

# Portraits of an Isolated Indigenous Mexican Community

Mara Sanchez Renero looks to break with the stereotypical depictions of the Sierra de Zongolica in Veracruz, Mexico, documenting instead staged scenes that together reinterpret the inhabitants and the territory.

 Feedback

© Mara Sanchez Renero, from the series *Iluikak*

*Iluikak*, meaning “in the sky” in Nuahtl - known historically as Aztec, a language or group of languages in the Uto-Aztecan language family - is a photographic project that reveals a natural and cultural beauty protected by the Sierra de Zongolica in Veracruz, Oaxaca. Far removed from conventional forms of anthropological photography of indigenous Mexican communities and the stereotypes of representation, the images produced manifest a new

**Mara, you have mentioned that you are interested in seeking places that allow you to create settings where you can explore the instability of the human condition. Could you elaborate how this concept relates to your project, *Iluikak*?**

The project seeks to portray, through constructed scenarios, the culture that shelters the Sierra of Zongolica in Veracruz, an area inhabited by Nahuas, who, due to the geographical conditions of the region, remain partially isolated. Although the landscape has contributed to scarce economic development, it has protected its cultural wealth in close relationship and veneration towards nature, something that was part of the worldview of the original communities of Mexico.

I am interested in making visible the link between the past and the present that still remains in the area; searching for those meanings that are disintegrating due to the passage of time, modernisation, and the socio-political conditions of the country. When mentioning the instability of the human condition, I refer to the vulnerability of identity, not as a negative aspect but as a state that is constantly moving and transforming. I am interested in talking about those conditions through photographic construction.



**Why do you think it is relevant to remove your subject from their daily surroundings in order to portray their identity?**

Actually, my starting point is from the objects and activities that are part of the daily life of this community - I extract those elements from their usual context to be able to see them from a new place, the photographic scenes that I build.

I wanted to get away from the conventional forms of the anthropological portrait of rural communities in Mexico and the stereotypes of representation. It is from the exercise of building, the act of redirecting and creating new connections that I can generate a timeless space through which I can focus on specific aspects of identity. In this way the images are closer to an imaginary state where the elements are read in an iconographical way.

**You have deliberately focused on the state of Veracruz, Mexico in order to talk about the country's current socio-political issues, but in addition, you described in your statement that you have chosen to situate yourself within your project - why so and how can we locate you in your images?**

When I see my photos I see all my references and influences on them. I see the route and the research that I have carried out with the medium and the visual language, in addition to the previous documentary and ethnographic research processes that I carried out in relation to the place and people that I am going to photograph.

In *Iluikak* I have decided to incorporate different light sources to generate a connection between the subject and the support, an aesthetic exercise in which light is a fundamental core player. Light is the indispensable technical condition that enables me to not only compose the image, but also render visible everyday elements drawn from the identity of lives led in the Sierra of Zongolica. It's the formal resource to unify all these themes that enclose the mountains.



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**Iluikak means *In the Sky* in the local dialect. Could you elaborate on how this concept has influenced the way you have produced your images?**

When I started landing on my ideas, I went in search of those words that, in the Nahuatl language, contain concepts that speak beyond the proper meaning of the word and that describe their worldview. The Sierra de Zongolica is located in the northern part of the Sierra Madre del Sur in Mexico, it is an area that is characterised by having very steep mountains, peaks that are constantly hidden among the clouds. It is these boundaries between territory and sky that led me to name the project *Iluikak*. It is the mountain as a description of the mystical; the sky as the empire of the clouds.

These are metaphors and associations that led me to travel the mountains in their different altitudes and customs.

**I find that the way you have photographed this indigenous community almost challenges how natives groups have been portrayed in the past. What are your thoughts on this?**



There are many questions around the topic about the forms of representation in Mexico that impel me to seek new points of view. But above that, in this project I was interested in working with the environment, with the mountain, which is part of my research on the territory. Zongolica mountains constantly change because of the weather. Also, is quite difficult to move through the sierra, the routes can be long on dirt roads in very bad condition and with many curves, which often makes things difficult. The work is slow and many things are not possible to control. There are times when conditions do not allow me to take a photo and other times the image ends up being something that was not planned.



Feedback



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***Mara Sánchez Renero*** is a Mexican photographer currently based in Mexico City. Her projects *El Cimarrón* and *Fandangon* have been exhibited extensively in Europe, Latin American and the Caribbean. In 2016, she began to work on her project *Iluikak*, which was selected by the Aperture Foundation as part of its Aperture Summer Open program. Follow her on PHmuseum and Instaaram



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*This article is part of **In Focus: Latin American Female Photographers**, a monthly series curated by Verónica Sanchis Bencomo focusing on the works of female visual storytellers working and living in Latin America*

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