

Mexico's hidden people

By Abby Reimer, Special to CNN

🕒 Updated 1443 GMT (2243 HKT) July 10, 2015



Photos:

The dance of the devils is a traditional dance from the Costa Chica area, with roots in African culture.

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Mexican constitution not counted in the census

Yet Afro-Mexicans remain a marginalized and often forgotten part of Mexico's identity.

Photographer Mara Sanchez Renero dug deeper into their history and culture

Photographer [Mara Sanchez Renero](#) first learned about Afro-Mexicans as a teenager, when she traveled to the Costa Chica region in southern Mexico. The black community there told her they were descendants of Africans shipwrecked off the Pacific coast in 1900.

But it wasn't until she traveled back last year that she realized what little she knew. There, traditions and customs rooted in Africa -- such as "La Danza del Diablos," or the dance of the devils -- have survived.

"I didn't know there was that much African culture in Mexico," Sanchez Renero said. "They didn't teach me that in school."

Sanchez Renero dug deeper into Afro-Mexican history and culture, ultimately deciding to tell the story of Afro-Mexicans through a series of photographs called "The Cimarron and Fandango."



She said Afro-Mexicans are not recognized by the Mexican constitution, meaning that resources given to other groups, such as the indigenous Purepechas, Mayas or Amuzgos, are out of reach. These resources include social security and medical services, education grants and proactive subsidies.

Afro-Mexicans are also not accounted for in the national census, which does not track race. The World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples provides a sweeping estimate for the Afro-Mexican population: between 474,000 and 4.7 million.

Photographer Mara Sanchez Renero

"Today the black community is in a much more solid state concerning their self-recognition and has begun to fight and generate movements for their rights as Afro-descendants," Sanchez Renero said. "But this self-

recognition has not been there for so long. I assume that there are still places, small towns, where (there is a) kind of confusion about their origins."

Part of the confusion stems from intermarriage and the dual influence of traditions and ways of life. The devil dance, for instance, is reminiscent of Mexico's Day of the Dead celebrations, which itself fuses pre-Colombian and European traditions.



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Photographer Mara Sanchez Renero

"There's a lot of mixture now," she said.

Sanchez Renero spent a combined two months in Costa Chica and said she, "got in touch with the images through the people."

Her favorite image is a portrait of Bucho, a fisherman, musician and instructor of traditional dance. He had worked his entire life to keep the traditions and culture of the community alive.

But at first, he didn't want to be involved in the project, Sanchez Renero said.



in the portrait, NO. 4 in the gallery above, Dacho stands with his back to a gray sea, wearing a cowboy hat and a necklace made of fish. Sanchez Renero said when she took the photo, "he was so happy."

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Other photos in the collection show the many industries in which Afro-Mexicans have made their mark on Mexico, including fishery, domestic work and animal husbandry.

But there are also photos that are deeply symbolic, she said: a cloud isolated in the dark sky, thunderous waves meant to represent the clash of civilizations, rock formations meant to represent the Afro-Mexicans transformation as they "integrated to the landscape."

Sanchez Renero, in this series and others, attempts to "naturalize" or visualize abstract concepts of memory, identity and emotion. As a result, her photos seem more like a dream than reality.

In taking the photos, she was interested in memorializing and recording the identity of a people who have long been ignored or simply unknown.

"I was glad this work went out and moved people and somehow transmitted some tension that is around in society," she said. "It's part of me and not part of me. It's about them."

Mara Sanchez Renero is a Mexican photographer. You can follow her on [Instagram](#) and [Facebook](#).

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