transformations in El Coyolillo are also related to the strengthening of the Afro-Mexican movement during recent decades. The struggles driven by Afro-descendant organizations in Veracruz, Oaxaca, and Guerrero have contributed to making visible demands for constitutional recognition, political representation, and valorization of Afro-descendant cultures. In this context, many women have participated in processes of identity legitimation linked to Afro hair, gastronomy, dance, and the recovery of community memories, articulating ethnic-racial and gender demands.

The objective of this article is to analyze the participation of Afro-Mexican women in the carnival of El Coyolillo; the first part analyzes the participation of women in the public space: in the carnival organizing committee and their intervention as disguised figures (a local category used for those who wear a mask and traditional costume), which represents a challenge to gender mandates. Next, the reappropriation and validation of non-hegemonic beauty is described, through presence in the royal court and African dances, to culminate with the recognition of Afro cuisine through the election of the queen of gastronomy; these three areas question the coloniality of being, knowledge, and gender.

Conclusions

Based on the results presented, it can be stated that the participation of Afro-Mexican women in the carnival of El Coyolillo constitutes a partial transgression of gender mandates, as it allows them to leave the domestic space and occupy places historically reserved for men, such as organization, the use of traditional costumes and masks as disguised figures, as well as the appropriation of public space through dance, symbolic representation through the aesthetic vindication of black bodies, and the preservation of gastronomic knowledge.

By joining the carnival's organizing committee and disguising themselves with traditional costumes and horned masks, women challenge gender stereotypes regarding the assignment of domestic space as the place for women. By participating in the royal court and dancing African dances using their bodies with

energy and vitality, women reaffirm that aesthetics is also political and a form of resistance against racial stereotypes that confine them to hypersexualization or exoticism.

Similarly, by protecting and transmitting their ancestral knowledge of gastronomy, they preserve Afro-descendant identity, and by recovering the experiences, practices, and representations of women in the carnival, situated knowledge and resistance to colonialism and patriarchy are recognized. Although these transgressions occur within a liminal and temporal space, they allow Afro-Mexican women to resignify black bodies in the face of *mestizaje* policies that have tried to erase the "black vein".

Although these practices expand the margins of female participation, they do not necessarily imply a permanent structural transformation of gender inequalities within the community. However, for many women, this effort also represents a way to preserve and transmit the tradition of the carnival and reaffirm their Afro-descendant identity. The carnival of El Coyolillo can also be understood as a political stage where women reclaim the right to exist, to narrate themselves, and to be seen from their own perspective and corporalities.