

The New York Times

Follow Lens:[Facebook](#)[Twitter](#)[RSS](#)

Exploring the History of Afro-Mexicans

By David Gonzalez Jan. 11, 2018

About all that Mara Sanchez Renero knew about Afro-Mexicans was that they existed. And even that did not prepare her for the surprise she felt when she visited one of their communities in the Mexican state of Guerrero in 2014. There, during a ceremonial dance with African roots known as the Dance of the Devil, she encountered scores of Afro-Mexicans.

“There was another dance that is like a courtship between a man and woman, with very smooth music,” said Ms. Sanchez Renero, who was born in Mexico and spent a decade studying in Barcelona, Spain, where she studied photography. “And the people, so many people. I had been told that in one area they arrived a long time ago when a boat had capsized. That story stayed with me. I had not known the story of slavery and the importance of blacks in Mexico. I found this story, and my ignorance.”

That realization led her to look at a community that had long been denied recognition by the Mexican government. They date back to the colonial era when the Spanish brought over enslaved workers from Portugal, a trade that continued until the mid-18th century. A step toward lifting that invisibility came in 2015 when the government recognized Afro-Mexican as a census category, estimating that a little under 1.4 million people identified themselves as such.

“The Cimmarón and the Fandango” – its title referring to escaped slaves and a dance – is Ms. Sanchez Renero’s interpretation of her conversations and encounters with people in various communities in the Costa Chica region of Guerrero and Oaxaca. Reaching out to some cultural figures and activists in the area, she enlisted the help of several locals to help her find subjects, whom she would later visit. During those resulting conversations, she got ideas for her photos, which she would first sketch out.

“What was important to me was to tell a story,” she said. “I wanted to do, like, an illustrated history. It was a personal reinterpretation. It was the things that resonated with me.”

Fusing landscapes with images graced with symbolic touches, she set about making her images. Since the people of the region had been known for being skilled cowboys, she wanted to portray that, as well as the importance of fishing to these coastal communities. She also found ways to

draw the parallels to their African roots, like when she noticed women balancing loads of firewood on their heads.

“As you go on the roads you see women doing something we had identified with Africa, and I wanted to make that link. The woman surrounded by fire, the symbolism, it has elements of spirituality. I also blindfolded her eyes, because women are the great carriers of culture and educate their children. But there is also a lack of interest in maintaining it.”

Government recognition may help preserve that culture, as well as strengthen the communities economically and socially, she said.

“Afro-Mexicans have been in limbo,” she said. “They are Mexican and have the same rights as anyone. But they are in a situation similar to indigenous people, having to deal with poverty, lack of education, and limited resources and development. But they have not had the help that the government gives to indigenous people.”

Follow @nytimesphoto on Twitter. You can also find Lens on Facebook and Instagram.

Next in Lens:

Behind the Iron Curtain: Intimate Views of Life in Communist Hungary

Pictures of the Week

The Week in Pictures: June 23, 2017

The Week in Pictures: June 16, 2017

The Week in Pictures: June 9, 2017

The Week in Pictures: June 2, 2017

View all Pictures of the Week

© 2018 The New York Times Company