

Anthro Notes

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IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION IN COLONIAL NORTHERN MEXICO

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... con gran facilidad mudarán a semejanza de los mulatos y mestizos su traje, dejando crecer el cabello, trocando la tilma por un capote; pues con esta transformación se llaman gente de razon, y se eximen de pagar tributo.

A Jesuit Priest, 1754

In 1754, Spanish officials and Catholic missionaries in the province of Sinaloa, located in northwestern Mexico, debated the wisdom of requiring local Indians to pay tribute to the King of Spain while exempting certain non-Indian settlers from such payments. A Jesuit missionary, whose opinion but not his name is preserved in the historical record, argued against the measure, indicating that the Indians would simply change their identity: "... with great ease they will come to resemble mulattos and mestizos in their dress, letting their hair grow and exchanging their capes for cloaks, and with this transformation they call themselves people of reason and are exempted from paying tribute."

Historical Background

During the century following the Spanish conquest of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan in 1521, Spanish settlers spread from central Mexico as far north as what is now the southwestern United States. Drawn especially by major strikes of silver and gold in the modern state of Chihuahua, miners were joined by missionaries, ranchers, farmers, and merchants in an effort to establish firm Spanish control over the northern frontier.

At the time of European contact, Chihuahua was populated by a number of distinct Indian groups speaking a variety of mutually unintelligible languages. Nomadic, hunting-gathering bands lived in eastern and northern Chihuahua, while in central and western Chihuahua, sedentary societies supplemented their agriculture with extensive collecting of wild resources. All these societies were egalitarian and locally autonomous.

At the time of contact, there were no Native conquest states in this region (such as the Aztec and Inca farther south) and, while local groups probably formed alliances during times of conflict, no political organization existed that encompassed more than a few small bands or contiguous rancherías.

Franciscan and Jesuit missionaries first contacted the Indians of Chihuahua in the second half of the 16th century, but they did not begin to create a network of permanent missions until the early decades of the 17th century. Indian revolts throughout the second half of the 17th century disrupted their efforts, but by the early 18th century

When the Spanish arrived in northern Mexico, they brought with them a scheme of ethnic classification derived ultimately from Iberian and European concepts of ethnicity and modified during the previous century on the basis of their experience in other parts of the New World. The basic distinction in this scheme was that between "Spaniards" and "Indians." The category of "Spaniard," itself a subcategory of "European," was divided into two principal subcategories, the first labeling Spaniards born in Spain (*peninsulares*) and the second Spaniards born in the New World (*criollos*). The category of "Indians" also was subdivided; distinct Indian groups were labeled by tribal identities, which were crossed by several general categories. For example, Indians were classified as being "civilized" or "barbaric"--a distinction that reflected the prejudices not only of Europeans but of central Mexican Indians as well--depending primarily on the complexity of their societies. Those Indians who converted to Christianity were called "Christians" (*cristianos*), "baptized people" (*bautizados*), or "converts" (*conversos*), and were distinguished from those who did not, who usually were referred to as "gentiles."

Christian Indians were further distinguished according to their inclination to accept the conditions of colonial existence that their colonizers attempted to impose upon them. There were "good Christians," who tended to accept these conditions, and "bad Christians," who did not. Those "bad Christians" who abandoned their mission pueblos and the Spanish economic centers to live in areas beyond Spanish control were characterized additionally as "apostates," "fugitives," or "cimarrones." The term "cimarrones" originally meant "runaways" and is the source of the name "Seminole," which labeled Indians and African slaves who sought refuge from European colonialism in remote areas of Florida.

Apostate and fugitive Indians often moved into established communities of gentile Indians. In fact, people in Chihuahua today use the terms "gentiles" and "cimarrones" interchangeably to designate the descendants of those Indians who remained outside the colonial system. However, not all gentiles rejected baptism and incorporation into the mission pueblos. Many remained outside the mission system simply because the opportunity to join had not presented itself or because they did not want to abandon their rancherías, which frequently were located long distances from the mission pueblos. As the mission system expanded into their areas, they often accepted baptism. Thus, over the course of the colonial period, the number of Indians identified as "gentiles" tended to decrease and to include primarily those Indians who intentionally rejected an affiliation with the Catholic mission system.



Joining the categories of "Spaniards" and "Indians" in the Spanish ethnic classification was a third division composed of a complicated set of categories that labeled individuals of mixed European, Indian, and African genetic heritage. These categories, theoretically infinite in number, were collapsed under the general term of "castes" (*castas*). The people so classified also were categorized collectively as "*gente de razón*," a term that literally means "people of reason," but was originally used to designate non-Spaniards and especially people of mixed genetic heritage who were able to speak the Spanish language. Today non-Indians in Chihuahua sometimes refer to all local non-Indians as "*gente de razón*" regardless of their genetic heritage. However, colonial documents reveal that many Spaniards carefully

distinguished themselves from the ethnically mixed "*gente de razón*," whom they tended to consider of inferior status.

The Indians of Chihuahua undoubtedly maintained their own schemes of ethnic classification, but it is impossible to determine with any confidence what these schemes might have been because all of our information is filtered through documents produced by Europeans. From the evidence that is available, it appears that the Indians emphasized language as the principal marker of ethnicity, further distinguishing among speakers of the same language on the basis of locality. There was some blurring of identity along the borders of different language groups, where speakers of distinct languages intermarried, lived in the same or adjacent *rancherías*, and occasionally shared political leaders. Yet, even in such border areas where bilingualism was the rule, a person's first or preferred language appears to have been the key element in determining his or her ethnic identity.

The Spanish and Indian schemes of ethnic classification probably differed primarily in the degree to which the categories they included were ranked. In the Spanish scheme, Spaniards and other Europeans were located at the top, "*castas*" in the middle, and Indians at the bottom. In specific areas, however, Indians and in particular "good Christian Indians" were considered by Europeans to be morally if not socially superior to certain people of mixed heritage whose libertine ways were felt to jeopardize the progress of "civilization" on the frontier.

Given the egalitarianism of the Indian societies in northern Mexico, it is unlikely that their schemes of ethnic classification were as hierarchical as that of the Spaniards, although they may have thought of themselves as superior to the Spaniards. Today the Tarahumara Indians classify all non-Indians as "whiskered ones" (*chabochi*) and say that they are the children of the Devil, while considering themselves and all other Indians to be equals and the children of God.

Fewer Indian Identities

One of the most notable features of the history of identity formation in colonial northern Mexico is the decline in the number of distinct Indian groups noted in the documentary record between the 17th and 18th centuries. In some cases, especially among nomadic Indian societies in eastern Chihuahua, entire groups disappeared because the majority of their members died in epidemics or conflicts with the Spanish, the survivors joining other Indian groups or assimilating into the emerging mestizo population. Epidemics and military conflicts also had an important impact on the more sedentary Indian populations in central and western Chihuahua. In these areas, however, the reduction in the number of distinct Indian identities appears to have been due primarily to the emergence of more inclusive categories of ethnicity and a better understanding of the linguistic and cultural relationships among the Indians on the part of missionaries and colonial officials.

At the time of European contact, the greatest ethnic diversity in the region was reported from the mountains and rugged canyon country of western Chihuahua. The first missionaries to visit and work in this area identified these Indians as comprising a number of distinct "nations" (*naciones*): Chinipas, Varohíos, Guazapares, Témoris, Tepochis, Cuitecos, Cerocahuis, and so on. However, the missionaries' perspectives on local ethnic diversity was strongly affected by their previous experience in the Sinaloan missions to the south, where the Indians belonged to a number of politically autonomous groups and spoke many distinct languages. When they arrived in western Chihuahua, these missionaries failed to realize that the various politically autonomous groups that they encountered probably were sub-divisions of but two ethnic groups: the Varohío (known today as Guarijío) and the Guazapar, who probably spoke a dialect of Tarahumara rather than a distinct language.

In 1632, the Varohíos and Guazapares expelled the missionaries and other outsiders from their territories. It was

not until the late 17th century that the Spanish had an opportunity to acquire a more profound understanding of the cultural and linguistic affiliations of these groups. From that point on, the missionaries began using fewer terms to distinguish among the Indians in the region.

It is also likely that the influx of Tarahumaras and Indians from other areas into western Chihuahua resulted in some cultural and linguistic homogenization across the region. Large numbers of Tarahumaras began migrating into this area during the major revolts in the mid- and late 17th century, and the immigrants probably included both rebels fleeing from the Spanish military and other Tarahumaras who sought to avoid the violence altogether.

Where the number of Tarahumara immigrants was small, they were absorbed by the local communities, eventually substituting local Indian identities for their own. A similar loss of identity may also have occurred where the number of Tarahumara immigrants was more substantial, but the outcome for ethnic identity was not always the same. The large numbers of Tarahumara immigrants who entered the Varohío area of western Chihuahua apparently were assimilated into the Varohío communities: the Varohíos continue to live today as a distinct ethnic group in roughly the same area as they did in the 17th century. In contrast, the Tarahumaras who migrated to the neighboring Guazapares region did not lose their identity but instead, by the 18th century, the Guazapares became known as Tarahumaras and apparently identified themselves as such.

Because comparable numbers of Tarahumaras migrated into the Guazapar and Varohío areas, how can we explain the fact that the Varohíos retained their distinct identity while the Guazapares lost theirs? I believe that the key lies in differences in the degree to which the languages spoken by the Varohíos and Guazapares were similar to the Tarahumara language spoken by immigrants into their communities. Although closely related to Tarahumara, Varohío is nonetheless a distinct language. The Guazapar language, on the other hand, probably was a mutually intelligible variant of Tarahumara. Assuming an identity as "Tarahumaras" thus would have been simpler for the Guazapares than for the Varohíos. Indeed, given the linguistic and cultural similarities between the Guazapares and the Tarahumaras, it is possible that the Guazapares identified themselves as Tarahumaras before the arrival of the Spanish, who might have concluded incorrectly that "Guazapares" labeled a separate ethnic group rather than a sub-division of the Tarahumaras.

In the 18th and 19th centuries the Spanish expanded the semantic scope of the term "Tarahumara" to label both Tarahumaras and other Indians who closely resembled them. They did this even in the case of Indians who did not identify themselves as Tarahumaras. This reformulation of the category "Tarahumaras" by the Spanish may have paralleled and even contributed to the adoption of the term as a more encompassing ethnic label by the Indians in the region. During the colonial period, Indian groups from widely separated areas came into contact with one another in Spanish mines, haciendas, and other population centers. It is reasonable to assume that this increased interaction, combined with the growing presence of non-Indians with whom to contrast themselves, encouraged the emergence of a sense of common identity among the Indians, an identity that came to be labeled as "Tarahumara."

Today the Tarahumaras consider the term "Tarahumara" to be a Spanish word, and they refer to themselves as "Ralámuli." The term "Ralámuli" has meanings on four increasingly specific levels of significance. At the most general level, it designates "human beings" in contrast to "non-humans." At the second level, it labels "Indians" in contrast to "non-Indians." At the third level, it refers only to Ralámuli Indians in contrast to the members of other Indian groups. Finally, at the most specific level, it designates Ralámuli men in contrast to Ralámuli women. A recognition of these different senses clearly indicates that the term "Ralámuli," semantically one of the most complex words in the Ralámuli language today, was adjusted, if not created, to accommodate the distinction

between Indians and non-Indians that impinged itself upon the Ralámuli and other Indian people in the colonial period.

The word "Ralámuli" first appears in the historical literature in 1826 in a sermon prepared in the Tarahumara language by the Franciscan missionary Miguel Tellechea. Given its late appearance, I am inclined to conclude that the Tarahumaras adopted the term "Ralámuli" during the course of the colonial period to label the more inclusive ethnic identity that was being forged out of the multiple and often very localized identities of the pre-contact period. Because the term "Tarahumar" was used by the Spanish from the time of their arrival in Chihuahua, the Tarahumaras later on in the colonial period might have identified it as a Spanish rather than Native word, as they do today. If so, they may have rejected it as inappropriate as a label with which to distinguish themselves from non-Indians.

The Spatialization of Identity

The Tarahumaras responded to the Spanish colonial system in a variety of ways, ranging from enthusiastic acceptance to near total rejection. Through time these differences in attitudes became increasingly associated with communities located in different areas rather than being replicated within each Tarahumara community.

By 1767, when the Jesuits were expelled, the Tarahumaras who rejected most aspects of the Spanish colonial system lived in the remoter reaches of western and southern Tarahumara country, far from major Spanish settlements and economic centers. There they were little affected by labor drafts, Spanish encroachment on their lands, and the programs of directed culture change administered by the Catholic missionaries.

These isolated communities of Tarahumaras contrast with those located in and around the missions and Spanish economic centers of east central Chihuahua and northern Durango. Here the Indians extensively participated in the regional colonial economy and were described by the missionaries and Spanish colonial officials as having accepted much of Spanish colonial society and culture. Between these two groups were the Tarahumaras who lived within the mission system but some distance from major Spanish economic centers. These Indians created a synthetic culture that combined both indigenous and introduced ideas and practices. They also retained their distinct Indian identity, which they modified to reflect their affiliation with the Catholic mission system.

Summary

In this essay, I have discussed three basic processes related to the formation and transformation of Indian identity in colonial northern Mexico. All three processes took place simultaneously and were inextricably linked to more general processes of the colonial endeavor.

The first process involved modifications in the Indian schemes of ethnic classification. Unlike the Spanish, who employed essentially the same scheme in northern Mexico as the one they had developed earlier in central Mexico, the local Indians modified their pre-existing schemes rather extensively. They created new terms to label non-Indians as well as new or modified terms to label the emerging category of "Indian." They also adopted ethnic labels from the Spanish to designate subgroups of Indians who varied from one another in their responses to the colonial system.

The second process was the reduction in the number of terms used to label local groups. In other areas of the New World, the emergence of more inclusive ethnic categories often resulted from the consolidation of remnant groups into new ethnic units. In central and western Chihuahua, in contrast, most Indian groups were sufficiently

large to sustain their biological reproduction and avoid reduction to the status of remnant societies, at least until the 20th century. The Spanish began using fewer terms to label these groups because they gradually came to recognize the cultural and linguistic affinities among them. In northern Mexico as in other areas of the New World, they sometimes carried this process too far, lumping together Indians who probably were sufficiently different to warrant designation as distinct groups. During the same period, the Indians in the region also apparently began employing broader ethnic labels to designate themselves, in part because the Spanish were using these terms in a more inclusive sense, in part because of the cultural and linguistic homogenization that resulted from population movements, but most importantly because they were forging a sense of common Indian identity to contrast with that of non-Indians.

The third process was the spatialization of identity, in which internal divisions within the more inclusive Indian identities became associated with distinct geographical areas. These divisions were defined in terms of the different stances that different Indian people and groups took with respect to the Spanish colonial and mission enterprise and, on a superficial level at least, the Spanish and Indians agreed on what the distinctions were.

The interplay of both external and internal factors is evident in all three of these interconnected processes. Colonial categories and policies forced people to be "Indians" as well as specific kinds of "Indians," but at the same time they motivated Indian people to create a common identity as "Indians" that at different times and places served as the basis for political solidarity against the Spanish. Yet, while the Spanish presence engendered solidarity at one level it produced internal divisions and conflicts at another. At no time during the colonial period did all the Tarahumaras unite to support or oppose the Spanish.

The Spanish presence also stimulated the movement of Indians out of their home communities, either to avoid contact with the Spanish or to trade with and work for them. People from many different ethnic groups, often including both Indians and non-Indians, came together in refuge areas, in missions near Spanish settlements, and in Spanish economic centers, where identities were both reinforced and revised. One result was the transformation of large numbers of Indians into mestizos, either because of their assimilation into the emerging mestizo society or because of the creation of offspring of mixed ethnic and genetic heritage through inter-ethnic marriage or sexual relations.

Although less frequent, the transformation of non-Indians into Indians also occurred. Non-Indian criminals and other fugitives from Spanish society sometimes joined communities of fugitive and gentile Indians, many of whom themselves came from distinct Indian societies. The emergence of a common identity within these communities depended upon overcoming the ethnic diversity of their members, a process no doubt facilitated by the physical isolation of the communities and their marginal and often oppositional stance with respect to the Spanish.

Despite the transformations that have taken place in their lives since European contact, many Indian societies in northern Mexico have succeeded in maintaining their distinctive identities. During the past century, several developments in Mexico--including the *indigenista* movement, the organization of Indian communities into collective landholding and economic units called *ejidos*, and changes to the Mexican Constitution, which now acknowledges that Mexico is a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society--have promoted the persistence of separate Indian identities. However, Indian people have never depended on external structures and forces for the maintenance of their identities. Instead they have produced and reproduced their identities as part of their pursuit of the goals and interests that they have defined as fundamental to their survival.

For Further Reading

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ANTHROPOLOGIST REDISCOVERS PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHER BENEDICTE WRENSTED

by John Barrat

Call her the Annie Leibovitz of Pocatello, Idaho—an extraordinary woman portrait photographer. In 1894, Benedicte Wrensted settled in this dusty frontier town and made a successful living as a portrait photographer. When she retired some 20 years later, Wrensted left behind a collection of beautiful portraits of both Native and Anglo Americans.

Yet, critical recognition escaped Wrensted in an age before mass-media and the glossy magazine. Her subjects were local people — cowboys, school groups, soldiers, ranchers, firemen, families and newly married couples from Pocatello and nearby Fort Hall Indian Reservation. Rarely were her photographs published. Most were taken home by the customer who paid to have them done and placed on a wall or mantelpiece. When Wrensted sold her photography studio in 1912, she sold all her glass negatives as well. She then moved to California and died, in obscurity, in Los Angeles at the age of 89.

Today, an exhibition of her portraits, "Benedicte Wrensted: An Idaho Photographer in Focus," has been traveling from Nebraska, Missouri, Washington, Indiana, and Kansas to the Danish Immigrant Museum in Elkhorn, Iowa (5/15/97-6/20/97) and will be on exhibit most likely in Denmark in 1998. A number of her photographs have recently been donated to the Smithsonian's National Anthropological Archives from private collections, and there is a growing appreciation of her work among Native Americans, anthropologists and the general public.

Wrensted's recent rise from obscurity—she was unknown a decade ago—is the result of detective work and research by anthropologist Joanna Cohan Scherer of the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C.