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'We exist. We're here': Afro-Mexicans make the census after long struggle for recognition

The Afro-Mexican population are often overlooked in Mexico's cultural mosaic, but this year marks a statistical first

David Agren in Mexico City

🐦 @el_reportero

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3,388 

When Bulmaro García encounters military checkpoints in Mexico's southern Guerrero

state, soldiers sometimes ask him to sing the national anthem to prove his nationality.

García, a black man from the remote Costa Chica region, always refuses, and instead schools the soldiers - usually from other parts of Mexico - in local history.

“We exist. We’re here. We occupy this area. We have a culture and we proudly say that we’re Mexicans,” he said.

He attributes the soldiers’ ignorance to “classic discrimination due to skin colour. [They think] if you’re black, you’re not Mexican.”

The Afro-Mexican population has long struggled for recognition in an overwhelmingly mestizo country where the indigenous past is lionized but lighter skin colour is often reflected in social advancement and higher incomes.

This year’s census - which is being collected throughout March - marks the first time the country is counting its Afro-Mexican population, providing official recognition for a people often overlooked in the Mexican cultural mosaic.

A 2015 survey from Mexico’s statistics institute estimated the Afro-Mexican population at 1.3 million. Observers expect the census to put the current total at around 2 million - mostly in Guerrero, Oaxaca and Veracruz states.

“It’s extremely important that they count us as Afro-Mexicans,” said García, an engineer in the community of Cuajinicuilapa. “We’re of African descent - but we’re Mexicans because we were born here and we built this country.”



▲ Musicians play during the traditional Afro-Mexican Dance of the Devils in Cuajinicuilapa, Guerrero. Photograph: AFP/AFP via Getty Images

From the very start of conquest of what is now Mexico, Africans arrived alongside the Spanish, both voluntarily as conquistadores - and as slaves.

Many intermarried with indigenous people and some Afro-Mexicans have played prominent roles in the country's history - including the independence hero José María Morelos and early president Vicente Guerrero.

More recently, however, their history has been one of marginalisation and neglect in underdeveloped regions such as the Costa Chica, a dry, tropical zone to the south-east of Acapulco.

When President Andrés Manuel López Obrador visited the region recently, a local politician complained of inadequate roads, a lack of hospitals and schools and recurring blackouts.

“Our history was erased for centuries, so people think we don't exist,” Abad Campos Rodríguez told the president.

Locals say the struggle for recognition started to gain momentum ahead of the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus's arrival in the Americas.

Indigenous groups saw nothing to celebrate - and García said many Afro-Mexican communities felt the same since "we, too were mistreated by the Spanish because they brought us here by force.

"We knew we were different from the indigenous people, and we were different from mestizos - so we started to struggle for recognition."



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Many Afro-Mexican communities have "leaned into" their identity for social and cultural reasons, said Jayson M Porter, a PhD candidate in environmental history at Northwestern University, who has studied the Costa Chica.

"The question is: how much they should lean in to their identity for political reasons?" he said, adding that it is unclear who counts as Afro-Mexican - and what benefits that will bring.

Afro-Mexican identity is not straightforward: many self-identify as *negro* (black) though others dislike the term and prefer Afro-Mexican or Afro-descendant.

"There are people who say they don't mind being called *negro* - but it depends on how they say it," says Yolanda Camacho, a member of the Colectiva de la Costa de Oaxaca Ñaa 'Tunda - with *ñaan* 'tunda meaning "black woman" in the Mixtec language.

"In the word 'Afro-Mexican' are all the names of self-descriptions that we give ourselves."

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