

Invisible Roots examines the history of Mexicans of African descent and what it means to physically look Black, but culturally and ethnically identify as Mexican, oftentimes in the face of opposition.

Looks can be deceiving.

“Invisible Roots” is a documentary short highlighting the history, cultural identity and lives of Afro-Mexicans from the Costa Chica area of Mexico, as well as Southern Californians with ancestral ties to the region.

Like America, Mexico is home to many African descendants including the Herrera family in Pasadena, the Cisneros family in Santa Ana and, Yismar Toribio, a college student at UC Santa Barbara.

And even though there are approximately 1.38 million Afro-Mexicans in Mexico, only in December 2015 did the Mexican government officially decide to recognize this population on their national census. Not only has this group of African-descended people been treated like “poor relations,” but this group, often referred to as Mexico’s “third root,” is largely ignored in history books as well.

“Invisible Roots” looks at some of the issues they have endured and also discusses the history of this community with scholars and historians who have tracked their migration to and from Mexico.

Ironically, at one time, there were more slaves in Mexico than in the United States, and also, more African-descended peoples than indigenous or Spaniards. Research also suggests that the Olmec civilization of Mexico was actually African and some anthropologists believe that it predates the Mayan, the Incan and the Aztec civilizations.

Today, many Afro-Mexicans live in impoverished conditions and there is a growing number of people of African descent working to improve their educational, employment and healthcare opportunities.

They are seeking to use the census as a way to gain official recognition in the Constitution. This would mean a deeper study and commemoration of their history and better services for their communities.

While there have been numerous formal and informal documentaries, photo exhibits and multimedia presentations of the African presence in Mexico, little in way of research exists on Afro-Mexicans who have immigrated to the United States, save some newspaper articles. And, while Afro-Mexicans have largely migrated to Southern California, the largest Afro-Mexican population north of the border is actually in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

“Invisible Roots” focuses solely on Afro-Mexicans living in Southern California. It examines the traditions, the food, the culture, the significance of the famous La Danza de los Diablos (the dance of the devils) and the often dysfunctional dynamics that exist between Afro-Mexicans and the people who do not quite know what to make of them.

The documentary opens with a montage of various scenes showing Afro-Mexicans that appear throughout the documentary. The first major scene opens in Pasadena, California, where we meet the Herrera family made up of father—Simeon; mother—Ana; and sons, Emmanuel and Christian.

Simeon and Ana both identify as Afro-Mexican. Both are originally from Oaxaca, Mexico.

We later meet their extended family: Simeon’s father—Arturo, who provides background into the dance, La Danza de los Diablos; Anahi and her husband, Pedro; and Anahi’s sister—Adriana.

Next, the Cisneros family, who live in Santa Ana, California, is shown. The family is made of father—Luis; mother—Lorena; daughter—Cristal—who acts as spokesperson for the family throughout the documentary; and her brothers—Luis Jr. and Francisco.

Father, Luis, identifies as Afro-Mexican and the rest of the family discuss how they individually identify, some as Hispanic and others as American.

The Cisneros family, their extended family and friends are shown in scenes where they are preparing food and partaking in food and festivities at their fundraising event for their hometown, Cuajinicuilapa, located in the Costa Chica region of the state, Guerrero. Most of the town’s nearly 26,000 residents are Afro-Mexican.

The last major cast member we meet is college student Yismar Toribio who is from Santa Ana, but attends the University of California, Santa Barbara. There, he double majors in Chicano Studies and Black Studies.

Yismar identifies as Afro-Mexican, but discusses his evolution to this identity.

His father is from San Nicolas, Guerrero, Mexico and his mother is from Montecillo, Guerrero, Mexico.