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An unusual blend of cultures: Mexican and black

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Ricardo Dearatanha / Los Angeles Times

Maribel Silva, Francisca Dominguez and Vanessa Zorrosa support the Costa Chica soccer team from Pasadena, made up mostly of Mexicans with cultural and racial histories going back hundreds of years to the Spanish conquistadors and the African slave trade.

Immigrants from Costa Chica share an ancient ethnic heritage and culture that few outsiders know about.

By John L. Mitchell, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
April 13, 2008

Every Sunday, on a chewed-up soccer field in Pasadena, Mexican immigrants play a game they learned barefoot in the dusty pueblos along a remote stretch of the Pacific coast.

The Costa Chica team -- named for the picturesque coastline south of Acapulco -- has cut a winning path through the heart of an immigrant-dominated league in Pasadena, capturing three championships in two years.

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Its players are agile and swift. And they've quickly earned the respect and admiration of opponents who at first didn't know what to make of their talented adversaries.

"Are you really Mexican?" they are sometimes asked.

Their skin is dark. They look Honduran,

Dominican or even African American.

Black Mexicans?

"No existe!"

But Costa Chicans -- many dark in complexion with *puchunco* (curly or kinky) hair -- are Mexicans with cultural and racial histories going back hundreds of years to the Spanish conquistadors and the African slave trade.

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As part of the massive wave of Mexican immigrants who began fleeing the economic hardships of their homeland in the 1980s, black Mexicans from the coast settled in communities throughout the United States, in Winston Salem, N.C., Joliet, Ill., and Salt Lake City, among other places.

Some 300 Costa Chicanos live in Pasadena, and thousands more can be found in San Bernardino, South Los Angeles, San Juan Capistrano and Santa Ana, all enclaves characterized by close family and community ties.

The story of their journey and survival includes familiar subplots: immigrant families - some here legally, some not -- struggling to adjust to a new country, establish livelihoods and avoid the perils of urban life. And for Costa Chicanos, the unique cultural and racial identities add another layer of complexity as they try to make their way in a new land.

Like all immigrants, this group came here looking to scratch out a better life than the one offered in the small coastal towns of Guerrero and Oaxaca where most were born. Many seemed to have found what they were looking for -- and then some.

By most accounts, Roberta Acevedo, 42, was among the first of the Costa Chicanos to migrate to Pasadena. When she and her husband, Francisco, arrived nearly two decades ago, she said she felt safe in this city at the foot of the mountains that reminded her of her pueblo, Jose Maria Morelos, in Oaxaca.

But back then, Pasadena offered little else that seemed familiar. The stores weren't stocked with the spices needed to make beef *barbacoa* or fish dishes from her native coast. She missed the festivals at which young men performed La Danza de Diablos, a traditional "dance of the devils" in which participants wear masks with long beards and horns.

Costa Chicanos are steeped in an Afro-Mexican culture that is evident in dance, food and music -- they listen to *cumbia*, not mariachi. Acevedo longed for that culture and the sense of closeness that is common in the coastal pueblos where families are large and everyone seems to know everyone else.

Early on, the Acevedo home became a magnet for the migration. Acevedo and her husband would often wake up to calls in the middle of the night: Eight to 10 relatives and friends had crossed the border and were waiting to be picked up, sometimes as far away as Phoenix.

Eventually, Acevedo, who has seven brothers and sisters living nearby, came to own a Pasadena party and gift store selling piñatas and other accessories, renting tables and chairs and video-taping events. Her sister Yolanda, a former Mexico City police officer, is a seamstress who makes gowns for first Communion and quinceañeras, dresses that can cost as much as \$500. One of their brothers is the store's videographer.

"My dream was that we would all have a chance to make it," Roberta Acevedo said. "Now I feel my dream has come true."

Despite a shared racial heritage, Afro-Mexicans in Southern California have little interaction with African Americans, the relationships hindered by religious, language and cultural differences. And cultural bonds with other Latinos are sometimes stymied by regional and racial preferences.

"I have African American friends who say, 'You're not Mexicans. I saw you with your dad and he's a black man,'" said Soledad Silver, 16, a junior at John Muir High School in Pasadena. "I say, 'Yeah, he's a black man, but he's also Mexican.'"

In Santa Ana, Yismar Toribio's only knowledge of his parents' birthplace comes from the stories he's heard over the years. San Nicolas and Montecillos are beautiful towns full of tradition, places where you don't stand out if you're black and Mexican - unlike Santa Ana, where Yismar attends school in a district that is 94% Latino and less than 1% African American.

Things would be better if his school had more blacks, said the 15-year-old freshman with skin the color of rich dark chocolate.

At school, he has been stung by teasing and occasional racial epithets. He doesn't mind the taunts of friends. He can give just as much as he takes.

It's the taunts of strangers that hurt.

"I'm on the cross-country team, and if I come out with a black shirt on they'll say, 'How dare you come out with no shirt on?'"

Yismar lives with it, but he hasn't forgotten. One such memory: A teacher put him in the front of the class and someone shouted, "No, he belongs in the back. Put him in the back of the bus."

Yismar's father just wants to keep him focused and is pleased his son has eclipsed his own achievements in school; the accomplishment justifies years of sacrifice. Yismar wants to go to college; he wants to be an attorney.

For many of the Costa Chicanos in Southern California, there are reasons to feel pride.



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Immigration has brought business success, home ownership, a continuation of community and the chance to improve the level of prosperity back home. The move has also exposed families like the Acevedos to the miseries -- and occasional miracles -- of urban life.

Early on the morning of Sunday, Aug. 27, 2006, just a few hours before a championship soccer game, Fortino "Chino" Acevedo was visiting with a few friends to cap off a night of partying and drinking.

Fortino, the younger brother of Roberta and Yolanda, had moved to the United States in 2003 from his father's home on the outskirts of Mexico City; he'd been sent to live in Pasadena to escape the lure of drugs and violence and took a job as a waiter at a country club in La Cañada Flintridge.

As he sat on nearby doorsteps early that morning with his friends, Fortino spotted three men surrounding a fourth near Orange Grove Boulevard and Lake Avenue. It looked like a holdup. He had once been robbed and wanted to put a stop to it.

The 20-year-old with a winning smile stepped into the crowd and announced: "If you are going to have a problem, have a problem with me," said Max Dahlstein, of the Pasadena Police Department. There was a fight, one of the men pulled a gun and shot Fortino in the face.

"He was trying to stop someone from being hurt and he ended up getting shot himself," Dahlstein said.

Fortino was rushed to Huntington Hospital, where the family gathered at his bedside. Several hours later he was pronounced dead.

Doctors encouraged the Acevedo family to consider organ donation; from Mexico, the family patriarch granted permission.

At the time of the shooting, Angel Zorrosa, a 26-year-old distant relative from the same pueblo as the Acevedos, was on kidney dialysis and had just been listed to receive a transplant. Hours after Fortino was declared dead, Zorrosa got a call: As a family member, he would be given priority to receive a kidney.

"I had just been approved that week for a transplant," Zorrosa said.

Last October, Zorrosa witnessed the birth of his first child, a son named Angel Luis. He weighed 5 pounds, 4 ounces.

The birth was a message, said Roberta Acevedo. "I try to find something about Chino in his child."

"*Negro, Chimeco y Feo*" -- black, dirty and ugly -- is the title of a popular song from Costa Chica. The lyrics describe the life of a man who is born in a shack on the coast of Mexico with a midwife's help. He grows up attending pigs and fishing for shrimp with an old net; because he is poor, he makes his way in the world with almost no clothes.

But the lyrics go on to explain that his soul is pure, unlike those who were "born in clean diapers," those with lighter skin.

It's a song that reminds Neri Cisneros, who lives in Santa Ana, of his childhood.

"I was that little boy," he said. "I would eat beans and I didn't have shoes.

"Sometimes we were the children playing in the streets without underwear. When I hear that song, it makes me sad because I used to live that life."

Cisneros, like many Costa Chicanos in Southern California, is nostalgic about his childhood and misses the land of his birth. But he is the father of three daughters who have never set foot in Mexico. He is intent on raising them here. He will not soon return to Costa Chica.

On the day Fortino was shot, the Costa Chicanos had a championship soccer game. They played the match and won.

It was important to keep the team focused on playing, said Martin Ibarra Aleman, the team's coach. The streets are too much of a distraction.

"If you are on the street, then you are heading for trouble," Aleman said. "The guys who play soccer are dealing with the game. For two hours they are in the game and that is all they care about."

But when the game is over, they return to lives shaped by immigration. Steady work has not always been easy to find. Many don't have driver's licenses and face stiff penalties if they're caught on the road in their cars. They worry about the safety and future of their children, most of whom were born here.

At the Sacred Heart Church in Altadena, Padre Glyn Jemmott, a Roman Catholic priest from Trinidad and Tobago who has had a parish of a dozen Costa Chican pueblos since 1984, said Mass one recent Sunday for a congregation of some 500.

Later, he challenged the group to apply their skills in organizing a winning soccer

team to strengthening their community. The change is up to them, he said.

"If you have water and you want to get the water to the roots of the plant, you have to carry it there," he said.

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