

Perception of Commemorations in Guatemalan History, Bicentennials of 1823 and 1824

Aníbal Chajón Flores

Resumen

En 2023 y 2024 se cumplen 200 años de dos acontecimientos: la Independencia definitiva y la liberación de los esclavos de origen africano. No existen proyectos oficiales de conmemoración de estas fechas, pero fueron acontecimientos importantes para la historia del país. A través de dos encuestas, realizadas a 6,893 personas en 2021 y a 4,682 en 2022, se logró determinar la poca relevancia que se le asigna a la Independencia definitiva respecto a la Independencia parcial de 1821, y establecer la presencia de elementos de discriminación fenotípica hacia la herencia africana para un tercio de los encuestados, por lo que se alcanzó el objetivo general: identificar la percepción de las personas guatemaltecas sobre los acontecimientos ocurridos en 1823, que básicamente indica desconocimiento, y 1824, con casi un tercio de personas que sentirían molestia por tener lazos con personas africanas, producto de un sistema de castas que imperó durante todo el periodo hispánico y que continúa vigente. Con esto se confirmó la apreciación de diversos autores que sirvieron para el referente teórico, como Michel Foucault (2012) en el caso de la educación, y como París (2002), Reding (2007) y Wade (2017) para el tema de la discriminación fenotípica.

Palabras clave: Efemérides, educación, discriminación, racismo, afrodescendientes.

Abstract

The 200th anniversary of two events will be fulfilled in 2023 and 2024: the definitive Independence and the liberation of the slaves of African origin. There are no official commemoration projects for these events. For this article, the author made two surveys. 6,893 persons

responded in 2021 and 4,682 in 2022. So, was possible to determine the little relevance assigned to the definitive independence with respect to the partial independence of 1821. Even, was possible to establish elements of phenotypic discrimination to African heredity. So, the general objective was achieved: to identify the perception of Guatemalan people about the events that occurred in 1823, which is basically ignorance, and 1824, with people who would feel bothered by having ties with African heredity. This confirmed the appreciation of various authors from the theoretical reference, Michel Foucault (2012) in the case of education, and París (2002), Reding (2007) and Wade (2017) for phenotypic discrimination.

Keywords: Ephemeris, education, discrimination, racism, Afro-descendants.

Introduction

In 2021 the Independence of Central America from Spain, signed on September 15th, 1821, was commemorated among official exaltations and criticism from organized groups. However, on January 5th, 1822, the territory was annexed to Mexico, signing the absolute Independence on July 1st, 1823 and,

the following year, the liberation of people of African origin who lived in slavery. At the time of the publication of this article, there was no project to commemorate these events, so it was considered opportune to portray the perception of some respondents about these decisive facts in the history of the country.

According to the study by Christopher Lutz (1984), there is an important phenotypic heritage of African origin in Guatemala which is evident in the hair and pigmentation of thousands of people anywhere in the territory. Therefore, it was considered appropriate to collect the material of this article and offer it to the national education sector as part of the service which by constitutional mandate and its own legislation the University of San Carlos should offer to Guatemalan society in accordance with the Development Objectives. Sustainable and the 2032 K'atun Plan.

Few studies were found on the importance of both historical events for the educational sector, but on each topic the contributions of Vicente Filísola (1911), Ana Carrillo (1976), Jorge Luján (1974; 1982), Mario Vásquez (2009), Andrés Townsend (1958), on the subject of definitive independence, and those of Herber Klein (1986) and Lutz (1984) for the African presence in the territory were considered. The works of Carlos Martínez Durán with Daniel Contreras (1962) and that of Ítalo López were also taken into account (1968) for the liberation decreed in 1824.

The general objective of this work was to identify the perception of Guatemalans about the events that occurred in 1823 and 1824, and the specific ones were: to determine the relevance that is assigned to the definitive Independence with respect to the partial Independence of 1821 and establish the presence of elements of phenotypic discrimination toward African heritage.

The methodology consisted of a bibliographic review of relevant material and two surveys of Guatemalans in different points of the country.

Theoretical Referent

The feats of the governors have constituted the historical content for the great state societies, from the Egyptian kingdom and the Akkadian empire to the Cholan state cities, such as Mutul, now called Tikal, and the K'iche' and Kaqchikel kingdoms, among others. The European tradition has been nurtured by Greek heroes, from the mythical Achilles and Hector, to historical ones such as Pericles and Alexander the Great. Aware of the importance of transmitting ideals to the young generations, the governments of the 19th century established commemorations. Commemorations are defined as:

Those remarkable dates or events that imprint identity on a State and help its formation. They're moments in its history that should be remembered, perpetuated, and commemorated. Usually, events and festivities are celebrated by that country or a specific region to emphasize them. These days are highlighted because they are considered of importance and since they have a relationship either with the spiritual, the civic or the historical; they are practices, acts, gestures, behaviours, and celebrations that undoubtedly help to determine the being and the making of the homeland (Groot, 2021, p. 1).

As established by authors such as Michel Foucault (2012), the educational process aims to make young generations consider themselves part of a nation-state and the commemorations play an important role, since "they are constituted as practices of governmentality of the conducts of the subjects" (Mercader, 2018, p. 229). Furthermore:

These are dates on which they are commemorated, in a patriotic, reclaiming and strongly emotive style, various historical events related to the origin of the nation and the foundation of the State (Mercader, 2018, p. 230).

Such that they become:

Mechanisms that generate consensus and cultural homogeneity and as such constitute instruments of hegemony... the historic discourse [which] circulates in school institutions guarantees the dominant hegemonic visions of the past that respond to certain interests of groups that hold power (political, cultural, and symbolic) (Mercader, 2018, p. 234).

Because of this intentionality, certain events are included in the commemorations, others are suppressed and promoted in childhood: “since we are young at a very early age, commemorations or relevant historic facts have been inculcated in us through the participation of the celebrations that take place at home or in the community where we live” (Mucino, 2009, p. 2). This has the purpose of creating an “imagery based on the supposed existence of values and virtues ... built from a historical discourse centered on the figure [of a hero]” (Rodríguez, 2013, p. 2). Because:

Knowing that patriotic sentiment is specifically taught and learned in school, a space and time within it began to be devoted to the remembrance of certain events related to milestones in the origin of the nation (Godino, 2009, p. 3).

According to the cited authors, the inclusion of commemorations began in the nascent Latin-American states in the 19th century due to positivist influence. However, there have been revisions throughout the 20th century, especially for the contributions in the historical studies of the Frankfurt School and the Annals (Godino, 2009), so it would be:

Appropriate, then, that we the social sciences teachers can bring our students closer to the most remote and nearest past, from a more reflective view and analytical that allows them to envision the reality in their specific contexts ... [that] social sciences teachers can be revealing parts of the collective memory so that it allows them and their students to identify points in connection that tend to the construction of a common history, of social ties that facilitate the relationships of subjects (Godino, 2009, pp. 2,10).

That is, dismantling myths or faked aspects of historical reality to base identity on concrete data and attached to the events that occurred, because:

The social uses of teaching school history have as their fundamental purpose that students build significant knowledge and attitudes necessary to understand the reality of the world in which they live, as a complex, multiple, interconnected, and dynamic whole (Panuntini, 2017, p. 7).

In short, current education does not seek to suppress commemorations, but to contextualize them adequately so that the young generations have an adequate vision of events and protagonists, as well as the impact that historical events have on the reality they live. For all these reasons, it seems appropriate for students to reflect on the definitive Independence, which occurred in 1823.

The same can be said about the African presence in the territory, whose liberation was established in the 1824 Constitution at the behest of the Salvadoran Simeón Cañas (López, 1968). However, as stated by Lutz (1984), the Guatemalan elite has rejected the African presence and, above all, a possible ancestry of that origin, which has implied an

important dose of racism. In the words of José Arriaga:

There is no doubt that in every State there is a ruling class that is the one who dynamizes the social development of the peoples. Versatility, class responsibility, and the cultural degree to which this class arrives within the social structure are determinant variables for social development to be possible; but they are also determinant variables that affect the backwardness and poverty of the peoples (Arriaga, 1997, p. 171).

While other authors stated: “Guatemala has a large production of studies that account for racism and racial discrimination” (Romero, Orantes and Zapil, 2018, p. 13). This discrimination has clearly manifested itself against persons of indigenous peoples, of Mayan languages, and has worsened since 1871. However, as Lutz (1984) pointed out, the African ascendant has also been rejected. As in the rest of Latin America, it did not reach the extermination of the United States and Europe, but it is evidenced in:

The "good presentation" required to occupy visible positions, such as receptionist or secretary, hidden considerations for the promotion to certain positions... The different phenotypic features or identity ascriptions are attributed, in the most diverse institutional spaces, differentiated potentialities for social achievements. And indeed, high levels of discrimination can be observed in all institutions. Indigenous or black people have very low expectations for career advancement, access to important political positions at the national level, educational performance or cultural success (Paris, 2002, p. 290).

The origin of this behaviour is in the Hispanic period, when the caste system was established to allow

mestizo descendants of a Spaniard managed to be considered “pure” Spaniards after several generations of marrying Europeans (Chance, 1978; Macleod, 1987; Möner, 1969; Möner, 1980). According to one author: “The caste system remains in the Latin American imagery because it legitimizes both subordination and hegemony... [but] racism is pathological, neuroticizing, distressing: it provokes deviant behaviours such as ethnocide or genocide (Reding, 2007, pp. 158-159).

As for studies on the African presence in Latin America, they date back to 1948, but increased after 1990 and 2001, after the Durban World Conference Against Racism (Wade, 2017), and the results are very different in each country. In Guatemala they are scarce and have concentrated on the presence of the Garifuna, which arrived in 1802 and constitutes a different phenomenon from the population of African origin introduced as a slave since the sixteenth century and that benefited from the liberation of 1824.

Results

As indicated, two surveys were conducted to achieve the objectives. In order to determine the relevance assigned to the definitive independence with respect to the partial independence of 1821, a tool was circulated from July 18 to December 6, 2022, in the municipalities of Chiquimula, Quezaltepeque, Ipala, Jocotán, Puerto Barrios, Los Amates, Livingston, Zacapa, Jutiapa, Totonicapán, Uspantán, Quetzaltenango, Chimaltenango, Pastores, Escuintla, Santa Rosa, Tiquisate, Suchitepéquez, Retalhuleu, San Juan Sacatepéquez, Santa Catarina Pinula, Villa Nueva, San Miguel Petapa, Mixco and in zones 1, 4, 10, and 13 of Guatemala. 4,682 people participated. The data of respondents can be seen in table 1:

Table 1 <i>Respondent's Data</i>		
Sex	Male	2,240
	Female	2,442
Age	18-22	1,062
	22-26	882
	27-31	799
	32-35	684
	36-40	473
	Greater than 40	782
Schooling	Primary	118
	Secondary	1,385
	University	3,179

As can be seen, there was a number similar for men and women, with a notable majority of young people under the age of 36 years, with secondary and higher education. Respondents were asked four closed-format questions to obtain the information as can be seen in table 2:

Table 2 <i>Answers</i>		
a) What event occurred in Guatemala in 1821?	a) The union with Mexico	353
	b) The separation of Central America	1,757
	c) Definitive Independence	2,572
b) Did you study this topic in primary and secondary school?	a) Yes	2,262
	b) No	852
	c) I don't remember	1,568
c) What would be the difference between 1823 and 1821?	a) Public parades and ceremonies	776
	b) The capacity for self-government	2,663
	c) I find no difference	1,243
d) What date did you learn during your studies was more important?	a) September 15 th , 1821	3,766
	b) July 1 st , 1823	354
	c) March 21 st , 1847	104
	d) October 20 th , 1944	458

The first question included two wrong answers, to make the respondents reflect. Almost 55% responded correctly, but it is interesting to compare that all respondents had formal studies and almost 68% had higher education. This clearly indicates that the definitive independence has been completely relegated in formal studies. The fact that only 48% remembered seeing it in classes is an indication of the little importance assigned to student content.

Just over 56% associated the date with government self-determination, which really constitutes Independence, confirming the already made assertions. Finally, the importance assigned to the first Independence, remembered by more than 80% of respondents, is undeniable.

To establish the presence of elements of phenotypic discrimination against African heritage, another survey was conducted, which was done

almost a year before, between September 6th and November 11th of 2021, in the municipalities of Chimaltenango, Santo Domingo Xenacoj, Huehuetenango, Santa Cruz del Quiché, Cobán, Carchá, Puerto Barrios, Quetzaltenango, Flores, Santa Rosa, Chiquimulilla, Cuilapa, Jalapa, Monjas, Jutiapa, Santiago Sacatepéquez, San Lucas Sacatepéquez, Mixco, Fraijanes, San Miguel Petapa, San José Pinula, Santa Catarina Pinula, Villa Nueva, Villa Canales, Amatitlán, and in zones 1, 4, 7, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 18, 21 of Guatemala. For this survey, 6,893 people collaborated, as shown in table 3:

Table 3 <i>Respondent's Data</i>		
Age	18-22	1,055
	23-27	1,508
	28-32	1,338
	Greater than 32	2,992
Sex	Male	3,323
	Female	3,570
Schooling	Undergraduate	2,492
	Degree	2,808
	Postgraduate	1,593

As in the previous one, there were a similar number of men and women, as well as a large majority of young people, under the age of 32, with almost 64% of people with higher education. These people responded as shown in Table 4:

Table 4 <i>Answers</i>		
Question	Yes	No
Did you know that people from Africa came to Guatemala, as slaves, introduced during the Spanish government?	5,079	1,814
Have you heard that these people are called browns and mulattos?	5,734	1,159
Would it bother you to have ancestors or descendants with an African appearance?	2,201	4,692

Only three questions were asked in this survey. In the first one, almost 74% reported handling the migration information of Africans in the Hispanic period as slaves. More than 83% said they had heard the terms of blacks and mulattos, two of the categories established in the caste system of the Hispanic period. In addition, 31.93% of respondents expressed discomfort in the case of having African ancestors or descendants.

Discussion of results

As stated by the authors, Foucault (2012), Mercader (2018), Muciño (2009), Rodríguez (2013), Godino (2009) and Panuntini (2017), the commemorations celebrated in educational centers fulfill a function led by the governments to strengthen the state and it is evident

that the September commemorations have been successful, as can be seen from the respondents' responses. From these contributions the deliberate concealment of the definitive Independence emerges, which is a subject little known among the people who responded to the survey, and which shows that it has not been considered important in formal curricula.

On the other hand, almost four decades after the publication of Lutz, emphasizing the presence of people of African origin in the Guatemalan society, it seems that what was exposed by Arriaga (1997), Romero, Orantes and Zapil (2018), can be extended to the African presence in the territory, similarly, although less dramatic than in other Latin American countries, such as Brazil, Colombia and Peru, since almost a third of respondents would reject this phenotypic heritage.

Obviously, the governments of the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries have displaced any reference to this heritage and have suppressed it from any kind of commemoration, which has favoured the permanence of the categories established by the caste system. This shows a search to avoid racism that has manifested itself much more clearly toward the Mayan-speaking population and that confirms what was presented by Paris (2002), Reding (2007) and Wade (2017).

Final comment

In conclusion, it can be said that it was possible to determine the relevance of the definitive Independence with respect to the partial Independence of 1821, since the celebrations of September allow us to recall a little transcendent fact: the signing of an Act that only gave way to the annexation of the Mexican empire, while the definitive Independence has been displaced in the formal education system.

It was also possible to establish the presence of elements of phenotypic discrimination toward African heritage, since almost a third of respondents expressed discomfort to know their relationship with this large human group, an annoyance caused by the fear of discrimination that can be perceived in today's society.

Finally, it was possible to identify the perception of Guatemalans about the events that occurred in 1823 and 1824. There is widespread ignorance about definitive Independence and a significant rejection of African phenotypic heritage in Guatemala. It would be worth considering that, in order to build an inclusive society, it is necessary to not close one's eyes to reality and promote the dissemination of concrete data in the formal education system about the

historical reality and the true value of the African contribution to today's society.

References

- Arriaga, J. (1997). El racismo de la clase dominante de Guatemala como obstáculo al desarrollo nacional. Mexico: *Cuadernos del Instituto de Investigaciones Jurídicas*, UNAM, págs. 171-184.
- Carrillo, A. (1976). *Clases sociales y lucha de clases en la anexión de Centro América a México* (tesis de grado). Escuela de Historia, Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala, Guatemala.
- Chance, J. (1978). *Race and class in colonial Oaxaca*. Stanford, United States: University Press.
- Filísola, V. (1911). *La cooperación de México en la independencia de Centro América*. México D.F.: Bouret.
- Foucault, M. (2012). *El poder, una bestia magnífica. Sobre el poder, la prisión y la vida*. Buenos Aires, Argentina: Siglo Veintiuno.
- Godino, C. (2009). Efemérides patrias. Análisis de su génesis y cambios en la institución educativa. *Aposta, Revista de Ciencias Sociales*, No. 40, págs. 1-15.
- Groot, R. (2021). Efemérides. Bogotá, Colombia: Universidad Militar Nueva Granada. *Análisis coyunturales*, págs. 1-6.
- Klein, H. (1986). *La esclavitud africana en América Latina y el Caribe*. Madrid, España: Alianza Editorial.
- López, Í. (1968). José Simeón Cañas, libertador de los esclavos centroamericanos. *La Pájara Pinta*, No. 35, págs. 1-2.
- Luján, J. (1974). *Algunas apreciaciones sobre la anexión de Centroamérica a México*. Ciudad de Guatemala: USAC.
- Luján, J. (1982). *La independencia y la anexión de Centroamérica a México*. Ciudad de Guatemala: Serviprensa Centroamericana.

- Lutz, C. (1984). *Historia sociodemográfica de Santiago de Guatemala, 1541-1773*. Ciudad de Guatemala: CIRMA.
- Macleod, M. (1987). *Relaciones étnicas y la sociedad indígena en la provincia de Gautemala, ca. 1620-ca. 1800*. Ciudad de Guatemala: Seminario de Integración Social Guatemalteca.
- Martínez, C. y Contreras, D. (1962). La abolición de la esclavitud en Centroamérica. *Revista de Estudios Interamericanos*, Vol. 4, No. 2, págs. 223-232.
- Mercader, A. (2018). Construcción de la identidad nacional a partir de las efemérides escolares, pensando desde la noción de gubernamentalidad. *Ixtli, Revista Latinoamericana de Filosofía de la Educación*, Vol. 5, No. 10, págs. 227-270.
- Mörner, M. (1980). Estratificación social hispanoamericana durante el periodo colonial. Institute of Latin America Studies, Stockholm. *Research paper series*, No. 28.
- Mörner, M. (1969). La política de segregación y el mestizaje en la Audiencia de Guatemala. *Revista Conservadora del Pensamiento Latinoamericano*, Vol. XX, No.3, págs. 41-47.
- Muciño, G. (2009). Efemérides. ILCE. *Revista E-Formadores*, págs. 1-6.
- Panuntini, C. (2017). Enseñar historia a través de las efemérides escolares de la historia reciente: 24 de marzo y 2 de abril. Mar del Plata: XVI *Jornadas*
- Interescuelas/Departamentos de Historia*, págs. 1-19.
- París, M. (2002). Estudios sobre el racismo en América Latina. *Política y Cultura*, No. 17, págs. 289-310.
- Reding, S. (2007). Diversidad y racismo en América Latina. *Revista Latinoamérica*, No. 44, págs. 157-179.
- Rodríguez, M. (2013). Apuntes para repensar las efemérides y actos patrios escolares desde las fronteras. Un estudio empírico en escuelas de la provincia de Misiones. Córdoba: VI *Encuentro Panamericano de Comunicación*, págs. 1-17.
- Romero, W.; Orantes, A. y Zapil, S. (2018). *Estudio sobre racismo, discriminación y brechas de desigualdad en Guatemala*. Ciudad de Guatemala: CEPAL.
- Townsend, A. (1958). *Fundación de la República*. Ciudad de Guatemala: Ministerio de Educación Pública.
- Vásquez, M. (2009). *El imperio mexicano y el reino de Guatemala: proyecto político y campaña militar, 1821-1823*. Ciudad de Guatemala: FCE.
- Wade, P. (2017). Estudios afrodescendientes en Latinoamérica: racismo y mestizaje. Bogotá: *Tabula Rasa*, No. 27, págs. 23-44.

Appendix A. Definitive Independence Survey Ballot

CECEG-USAC

Survey

Thank you for answering this anonymous survey. It will be used for educational purposes.

Instruction: Please mark the answer that seems correct.

Sex	Male	
	Female	
Age		
Schooling	Primary	
	Secondary	
	University	
a) What event occurred in Guatemala in 1823?	a) The union with Mexico	
	b) The separation of Central America	
	c) The definitive Independence	
b) Did you study this topic in primary and secondary school?	a) Yes	
	b) No	
	c) I don't remember	
c) What would be the difference between 1823 and 1821?	a) Public parades and ceremonies	
	b) The capacity for self-government	
	c) I find no difference	
d) What date did you learn, during your studies was more important?	a) September 15 th 1821	
	b) July 1 st 1823	
	c) March 21 st 1847	
	d) October 20 th 1944	

Appendix B. Survey Ballot on Afro-descendants

CECEG-USAC

Survey

Thank you for answering this anonymous survey. It will be used for educational purposes.

Instruction: Please mark the answer that seems correct.

Age			
Sex	Male		
	Female		
Schooling	Undergraduate		
	Degree		
	Postgraduate		
Question		Yes	No
Did you know that people from Africa came to Guatemala, as slaves, introduced during the Spanish government?			
Have you heard that these people are called browns and mulattos?			
Would it bother you to have ancestors or descendants with an African appearance?			

