

Tarahumara

ETHNONYMS: Ralámuli, Rarámuri, Tarahumar, Tarahumari, Taraumar

Orientation

Identification. In Spanish colonial records the Tarahumara are usually designated as "Tarahumaes" and "Tarahumaras," the names that non-Tarahumara continue to apply to them. The Tarahumara today refer to themselves as "Rarámuri," which means—on increasingly specific levels—"human beings," "Indians" (as opposed to non-Indians), "the Rarámuri proper" (as opposed to other Indian groups), and "men" (as opposed to women). The term "Rarámuri" first appeared in print in 1826 (but spelled "Rarámari" and translated as "Tarahumares"). The etymologies of "Tarahumara" and "Rarámuri" and the relation between the two terms remain unclear. "Ralámuli" is becoming the standard spelling in writings by Rarámuri people. Around 3 percent of contemporary Tarahumara reject a formal affiliation with the Catholic church and are called *gentiles* and *cimarrones*. The rest of the Tarahumara identify themselves as "Pagótame" or "Pagótuame" (Baptized ones).

Location. At Spanish contact, the Tarahumara lived across much of what is now central and western Chihuahua, Mexico, from 106° to 108° W and 26° to 30° N. During the colonial period, some Tarahumara entered Spanish economic centers to the south and east of their aboriginal territory, whereas others retreated to the west. The incursions of non-Indian settlers and the integration of the Tarahumara into the emerging mestizo society have reduced their territory to the mountains and canyons of western Chihuahua. In the mountains, summers are cool and winters mild, but the climate of the canyon floors is semitropical.

Demography. The 1980 Mexican census recorded 62,419 speakers of the Rarámuri language over 5 years of age, of which 56,400 resided in Chihuahua and 3,916 in the adjacent states of Sinaloa, Sonora, and Durango. Sixty percent of the Tarahumara in Chihuahua live in the mountains and

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canyons of the Sierra Madre Occidental, and the remainder around urban centers outside the sierra.

Linguistic Affiliation. The Rarámuri language, of which there are three dialects, belongs to the Uto-Aztecan Language Family. Of extant languages, it is most closely related to Guarijío and Yaqui-Mayo.

History and Cultural Relations

The meager archaeological evidence available suggests that the Tarahumara have lived in Chihuahua for at least two thousand years. At Spanish contact (around 1600), they were bordered on the south by the Tepehuan, on the east and north by the Concho, on the northwest by the Mountain Pima, on the southwest by the Tubar, and on the west by the Guarijía and a number of other small groups closely related culturally and linguistically to the Tarahumara. Spanish settlement in and around Tarahumara country was motivated primarily by the discovery of rich silver and gold deposits; the settlers carried Old World diseases that decimated local Indian populations. The Tarahumara served as both forced and free laborers in the colonial economy; they adopted Old World livestock and agricultural technology. Between 1639 and 1767, Jesuits established missions across the Tarahumara region, but most Tarahumara maintained only a loose affiliation with the Catholic church. Although there were Tarahumara who integrated into Spanish colonial society, many resisted Spanish expansion: several revolts erupted throughout the seventeenth century, Spanish settlements were raided during the eighteenth century, and some Indians sought refuge by establishing communities in inaccessible areas. Franciscan and secular priests replaced the Jesuits in 1767.

By the mid-nineteenth century, social and economic disruptions following Mexican independence in 1821 led to the abandonment of the mission system, but the Jesuits reestablished it in 1900. Since the late nineteenth century, expanded mining, agriculture, and lumbering have displaced the Tarahumara from many areas outside the Sierra and have attracted non-Indian settlers into the Sierra. Tarahumara relations with these non-Indians vary from community to community, but generally each ethnic group views the other negatively and intermarriage between them

is rare. The Mexican government and the Catholic mission provide the Tarahumara schools and medical services. In the late twentieth century Protestant missionaries have been active in several Tarahumara communities, where they also offer some social services.

Settlements

The Tarahumara in the Sierra Madre continue their traditional pattern of living near their fields in hundreds of hamlets and isolated homesteads scattered along streams and canyons. Catholic missionary efforts to congregate the Tarahumara into compact villages have largely failed, but their churches have become the foci of community religious and political activities. In the second half of the twentieth century, notched log houses have replaced more traditional stone and mixed stone and handhewn-plank houses over much of Tarahumara country. In many areas, residents move during the growing season to cultivate dispersed fields; some shift to rock shelters or winter houses during the colder months of the year.

Economy

Subsistence and Commercial Activities. As in the past, the Tarahumara economy is based on the cultivation of maize, beans, and squash. The European introduction of plows, axes, livestock, fruit trees, and Old World crops such as wheat enhanced rather than transformed traditional agricultural practices. Wild plants continue to provide an important component of the diet, but wild-plant fibers used for weaving have been supplanted by wool and commercial yarn. The destruction of much of the larger fauna, especially deer, once a crucial source of meat and raw materials, has increased the importance of introduced livestock, in particular sheep, goats, and cattle, which provide manure, wool, and hides in addition to meat. Many Tarahumara supplement their agricultural activities by working in the local Mexican economy, typically in lumbering and road construction, and by performing chores for their non-Indian neighbors. They also acquire cash by selling their agricultural products and by producing items for sale to tourists. Since the colonial period, the Tarahumara have migrated to work in economic centers outside their territory; in the second half of the twentieth century such out-migration, both temporary and permanent, has been increasing.

Industrial Arts. The Tarahumara make most of their basic household and agricultural implements and ritual paraphernalia from locally available raw materials, but they purchase manufactured goods such as cloth, metal tools, and plastic and metal containers. They also produce textiles, pottery, musical instruments, and wood carvings for the outside, mostly tourist, market.

Trade. In the colonial period, the Tarahumara traded maize and other agricultural products for European manufactured goods, providing a significant proportion of the food for some Spanish mining towns. A similar exchange continues, but goods are now more frequently bought and sold rather than bartered. Items found locally in the canyons of southwestern Chihuahua, especially medicinal

plants, are traded and sold in the uplands and in areas outside the Sierra.

Division of Labor. The Tarahumara divide most work into male or female tasks, but when the need arises both men and women perform basic household chores associated with the opposite gender. Women tend to prepare the food, care for the children and livestock, weave, and make pottery; men undertake most of the horticultural work, construct houses, cut and haul firewood, and carve. Men are the principal political officials and are also more prominent than women in wage labor for non-Indians and in ritual activities, including curing.

Land Tenure. Most Tarahumara live in *ejidos*, communal landholding units created as part of the agrarian-reform program of the Mexican Revolution. Land tenure is ultimately subject to ejido rules but tends to conform to traditional practices. Both men and women own fields individually, which they exchange, sell, lend, and transmit to their heirs. Usufruct applies to abandoned fields and uncultivated lands. Reforms to the Mexican constitution in 1992 allow ejido holdings to be converted to private property and sold to non-ejido members, potentially jeopardizing Tarahumara control of their lands.

Kinship

Kin Groups and Descent. The Tarahumara reckon descent bilaterally and have no corporate kin groups. Their kin terminology is classified as Neo-Hawaiian.

Marriage and Family

Marriage. People who share a lineal ancestor theoretically cannot marry, but in practice this prohibition usually extends only to second cousins because genealogical connections seldom are remembered beyond three generations. Many marriages are arranged, often by special marriage officials; only the Tarahumara most influenced by Jesuit missionaries are married by Catholic priests. Because interaction between unrelated men and women is discouraged, young people often marry several times, until they find compatible spouses, after which their marriages are stable. Polygyny occurs but is rare. Young newlyweds usually move between their natal households until they are economically independent.

Domestic Unit. Households are composed of nuclear families, frequently extended to include relatives of either spouse but seldom of both. Closely related nuclear families often live near one another, sharing food and working cooperatively.

Inheritance. Children inherit equally from both parents. Spouses do not inherit from one another, but surviving spouses often retain some property if there are no surviving children or serve as trustees for property inherited by their small children. During life, parents often give their children livestock and (especially at marriage) fields so they can begin forming separate economic bases.

Socialization. Children enjoy considerable independence and are scolded but seldom struck when they misbehave. A child's older siblings and grandparents share child-rearing duties with the parents. Industriousness, sharing, coopera-

tion, and nonaggression are encouraged. The Tarahumara have no initiation rites or formal educational institutions; children are educated informally by participating in household and community activities. Most children also attend government or Jesuit primary schools, which somewhat disrupt traditional patterns of cultural transmission.

Sociopolitical Organization

Social Organization. The basic unit of social organization is the household. Neighboring households cooperate in the performance of rituals and in work projects such as planting and harvesting maize. Sponsoring households usually serve maize beer in conjunction with such activities. Households also share an affiliation with a pueblo, an organizational unit established by Catholic missionaries in the Spanish colonial period. Tarahumara society is egalitarian. There are variations in the amount of land and livestock individuals own, but wealth does not translate into political power, and redistributive mechanisms preclude the development of class divisions. Men and women are regarded as complementary equals.

Political Organization. At Spanish contact, local elders directed the political affairs of their communities but apparently exercised little real power. Today, a hierarchical political organization introduced by the Spanish is found in each Tarahumara pueblo, but no overarching tribal organization links the different pueblos. All officials are men, who choose their successors subject to the approval of the other men of the pueblo. The Tarahumara also participate with their non-Indian neighbors in the local political organizations of the ejido and the Mexican government.

Social Control. Social control is achieved informally through shunning, gossip, and scolding. The pueblo's political officials, sometimes joined by local ejido and Mexican-government authorities, hold formal trials in cases of assault, theft, failure to pay debts, and spouse desertion, punishing offenders by scolding, fining, or jailing them. People who commit more serious crimes (e.g., murder) are turned over to government officials for trial and punishment.

Conflict. Overt violence occurs almost exclusively in drinking contexts, most frequently between spouses. Such conflicts are often forgotten, but if they persist the pueblo political officials sometimes intervene. Although tensions exist between the Tarahumara and their non-Indian neighbors, few violent confrontations have occurred in the twentieth century.

Religion and Expressive Culture

Religious Beliefs. Catholicism has affected Tarahumara ritual more than it has their religious beliefs. Contemporary Tarahumara religion is oriented toward maintaining proper relations with their deities, who tend to be either benevolently or malevolently inclined toward them. Through dances, offerings, and other acts, the Tarahumara attempt to promote the benevolence or deflect the malevolence of these deities.

Religious Practitioners. Indigenous ritual specialists include chanters and curers; of the latter, raspers who direct peyote ceremonies are considered by many to be the most

powerful. Curers are compensated for their services, but few are full-time specialists. Catholic missionaries have introduced additional ritual roles, principally *matachine* dancers and the musicians who accompany them on violins and guitars; the sodalities that direct the Easter ceremonies; and male and female officials who recite prayers, offer incense, and care for the church.

Supernaturals. The principal deities are "Our Father" and "Our Mother," associated with the sun and moon respectively. In many communities, the Christian God (often conflated with Jesus Christ) and the Virgin Mary have been assimilated to these deities. The Devil, considered the elder brother but implacable opponent of "Our Father," has been incorporated as the father of non-Indians. He controls the levels of the universe below the earth, whereas "Our Father" and "Our Mother" control those above. Minor deities and spirits also help or harm people but do not serve as intermediaries between humans and the supreme deities; Catholic saints are almost entirely absent.

Ceremonies. The Tarahumara perform rituals at their homes to cure ailments, to promote good health in people, livestock and maize, and to send offerings to their deities and the dead. They stage their most elaborate ceremonies at the pueblo churches during the Christmas and Easter seasons.

Arts. The Easter pageantry and the *matachine* dance, with its costumed performers and extensive musical repertoire, are the most highly developed examples of Tarahumara expressive culture.

Medicine. The Tarahumara consider illnesses to be of two types: those that afflict people's bodies and those that afflict their souls. The former usually are cured with plant or commercial medicines and increasingly are treated by physicians in Mexican government or Catholic facilities; the latter, which are usually produced by spirits, deities, or sorcerers, require the intervention of curing specialists who rely on their dreams to discover the causes of illness.

Death and Afterlife. Death occurs when people's souls permanently abandon their bodies. Tarahumara souls ascend to spend eternity with their heavenly parents, whereas those of non-Indians descend to live with the Devil. The souls of the Tarahumara who have committed offenses are punished—with destruction if their crimes are especially serious—but there is no eternal punishment or suffering. Surviving relatives sponsor a series of rituals to provide the dead food and goods and to encourage them to sever their relations with the living. Visitations from the dead, which usually occur in dreams, are feared as potential causes of illness and death.

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