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Rarámuri Personhood and Ethnicity: Another Perspective

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debate

Rarámuri personhood and ethnicity: another perspective

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The construction of personhood and ethnicity among the Rarámuri (or Tarahumara, as they are called by outsiders) is a topic long neglected in Rarámuri studies. Slaney's desire to fill this gap through her research in the community of Banalachi (Spanish: Panalachi) is commendable, but her efforts are undermined by her superficial ethnography, her serious misinterpretations of Rarámuri culture and history, and her frequent misrepresentations of previous theoretical and ethnographic work. We base this evaluation of her article on Heras's investigation of Rarámuri identity in Banalachi begun in 1994 and Merrill's research on contemporary Rarámuri religion and philosophy in other communities and the history of the Rarámuri region as a whole conducted between 1977 and the present (Herás 1996, n.d.; Merrill 1978, 1988, 1992, 1993, 1995).

Few scholars would take issue with Slaney's rejection of primordialist and essentialist concepts of personhood and ethnicity or disagree that the production and reproduction of these and other aspects of identity are part of a dialectic between internal and external factors in which local perspectives and circumstances are crucial. Most scholars would, however, challenge her belief that this perspective derives largely from postmodernism and would question the validity of many of her criticisms both of postmodernist and other theoretical perspectives and of previous work on Rarámuri history and culture. Although we consider Slaney's treatment of the existing literature unfortunate, this literature is readily available to readers who wish to evaluate her arguments. In contrast, few people will have the firsthand ethnographic experience to recognize the inaccuracies that pervade her portrayal of the ideas and practices of the Banalachi Rarámuri and her interpretations of them. Given the limited space available to us, we will focus on the latter in our commentary.

Slaney's analysis of Rarámuri personhood and ethnicity is flawed throughout because the fire and water symbolism central to her interpretation simply does not exist as she portrays it, either in Banalachi or other documented Rarámuri communities. She proposes the existence of two opposing sets of symbolic associations: (1) Fire—Sun—God—Upperworld—Souls—Rarámuri—Males *versus* (2) Water—Moon—Virgin Mary—Underworld—Bodies—Non-Rarámuri—Females. Although the Rarámuri oppose individual elements from each of these two sets (e.g., fire versus water, males versus females, etc.) and link some of the elements within them (e.g., the upperworld and Rarámuri versus the underworld and non-Rarámuri), they do not maintain primary or exclusive symbolic associations among fire, the upperworld, souls, and males; nor do they maintain such associations among water, the underworld, bodies, and females. They do not link fire or water to either bodies or souls, and they associate fire and water and bodies and souls with both the under- and upperworlds. They also replicate the opposition between males and females on all levels of their cosmology; Slaney's claim that the Rarámuri symbolically link females to the underworld and Rarámuri women to non-Indians is antithetical to Rarámuri perspectives (pp. 293–294). Such sets of linked symbolic elements do not emerge from local Rarámuri symbolism, rather they are inventions that Slaney assembles from diverse and often non-Rarámuri sources (pp. 293–294). In this regard, her failure even to mention the

principal deities of the underworld (the Devil and his wife) is indefensible. These deities are as closely associated symbolically with fire as is the Sun, and, as the spiritual progenitors of non-Indians, they are central to Rarámuri conceptions of ethnicity.

In addition to imposing fallacious symbolic associations and excluding data that contradict her analysis, Slaney ignores a basic tenet of symbolic analysis: a single element can be assigned multiple and even contradictory values. In the case of fire and water, the Rarámuri regard both as potentially destructive forces but also associate fire with warmth and light and water with life and sustenance. Moreover, while they identify lakes and streams as passageways to the underworld, which are inhabited by potentially dangerous beings, they do not fear water as such. Indeed, they closely associate water with the upperworld and direct much of their ritual activities toward convincing the upperworld deities to send them water in the form of rain. In brief, their cosmos is not “coded by fire and water” (p. 280).

Slaney’s misunderstanding of contemporary Rarámuri symbolism leads her to misinterpret past Rarámuri culture and actions. For example, the ambivalence of the Rarámuri in the colonial period to Christian baptism did not reflect their fear of water, as Slaney claims (pp. 289–290). In fact, their ambivalence can be traced to their association of baptism with the spread of European diseases and incorporation into a colonial system dedicated to labor exploitation and political and cultural domination. Moreover, their responses to Christian baptism and the Spanish colonial system varied at different times and places from enthusiastic acceptance to violent rejection, engendering the formation of distinct communities of “baptized” and “gentile” or, as Slaney calls them (p. 279), “pagan” Rarámuri (Merrill 1993).

In her use of the historical record Slaney misinterprets sources, confuses European and Indian perspectives, and assumes a uniformity of culture and experience among the Rarámuri of the colonial period that did not exist. Of even greater concern to us is her unjustified projection of contemporary Rarámuri ritual practice into the past. She assumes that the ritual she calls “fire baptism” (which we place in quotes because we consider it a misnomer) predated European contact. The Rarámuri of the late 17th century reportedly performed rituals to protect their newborn children and themselves from lightning (Neumann in González Rodríguez 1993:305–306), but the “fire baptism” ritual does not appear in accounts until two centuries later (Lumholtz 1894:298; cf. Lumholtz 1902, 1:272–273). Slaney does not consider the possibility that the Rarámuri created or reformulated this ritual during the postcontact period in response to church baptism and other Catholic rituals, even though, like all contemporary rituals of baptized Rarámuri, it reflects some Catholic influence and the Rarámuri themselves regard the naming component of this ritual to parallel that of church baptism.

Slaney is correct that children in Banalachi and other baptized Rarámuri communities are named once during “fire baptisms” and again during church baptisms, but she errs by forcing these rituals to fit her fire/water interpretive scheme and by reducing “fire baptism” to the Rarámuri equivalent of Catholic baptism. The baptized Rarámuri of Banalachi do not associate church baptisms symbolically with women, nor do they maintain that these baptisms should be performed on the women’s side of the church. Moreover, they, like baptized Rarámuri elsewhere, insist that these baptisms are most appropriately performed by Catholic priests. Slaney’s claim to the contrary (p. 284), based on a single example of an “emergency” postmortem baptism, is incorrect.

Compared to the “fire baptism” rituals, church baptisms are rather simple affairs, performed but once during a person’s lifetime. The rituals that Slaney identifies as “re-baptisms” (p. 285) are in fact requests to the upperworld deities for rain. Both church and “fire baptisms” are intended in part to protect children from harm but “fire baptisms” are more closely linked to the series of preventative curing procedures that are performed throughout a person’s lifetime. Slaney reports that, among other reasons, the Banalachi Rarámuri stage “fire baptisms” to burn the invisible threads that link their infants to their “Godly origins in the world above” (p. 283).

This interpretation may exist in other Rarámuri communities (e.g., Bennett and Zingg 1935:234) but not in Banalachi. There the Rarámuri say that they destroy these threads (cutting them with knives as well as burning them) to separate infants from their earthly parents, thereby establishing them as distinct individuals who are presented as such to God and, through this and other ritual procedures, are protected from malevolent beings, particularly lightning. They also indicate that these threads, which they call “roots” (*nawá*), must be eliminated because they disrupt the proper physical and moral development of children, jeopardize the well-being of people in general, endanger their crops and livestock, and hinder their ascent to heaven at death.

Slaney also misrepresents how the Banalachi Rarámuri actually use the names they acquire during church and “fire baptisms.” She contends that these distinct names are assigned to people’s bodies and souls respectively, and the “fire baptism” names are employed by “everyone in the district,” while “water baptism” names are “dormant,” used, if at all, in non-Rarámuri contexts, often outside the local area (p. 283). In reality, both names are attached to the complete individual, composed of both body and souls, and names acquired through the “fire baptism” ritual tend to be used within the context of a person’s immediate family while church baptismal names tend to be used elsewhere, among both Rarámuri and non-Rarámuri. Ultimately, however, the choice of which name to use in which contexts is an individual decision.

Slaney mentions that “fire baptism” in Banalachi “secures coparenthood relationships” (p. 283), but she does not indicate what these relationships might be or how they relate to those established through church baptism. Because there are no separate godparents in this ritual, she probably refers to the ritual kin relations that are created between Rarámuri doctors and the parents of the children for whom they perform the ritual. These doctors and parents regard themselves as coparents, from whom mutual respect and assistance are expected and the doctors describe these children as their own. Marriage between these children and the doctors’ biological offspring is prohibited (although this prohibition is not always observed).

Similar marriage restrictions and expectations of respect and assistance are established through church baptisms—in this case among parents, godparents, and their children rather than with the priests who perform the ceremony. Although in Banalachi most godparents of Rarámuri children are themselves Rarámuri, Slaney accurately reports that non-Rarámuri people sometimes also serve in this capacity (p. 281). Nonetheless, she exaggerates the extent to which these non-Indians are able to use these relationships to exploit Rarámuri labor and other resources. The Rarámuri of Banalachi often resist the demands of their non-Indian coparents, and they also attempt to manipulate them by appealing to their relationships of coparenthood. By ignoring these and other sources of political and economic power available to the Rarámuri, Slaney diminishes the complexity of the interplay of ethnicity and power in Banalachi and perpetuates the myth of the Rarámuri as powerless victims.

Apart from these problems in her description of these two rituals, Slaney’s interpretation of their role in constructing ethnicity is seriously flawed because she fails to recognize that the Rarámuri conceive of ethnicity fundamentally in primordialist and essentialist terms. From their perspective, the two principal categories of human beings (i.e., Indians and non-Indians) differ radically from one another in both substance and spirit, reflecting their separate creation at the beginning of this world by God and the Devil respectively. Using this ideological perspective as a point of departure, they rely on cultural differences to refine their ethnic classifications. They distinguish themselves from the members of other Indian societies and more distant Rarámuri communities primarily on the basis of linguistic differences, an important dimension of ethnicity that Slaney ignores. Similarly, baptized Rarámuri use participation in church baptism as the principal—although by no means only—marker of the differences between themselves and “gentile” Rarámuri, just as they consider their participation in “fire baptism” one of many things that distinguish them from non-Indian Christians. The crucial point here is that they invoke

these rituals to emphasize their distinctiveness from the members of these other ethnic categories rather than regarding the overlap in ritual practices to imply even a partially shared identity with them.

Slaney argues that the incorporation of otherness is an important component of the process through which baptized Rarámuri construct their distinctive personhood and ethnicity, and she uses their imitation of non-Indians while drunk as evidence to support her view (pp. 285–286). Such imitation, which occurs both within and outside of drinking contexts, is, however, often intended to parody non-Indians. When it is more sincere, it is best seen as Rarámuri experimentation with alternative modes of behavior, which can result in permanent behavioral changes as well as a reformulation of the criteria used to define ethnicity. Despite paying lip service to history and process, Slaney portrays *contemporary* baptized Rarámuri personhood and ethnicity as essentially static and Rarámuri ideas about them as uniform, when in fact they are evolving and subject to multiple interpretations. She also misunderstands Rarámuri explanations of intoxication. The Rarámuri attribute drunkenness to the departure of only some of a person's souls and say that, because the souls that remain inside the body are like small children, drunk people behave like children, not “ethnic others.” If, as Slaney reports (p. 286), all the souls departed, the body would not be a “non-Tarahumara” shell but a corpse (Merrill 1978, 1988).

We agree with Slaney that the Rarámuri “reformulated indigenous personhood and ethnicity” during the colonial period and that today baptized Rarámuri deny the foreign origin of many of their ideas and practices, including church baptism (p. 288). Precisely because the Rarámuri have been so successful in creating a synthetic culture, however, Slaney's proposal that contemporary baptized Rarámuri personhood and ethnicity is “composite” (pp. 296–297)—combining components that are opposed or even “incompatible”—is difficult to accept, especially when it is based on an invented symbolism inappropriately attributed to the Banalachi Rarámuri. Indeed, this proposal is acceptable only if Western perspectives on the past are considered to be more relevant to understanding the construction of contemporary personhood and ethnicity than the perspectives of the people through whose agency this construction is accomplished. In saying this, we are not denying the importance of historical events and processes to the construction of personhood and ethnicity; rather, we are only asserting that the past and present should not be conflated and that analytical and local perspectives on them should not be confused.

Contemporary baptized Rarámuri society and culture can only be understood as historical formations dramatically affected by colonial and postcolonial forces. What distinguishes the concepts and construction of personhood and ethnicity of the baptized Rarámuri is not an uneasy juxtapositioning of opposed symbolic elements (indigenous and foreign, local and global, self and other), but rather a coherent praxis in which European-derived ideas and practices have been thoroughly localized and appropriated as part of a counterhegemonic ideology within which non-Indians have become identified as the children of the Devil. Baptized Rarámuri have embraced Catholic baptism as an important symbol of their communities and their special place within the universe, recontextualizing it within the framework of their understanding of a world transformed by the arrival of Europeans. They have linked it to another ritual (“fire baptism”) to incorporate their children into the communities on which their continued well-being depends and to confer on them a specific kind of personhood, distinct from that of both baptized non-Rarámuri and nonbaptized Rarámuri. Yet, despite the significance of these rituals, their importance in the actual construction of Rarámuri personhood and ethnicity should not be exaggerated. They are largely irrelevant to the creation of the highly developed individualism that most writers consider a salient feature of Rarámuri culture and personhood, and to the perpetuation of the multitude of ideas and practices that make the Rarámuri distinctive both to themselves and others. In the final analysis, the production and

reproduction of Rarámuri identity must be understood primarily in terms of more encompassing processes played out through the mundane practices of everyday life.

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response to Merrill and Heras Quezada's comments

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In responding to Merrill and Heras Quezada, I will focus on the recent history of Sierra Tarahumara ethnography and on anthropological discourse in general. At the moment of making this response, no written account of Heras Quezada's work is available to me. I am, however, familiar with the work of Merrill, who has consistently characterized Tarahumaras as having, for most of their history, withstood extensive cultural influences through relative "isolation" from other cultural groups (Merrill 1988:50). With refreshing candor, he has also stated his personal inclination to consider Tarahumaras as North American natives rather than as Mexicans or as Mesoamericans (1988:5–6). Merrill and Heras Quezada's present criticisms of my work express lingering attachment to this romantic vision of Tarahumaras as somehow "unsullied" by the other Mexicans among whom they live. Consequently, I am surprised and pleased to see Merrill and Heras Quezada agree that few scholars would claim my less isolationist perspective is unreasonable or alarming.