

ccomusoc

.com.ar

SPECIAL REPORT · DISCRIMINATION AND RACISM · PART 1

Afro-Argentine history: founding figures and icons of a presence that never left

An investigation into the Afro-descendant community that official history tried to erase — and that in 2026 remains alive, organized, and standing.

A special report by ccomusoc.com.ar — Social communication for development

Summary

- Afro-Argentines did not "disappear": they were a majority or near-majority in the colonial interior (Santiago del Estero 54%, Catamarca 52%, Córdoba 44%, Tucumán 44% in the 1778 census) and close to 30% of Buenos Aires by 1810; their apparent decline resulted from a combination of wars, epidemics, intermarriage, mass European immigration and, above all, deliberate statistical erasure.
- They left behind verifiable founding figures —María Remedios del Valle, "Mother of the Nation," captain of the Army of the North; the freedmen who made up a huge share of the Army of the Andes— and cultural icons such as payador (folk singer) Gabino Ezeiza and composer Zenón Rolón, plus a press of their own (La Broma, La Juventud).
- The 2022 INDEC Census confirmed the community is still alive: 302,936 people identified as Afro-descendant (0.7% of the country), a group that today combines the "colonial lineage" with Cape Verdean migration (since the 1920s) and recent sub-Saharan migration (Senegalese), and that sustains a vigorous activism despite the state cuts of 2024.

| Key findings

1. **The slave trade was central, not marginal.** Historian Alex Borucki calculated that between 1585 and 1835, 202,723 enslaved Africans and Afro-Brazilians arrived in the Río de la Plata through the ports of Buenos Aires, Colonia del Sacramento and Montevideo. Buenos Aires functioned as a redistribution hub toward Potosí, Peru and Chile.

2. **They were a demographic majority across much of the country.** Viceroy Juan José de Vértiz's 1778 census recorded Afro-descendant proportions above 50% in Santiago del Estero and Catamarca, and 44% in Córdoba and Tucumán.

3. **The "disappearance" is a historiographical myth.** Historians such as Marta Goldberg and Florencia Guzmán have shown the decline was partly real (wars, epidemics) and partly an artifact: the State stopped counting racial origin in national censuses after 1869.

4. **The founding figures exist and have names.** María Remedios del Valle, Antonio Ruiz "Falucho," Gabino Ezeiza, Zenón Rolón, Horacio Mendizábal, colonel José María Morales: official history whitewashed or erased them.

5. **The community is alive and organized.** DIAFAR, Africa and its Diaspora, Misibamba, and the Cape Verdean community of Dock Sud and Ensenada sustain Afro-Argentine identity well into the 21st century.

Details

1. General history: the Río de la Plata slave trade and Afro demographics

African presence in present-day Argentine territory is as old as colonization itself. Enslaved Africans are believed to have arrived as early as the first founding of Buenos Aires (1536), but it was after the 1580 re-founding that the port became integrated into the Atlantic circuit. The relative simultaneity of the foundings of Rio de Janeiro (1565), Luanda (1575) and Buenos Aires (1580) made possible the long-distance connection between Angola and Potosí, as noted by historian Carlos Sempat Assadourian.

Trade flowed through both legal channels (asientos, licenses such as those of contractor Gómez Reynel) and illegal ones ("forced landings" and smuggling). Buenos Aires merchants such as Martín de Álzaga grew rich from the trade. Historian Alex Borucki, in his study "250 years of the slave trade to the Río de la Plata" (Claves. Revista de Historia, vol. 7, no. 12, Montevideo, 2021), calculated that [202,723 enslaved Africans and Afro-Brazilians](#) arrived between 1585 and 1835, a figure that includes estimates of undocumented smuggling through Colonia del Sacramento. Unlike the Caribbean or Brazil, the Río de la Plata was not dominated by intensive plantations: enslaved people were mainly assigned to urban domestic service, artisanal trades, and, in the countryside, hide production and agriculture.

Colonial-era proportions

Viceroy Juan José de Vértiz y Salcedo's 1778 census recorded extremely high shares of "pardos y morenos" (mixed-race and Black people): Santiago del Estero 54%, San Fernando del Valle de

Catamarca 52%, Salta 46%, Córdoba 44%, San Miguel de Tucumán 44%, Mendoza 24%, La Rioja 20%, San Juan 16%. In the city of Buenos Aires, that same census counted 7,268 mulattoes and Black people out of roughly 24,451 inhabitants. According to historian Marta Goldberg (author of the classic "The Black and Mulatto Population of the City of Buenos Aires, 1810-1840," *Desarrollo Económico*, 1976), Buenos Aires' Black population rose from 16.9% in 1744 to 28.4% in 1788 and to nearly 30% in 1810. In several interior provinces they were an outright majority. In 1813, at the height of the Revolution, the Free Womb Law was passed.

What happened? The historiographical explanations

The myth that "there are no Black people in Argentina" has multiple explanations that current historiography (Goldberg, Guzmán, George Reid Andrews) combines:

- Wars: the wars of independence and, above all, the War of the Triple Alliance against Paraguay (1865-1870), in which Afro-Argentines were conscripted en masse as "cannon fodder" in exchange for the promise of freedom.
- Epidemics: the 1861 cholera outbreak and, especially, the 1871 yellow fever epidemic, which caused an estimated 14,000 deaths—around 8% of the city's inhabitants—according to the *Revista Argentina de Salud Pública* (Lazzarino et al., 2021). The epidemic hit the southern neighborhoods particularly hard (the "drum neighborhood": San Telmo, Barracas, La Boca), where the Afro population was concentrated. By 1887, Buenos Aires' Afro-Argentines numbered 8,005 out of a total population of 433,375 (under 2%).
- Intermarriage and "whitening": mixing with the white population gradually diluted the "Afro trace" within census categories.
- Mass European immigration: policies inspired by Juan Bautista Alberdi and Domingo Faustino Sarmiento sought a "civilized," European-origin population that would "whiten" the country.
- Statistical erasure: national censuses stopped asking about ethnic origin after 1869 and 1895. As historian Marta Goldberg sums it up ("Our Black People: Disappeared or Ignored?," *Todo*

es Historia, 2000), what happened was more deliberate ignorance than extinction.

2. Founding figures, soldiers, and independence

Freedmen: the backbone of the Army of the Andes. Afro-descendant participation in the wars of independence was massive, though exact figures remain disputed among specialists. Researcher Miriam Gomes (UBA) estimates around 2,500 Black soldiers were distributed across San Martín's troops, while British historian John Lynch puts the number of freedmen at 1,554; in either case they made up a decisive share of a force of some 4,000 men. Battalion No. 8 alone (known as "the Freedmen's Battalion") had more than 800 men of that background in its ranks.

"There's no other way, my good friend — only putting every slave under arms can save us (...) only Black men are truly fit for the infantry." — José de San Martín, in a letter to Tomás Godoy Cruz

Many gained their freedom in exchange for military service, but few came back alive.

Military figures. Among them is Antonio Ruiz, "El Negro Falucho" (c. 1795-1824), a soldier attached to Battalion No. 8 who —according to Bartolomé Mitre's account— died at the Real Felipe fortress (Callao) on February 6, 1824, for refusing to render honors to the Spanish flag. His individual existence has been questioned by historians, but he was honored with a statue in Palermo, unveiled in 1923. Also worth noting: Sergeant Juan Bautista Cabral, from Corrientes, son of enslaved African Carmen Robledo, and colonel José María Morales (1818-1894).

María Remedios del Valle, "Mother of the Nation"

Born in Buenos Aires around 1766-1767, classified as "parda" under the colonial caste system, she took part in the British Invasions and later joined Manuel Belgrano's Army of the North from 1810 onward.

She fought at Tucumán, Salta, Vilcapugio and Ayohuma. Belgrano named her captain for her valor. She lost her husband and both sons in combat; she herself suffered six bullet and saber wounds. Captured by royalist forces, she helped patriot officers escape and was sentenced to nine days of public flogging. She fell into destitution and was begging on the streets of Buenos Aires when, in 1827, General Juan José Viamonte recognized her. On October 11, 1827, the Buenos Aires House of Representatives declared her a "heroine" and granted her a pension. She died on November 8, 1847.

In her honor, Law 26,852 (2013) established [November 8](#) as "National Day of Afro-Argentines and Afro Culture." On May 7, 2024, the Central Bank put into circulation a \$10,000 banknote bearing her image alongside Belgrano's.

3. Cultural icons of the 19th and 20th centuries

Music and candombe. Porteño candombe was an Afro-Argentine cultural matrix that, according to CONICET researcher Norberto Pablo Cirio (National Institute of Musicology "Carlos Vega"), left structural traces in tango and milonga: "we have been trained not to see or hear Black people," he argues.

Gabino Ezeiza (1858-1916). "El Negro Ezeiza," born in San Telmo, the son of a former slave, was the most celebrated payador (improvising folk singer) of the Río de la Plata. He introduced the milonga rhythm into payada singing and improvised the famous "Heroico Paysandú" in a duel with Uruguayan Juan de Nava on July 23, 1884 (a date now marked as Payador's Day). He died on October 12, 1916.

Zenón Rolón (1856-1902). An Afro-Argentine composer born in Buenos Aires to a family of free Black people, awarded a scholarship to Florence, Italy between 1873 and 1879, he composed nearly 80 works and introduced candombe drums into musical theater. In 2024, the Teatro Nacional Cervantes and SADAIC honored the recovery of his remains.

Afro-Argentine press. In the last decades of the 19th century, Afro-Porteño newspapers circulated widely: *La Igualdad* (1873-1874), *La Broma* (1876-1882), *La Juventud* (1876-1879) and *El Aspirante* (1882). They are now key documentary sources, compiled by Tomás Platero (IHCBA, 2004). Far from the idea of "disappearance," they prove a dynamic community that the establishment considered extinct at the very same time.

Literature. Horacio Mendizábal (1847-1871), an Afro-Porteño poet and translator, published "Primeros versos" (1865); he died at age 24 while caring for the sick during the 1871 yellow fever epidemic.

His son was pianist Rosendo Mendizábal, a celebrated tango composer.

4. The Afro-Argentine presence today (2020-2026)

The 2022 Census conducted by INDEC —final results published in March 2024— found that **302,936 people** in private households identified as Afro-descendant (162,262 women and 140,674 men), roughly 0.7% of the population. The figure more than doubled the 2010 count (149,493 people). They are concentrated in Buenos Aires province (42.5%) and the City of Buenos Aires (13.4%), followed by Córdoba (6.1%) and Santa Fe (5.5%).

Organizations and activists. DIAFAR (African Diaspora of Argentina), chaired by political scientist Federico Pita, has published the newspaper *El Afroargentino* since 2014. Other groups include Africa and its Diaspora, Misibamba (colonial lineage), the Indo-Afro-American Cultural House of Santa Fe, and África Vive, led by María Magdalena "La Pocha" Lamadrid.

Institutional setbacks (2023-2026). Decree 696/2024 shut down INADI, the anti-discrimination institute created by Law 24,515 (1995). Afro-descendant organizations denounced the dismantling of institutional channels for reporting racism. The community has marched every November 8 since 2023. On December 17, 2024, the UN proclaimed the Second International Decade for People of African Descent, 2025-2034.

5. "Colonial lineage" vs. recent migration

Three groups coexist today under the broad label "Afro-descendant": the colonial lineage (descendants of enslaved people, represented by Misibamba); the Cape Verdean community, which arrived voluntarily starting in the 1920s and settled in Dock Sud and Ensenada (an estimated ~25,000 descendants); and recent sub-

Saharan migrants, mostly Senegalese (1,120 according to the 2022 Census, the largest African community in the country).

Methodological note: colonial-era figures are estimates from period censuses and are not comparable to current standards. A UBA genetic study (Daniel Corach, 2005) detected sub-Saharan African genetic markers in 4.3% of the Greater Buenos Aires population, far above the 0.7% census self-identification rate.

| Main sources

Researchers and historians: Alex Borucki ("250 Years of the Slave Trade to the Río de la Plata," Claves, 2021) · Marta Goldberg ("The Black and Mulatto Population of the City of Buenos Aires, 1810-1840," Desarrollo Económico, 1976; "Our Black People: Disappeared or Ignored?," Todo es Historia, 2000) · Florencia Guzmán · George Reid Andrews · Miriam Gomes (UBA) · John Lynch · Norberto Pablo Cirio (CONICET / National Institute of Musicology "Carlos Vega") · Tomás Platero (IHCBA, 2004) · Lea Geler · Carlos Sempat Assadourian · Daniel Corach (UBA, 2005 genetic study).

Official bodies: INDEC (2022 National Census) · Ministry of Culture of Argentina · Central Bank of the Argentine Republic · Official Gazette of the Argentine Republic · UN / Resolution 79/193.

Afro-descendant organizations: DIAFAR (African Diaspora of Argentina) · Misibamba · Africa and its Diaspora · África Vive · Indo-Afro-American Cultural House of Santa Fe.

Media consulted: Infobae · La Nación · Página/12 · Ámbito · Cultura.gob.ar · Endepa · El Ciudadano · Wiriko · Revista Bordes (UNPAZ).