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**RARÁMURI**

**GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY**

Also known as the Tarahumara, the Rarámuri are an indigenous people of northwestern Mexico, whose contemporary homeland covers approximately 35,000 square kilometers of semi-arid but forested mountains and subtropical canyons. This rugged region, a component of Mexico’s Sierra Madre Occidental range referred to as the Sierra Tarahumara, is located in the southwestern corner of the state of Chihuahua. The Mexican national census for 2000 recorded over 86,000 speakers of the Rarámuri language in Chihuahua and an additional 6,000 speakers elsewhere in Mexico, the majority in the adjacent states of Durango, Sinaloa, and Sonora. There were more speakers of Rarámuri than any other indigenous language in northern Mexico and, except for Diné (Navajo), in all of North America north of central Mexico.

“Rarámuri,” sometimes written “Ralámuli,” is the Rarámuri’s name for themselves. Because the Rarámuri are renowned long-distance runners and the Rarámuri word rará means “sole(s) of the foot,” many writers have concluded that Rarámuri...
should be translated as “foot runners.” This analysis is suspect, however, and although no conclusive etymology exists, the Rarámuri use the term with increasing degrees of specificity to designate all human beings in contrast to plants and animals, all indigenous people in contrast to non-indigenous people, Rarámuri people in contrast to other indigenous people, and Rarámuri men in contrast to Rarámuri women. The semantic scope and pronunciation of the term varies among the Rarámuri themselves, reflecting regional variations. Linguists classify the language as belonging to the Taracahitan subgroup of the southern branch of the Uto-Aztecan language family and have proposed that it includes as many as seven distinct dialects.

Exactly when the Rarámuri arrived in western Chihuahua is unknown: only a handful of archeological sites in the Sierra Tarahumara have been excavated, and the relationship between the inhabitants of these sites and the contemporary Rarámuri has never been properly evaluated. At the time of European contact in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the Rarámuri’s ancestors lived in the basin-and-range country of central Chihuahua and the mountains and canyons of western Chihuahua. Spanish colonial expansion into the region was driven by the discovery of silver and gold, with miners and the farmers and ranchers who supported them soon being joined by Franciscan and Jesuit missionaries. The Rarámuri were proselytized primarily by Jesuits, who founded their first mission among the Rarámuri around 1608 and, during the next century and a half, developed a network of missions that extended throughout Rarámuri territory.

The Rarámuri response to the mission program and to Spanish colonialism as a whole was ambivalent. Some Rarámuri embraced Christianity and rapidly integrated into the Spanish colonial system. Many others resisted by withdrawing from the missions and Spanish settlements or by organizing a series of military campaigns against the intruders that involved large numbers of people from many different Rarámuri communities. Usually characterized by the Spanish as “rebellions,” these campaigns were motivated by a number of factors, including the Spaniards’ forced labor programs and the displacement of Rarámuri people from their lands by Spanish settlers.

Most of these campaigns took place in the second half of the seventeenth century. By the early eighteenth century the devastating impact of introduced Old World diseases and an increasingly effective Spanish military strategy overwhelmed the Rarámuri’s ability to organize and coordinate large-scale resistance. Some Rarámuri shifted to small-scale raiding of Spanish settlements as an alternative form of violent resistance, either on their own or in alliance with the members of other indigenous societies, especially the Apache. At times, they also joined multiethnic raiding bands whose members included not only indigenous people but Europeans, Africans, and individuals of mixed descent. Such raiding did not prevent the Spanish from expanding and consolidating their colonial system across Rarámuri territory, but it did undermine their efforts to establish full control over the region.

In 1767, the Spanish Crown expelled the Jesuits from its empire, assigning most of the Rarámuri missions in the Sierra Tarahumara to Franciscan missionaries and the remainder to diocesan priests. This arrangement remained unchanged following Mexican Independence in 1821, but in 1859 the Mexican government prohibited the Franciscans and other religious orders from operating within its borders. The Rarámuri missions in the Sierra Tarahumara were then transferred to the diocesan
clergy, which lacked the human and economic resources to administer them. The Catholic presence in the area was negligible until 1900, when the Jesuits resumed responsibility for the religious administration of the Rarámuri in the Sierra.

Between the late eighteenth and late nineteenth centuries, expansion and consolidation of non-indigenous settlements and economic endeavors within traditional Rarámuri territory outside the Sierra Tarahumara was accompanied by the gradual integration of Rarámuri people there into the Spanish colonial and Mexican national systems. In contrast, in the Sierra, where the impact of outsiders was less and resistance to integration greater, the Rarámuri continued to flourish as a distinct cultural group. Their autonomy began to diminish, though, near the end of the nineteenth century with the onset of commercial exploitation of the Sierra's natural resources.

Much of the twentieth century was characterized by an influx of non-indigenous, or mestizo, settlers into the Sierra. Initially they were attracted by economic opportunities offered by large-scale mining and lumbering and later, during the second half of the twentieth century, by tourism and, in certain areas, illegal drug production. These settlers displaced the Rarámuri from many of the best agricultural lands and subjected them to various forms of social and economic discrimination. Such abuses dramatically increased interethnic tensions and conflicts in the Sierra that were exacerbated by the growing mestizo presence. By the end of the century, the non-indigenous population in the Sierra was more than four times greater than the indigenous population.

Throughout the twentieth century the Catholic Church re-established its influence across the Sierra Tarahumara, combining religious activities with programs in education, health, and social welfare. Similar programs developed by the Mexican government and to a limited extent by Protestant organizations paralleled and at times competed with the Catholic efforts. As part of the agrarian reform instituted by the Mexican Revolution of 1910–1920, the Mexican government organized most Sierra communities into communal landholding and economic units known as ejidos. Intended to improve economic conditions for the region's residents and to enhance their control over natural resources, this approach legitimized mestizo claims to Rarámuri lands and provided Sierra communities with the means to join private companies in exploiting and destroying the Sierra's forests.

By the end of the twentieth century, local ecosystems had been thoroughly disrupted and thousands of Sierra residents, both Rarámuri and mestizos, had been forced to abandon the Sierra to seek a livelihood in economic centers elsewhere in Mexico and, to a lesser degree, the United States. This out-migration fragmented many Rarámuri communities and increased the integration of Rarámuri people into the Mexican national culture, a process reinforced by participation of Rarámuri children in the national primary education system. The members of a number of Rarámuri communities began to express concern about the potential loss of their culture and language and to develop strategies to ensure their survival.

ADOPTION OF FOREIGN CULTURAL PRACTICES

During more than four centuries of interaction with non-indigenous people, those Rarámuri who have sustained a separate cultural identity have responded to outside
cultural influences by recontextualizing certain foreign cultural elements within their own evolving cultural system. This process, better characterized as appropriation than as acculturation or assimilation, is well illustrated by several examples from the Spanish colonial period.

The ancestors of the contemporary Rarámuri eagerly adopted Old World livestock and agricultural technology, but they incorporated these innovations to enhance rather than replace their indigenous agricultural practices. They accepted the designation by colonial Catholic missionaries of specific locations as civil-religious centers and the construction of churches there, but they rejected missionary attempts to congregate them into these centers, known in Spanish as "pueblos." Instead they maintained the dispersed settlement pattern that was a more suitable adaptation to the local landscape and an effective mechanism for limiting intervention by outsiders into their daily lives. They made the Spanish colonial form of town government, with its hierarchically organized complement of officials, the central component of their political organization, but they limited the power of these officials by retaining consensus as the principal mechanism for community decision making. Similarly, they continued to regard wisdom, moral rectitude, oratorical ability, and commitment to serve others as the qualities most desired in their leaders. Finally, they "converted" to Catholicism by radically reinterpreting Catholic beliefs and rituals and integrating them into the framework of their indigenous religion. They also adapted the Catholic ritual calendar to their own ceremonial cycle, which was structured around the maize-growing season, and they directed the Catholic ceremonies that they had appropriated toward the achievement of indigenous goals such as ensuring the survival of the universe, enhancing individual health, and promoting agricultural productivity.

CULTURAL VARIATION

Contemporary Rarámuri society is one of the most vibrant indigenous societies in North America, with active and evolving traditions in music, dance, sports, the plastic arts, folklore, and oratory. The dynamism of these traditions is evidenced in the significant variation associated with them, which is found both within single communities and between different communities across the region. Broad generalizations about the Rarámuri usually are possible only if such variation is ignored, and
even characterizing the Rarámuri as a single cultural group is problematic. Rarámuri people across the Sierra Tarahumara share an identity as "Rarámuri," but they distinguish two major subdivisions within this general category. Most Rarámuri refer to themselves as "baptized ones" (págótame or págótuame), acknowledging their affiliation with the Catholic Church although not necessarily their acceptance of orthodox Catholicism. The members of a small number of Rarámuri communities, however—known as simaróni, from Spanish cimarrón, "renegade" or "runaway," and gentil, from Spanish gentil, "heathen" or "pagan"—reject a formal relationship with the Church.

This variation comes from the interaction of many factors, ranging from differences in the history of interaction with outsiders to the ecological diversity of the Sierra Tarahumara. In some cultural domains, like worldview and cosmology, it also reflects the high value that the Rarámuri place on individual autonomy and the absence of mechanisms, such as a formal education system, that would promote the standardization of knowledge. In fact, the only indigenous practice through which basic cultural values and perspectives are consistently presented to the members of different households is the public speech or "sermon" (nawésari), delivered by traditional authorities and other community and ritual leaders when people assemble for ceremonies and other social events.

**Oratory**

Rarámuri orators deliver their speeches rapidly, averaging about 500 syllables per minute compared to the 300 syllables per minute or less of ordinary conversation. Although each sermon is unique, they all tend to include special vocabulary and constructions seldom encountered in daily speech and to be structured by the presentation of a set of common themes related especially to how people should conduct their lives to maintain proper relations with one another and with their deities. These deities include Our Father (Onorúame, also referred to as Rípá Bitéame, “One Who Resides Above,” and as Ríosí, from Spanish Dios, “God”) and his wife, known as Our Mother (Eyerúame), often equated with the Virgin Mary and specifically the Virgin of Guadalupe. In most Rarámuri communities Our Father is associated with the sun and Our Mother with the moon, but in others these associations are reversed. In general, however, the Rarámuri identify Our Father and Our Mother as their creators and benefactors in contrast to the devil (Riré Bitéame, “One Who Resides Below,” or Ríáblo, from Spanish diablo, “devil”), who created and protects non-indigenous people, known as Chabóchi, “Whiskered One(s).”

Through explicit references to these beings and standardized admonitions on how to promote the beneficence of Our Father and Our Mother while deflecting the malevolence of the devil, orators implicitly convey many concepts basic to Rarámuri cosmology. The Rarámuri conceive the universe as a series of three to seven levels, with the earth situated in the middle. Levels above the earth are regarded as the abode of Our Father, Our Mother, and their allies, who usually are envisioned as having human form, as well as the ultimate destination of the souls of Rarámuri dead. Levels below the earth, where the souls of non-indigenous people travel after death, are the domain of the devil and his allies, who often are given animal form.
and include malevolent beings associated with bodies of water, especially deep pools and springs.

The specific details of cosmological knowledge are transmitted across generations in more informal settings, often from grandparents to grandchildren and typically in the privacy of individual households. Accounts of the ancient past often provide the medium through which this information is conveyed, and such accounts allow for considerable individual creativity. The result is that more variation is associated with this knowledge than with the basic cosmological concepts communicated through public oratory.

**FOLKTALES**

Rarámuri oral literature incorporates a wide variety of themes and protagonists. Some examples recount origins, usually not of the world per se, but of specific features of the world—unusual geological formations, notable characteristics of plants and animals, or specific cultural practices, for example. Many others fit readily into the genre of “trickster tales,” in which certain animals, often deer, rabbits, foxes, or coyotes, attempt to outwit one another or assume human form to seduce, deceive, or occasionally help human beings. Related stories describe transformations of one kind of animal into another. Human encounters with powerful beings also are a common theme. Accounts of such encounters sometimes are inspired or enriched by dream experiences.

The Rarámuri consider many of these stories to be equivalent to reports, handed down from one generation to the next, of actual events that took in the ancient past. They regard others as simply entertaining and others to be fictions that nonetheless convey important information or perspectives. They also occasionally attribute cosmological significance to accounts that appear on the surface to be insignificant. One example explains that the burro originally had a long tail, but it was burned to its present length when Our Father, displeased by the cannibalism and other misdeeds of the original human inhabitants of the world, dispatched the sun to destroy them. The burro’s short tail provides the subject for an engaging explanatory tale while providing concrete evidence of this major cosmological event.

Like oral traditions around the world, these stories are replete with moral lessons, but Rarámuri moral principles tend to be less absolute in concept and more flexible in application than the stark opposition between good and evil of orthodox Christianity. The beings of the Rarámuri pantheon, for example, tend to be either benevolently or malevolently inclined toward humans, helping or harming them in response to how humans behave toward them. Rarámuri religion also places little emphasis on the afterlife or individual salvation. Instead it promotes health and happiness in this life and ensures the continued existence of the universe by maintaining equilibrium among its diverse inhabitants.

**Religious Beliefs**

Historical evidence from the Spanish colonial period suggests that many Rarámuri accepted Christian baptism because they believed this sacrament could cure European
diseases, a view that the missionaries promoted. Meanwhile, others appear to have rejected baptism because they interpreted Christian doctrine regarding the Second Coming of Christ to mean that if all Rarámuri converted, the world would end, something that they wanted to avoid. This perspective is echoed in contemporary Rarámuri ideology, which proposes that by refusing to be baptized, "gentile" Rarámuri ensure that their souls will remain on earth after death to fulfill their role in protecting the pillars that support the sky.

The Rarámuri sustain the universe and fulfill their obligations to their deities primarily through performance of religious ceremonies. Most of these ceremonies include offerings of food and maize beer, feasting, and diverse rituals, all of which reflect indigenous and European influences. Among the most important indigenous rituals are the yúmari and tutubári, directed by ritual chanters (wikaráame) whose songs typically are melodic intonations rather than songs with words that are intelligible to non-specialists. They accompany themselves with rattles as they move back and forth across a dance patio in front of an altar composed of wooden crosses, usually draped with cloths and adorned with bead necklaces, and a plank or platform for food and beer offerings. Similar patios are constructed for performances of the matachine dance, adapted from Spanish dances dramatizing the conflict between Christians and Moors. The flamboyantly costumed matachine dancers also shake rattles but in a rhythmic pattern distinct from that of the chanters, and they dance to tunes played by musicians on violin and sometimes guitar. Such European-inspired music also is performed without dancing as entertainment during social gatherings, but yúmari and tutubári songs are restricted to ritual contexts. Other songs with no ritual significance are sung by individuals in their homes.

**FESTIVALS AND CELEBRATIONS**

The Rarámuri stage their major ceremonies at pueblo centers, usually in conjunction with the principal dates of the Catholic liturgical year. The Easter ceremony is the most elaborate, attended by hundreds of Rarámuri people from the widely dispersed homesteads affiliated with each pueblo. It also is the ceremony that varies most extensively in content and interpretation from one Rarámuri community to another.

Most Rarámuri communities hold their Easter ceremonies between Maundy Thursday and Holy Saturday. This ceremony

Statues representing Christ and the Virgin Mary, dressed as a Rarámuri woman, are carried in a procession led by Easter ceremonial officials and local political authorities. Norogachi, April 2003. (Photograph by Lars Krutak)
differs from those of the remainder of the year in that neither the yúmari and tutubíri nor the matachine rituals are performed. Instead groups of men and boys dance to the music of drums and reed whistles, played only during the Easter season, which begins for many Rarámuri communities on Candlemas (2 February) rather than Ash Wednesday. These groups, along with the pueblo political officials, women and girls, and other community members complete a series of processions around the church and pueblo center along a route marked by crosses and arches corresponding to Stations of the Cross. These processions’ prominence is reflected by many Rarámuri communities referring to the Easter ceremony as Norírawachi, meaning “When We Walk in Circles.” The ceremony culminates on Holy Saturday with the destruction of an effigy identified as Judas. This effigy is the focus of ritual humor and is interpreted in distinct ways in different communities, ranging from a rather straightforward icon of a non-Indian to a complex symbolic representation of disorder in the universe; however, in no Rarámuri communities is this effigy seen as simply a representation of the apostle who betrayed Christ. The remainder of Holy Saturday is devoted to drinking maize beer, which continues for one or more days, usually in the hamlets where the majority of Rarámuri live rather than in the pueblo centers.

The Easter celebrations of some Rarámuri communities also have become major attractions for tourists, whose presence many Rarámuri resent but others value as a ready market for their arts and crafts. Easter ritual
paraphernalia such as drums, reed whistles, and the feathered headgear worn by some participants are favorite tourist purchases, and the Rarámuri produce other items primarily for sale to them: woven belts, headbands, bracelets, necklaces, bows and arrows, and carved wooden figurines and masks. Violins, rattles, woolen blankets, baskets, and pottery are made for both local use and export. The Rarámuri gain access to the external market through arts and crafts stores in tourist centers of the Sierra or through traders who export Rarámuri goods to other areas of Mexico, the United States, Canada, and Europe. Rarámuri craftspeople usually receive poor compensation for their work, but some efforts have been made to reduce exploitation. These efforts, usually initiated by outsiders, include attempts to increase prices (and thus returns to artisans) by portraying Rarámuri arts and crafts as "authentic" expressions of indigenous culture or by organizing artisan cooperatives and then promoting the sale of arts and crafts as a way of benefiting the communities where they are produced.

**MAIZE BEER**

Of all Rarámuri productions, the large, low-fired clay pots used for fermenting maize beer are perhaps the most prized by private collectors of indigenous art. These pots also are highly valued by the Rarámuri themselves, in part because they are difficult to make but, more important, because of their relationship, both practical and symbolic, to maize beer. This beer, called sugí, suwí, or batári, is central to Rarámuri social life. Regarded as a gift from Our Father, it is referred to metaphorically as "Our Father's Water" (Onorúame Ba'wíra) and is valued as an intoxicating but nourishing beverage and as a medicine.

Maize beer is prepared most frequently by the members of a single household to compensate people who assist them in the completion of some task, like planting or weeding their fields, during communal work parties. It is also obligatory for all ritual events, including those sponsored by households or groups of neighboring households to provide food and other necessities for their dead relatives, to protect their crops and livestock, and to prevent or cure illness. Some of these rituals can include yámarí, tutubári, and matachine performances and thus—on a smaller scale—resemble ceremonies held at the pueblo centers. Curing rituals especially incorporate many elements not seen in the pueblo ceremonies.

**FOLK MEDICINE**

Rarámuri etiology and curing practices reflect the concept of the soul, an aspect of Rarámuri worldview about which considerable variation exists despite wide sharing of fundamental concepts. Each individual is believed to have multiple souls, and except for accidents and minor ailments, all sickness is associated with soul loss or other threats to the souls. Death occurs when all of a person's souls abandon the body. Most preventative and alleviative curing is directed toward strengthening the souls, and Rarámuri doctors (owirúame) typically rely on their ability to control their dreams, which are interpreted as the activities of their principal souls, to locate and recover souls captured by sorcerers (sukurúame) and other malevolent beings. The doctors restore the souls to the affected person during curing rituals.
The most elaborate curing rituals aim to placate two categories of powerful beings: híkuri, which is associated with the peyote cactus (Lophophora williamsii) and other plants, and bakánova or bakánawi, usually identified with the tubers of a bulrush (Scirpus sp.). The híkuri and bakánova beings are believed to be each other’s mortal enemies, and they also steal the souls of people who fail to provide them with offerings or to observe certain prohibitions.

The Rarámuri organize their ideas about these beings into sets of binary oppositions (híkuri, for example, is linked to fire and the east, bakánova to water and the west), but the rituals oriented toward them share formal similarities: both take place on special patios, access to which is restricted to a limited group of participants and dangerous to all others, and both are directed by the most highly regarded ritual specialists. These specialists are known as raspers (sipáame) because they communicate with these beings through special songs accompanied by rasping a smooth stick against a notched one resting on an overturned half bottle gourd.

Despite their dangers people acquire both híkuri and bakánova to protect themselves from sorcerers and other enemies and to improve their performance in sports and games, which usually are associated with wagering. The Rarámuri rely on these and other ritual elements and activities to influence the outcome of competitive events, but unlike the members of many other Native American societies, they tend not to regard games as preeminently religious in nature.

**SPORTS AND GAMES**

Today the Rarámuri play several games of chance, including card games adopted from their mestizo neighbors and native games—especially romayá, similar to pachisi and more widely known as patole, which uses stick dice. Games of skill include rihibári and hubára, which are based on the same principle as quoits or horse-shoes. In rihibári, the goals are depressions in the ground, and players use disks made of stone, metal, or pottery. In hubára, fresh tree branches, preferably of oak and about the thickness of a finger, are cut with a section of the adjacent trunk to provide stability. One of these sticks is tossed ahead to serve as the goal, and players toss their other sticks toward it, with points going to the one who comes closest. Men and boys play all three games, whereas women and girls usually play only romayá.

A sport called ra'chuéla, similar to lacrosse or field hockey, is found in some Rarámuri communities, but more widely distributed and by far the most famous of Rarámuri sports is long-distance running. Teams of children or young to middle-aged adults compete in two
different kinds of races: one, for men and boys, is called \textit{rarahípuami} or \textit{rarahípari}, in which a wooden ball is propelled along the course by flipping it with the foot; the other, known in different areas as \textit{ariwéta}, \textit{nakúwari}, \textit{rowéari}, and \textit{rowécuami}, is for women and girls, who use curved sticks to toss a single hoop, two interlinked hoops, or two small sticks bound together ahead of them as they run.

Despite their prominence in contemporary Rarámuri culture, these races may have been developed or adopted by the Rarámuri during the Spanish colonial period. The women's race is not described until the twentieth century, an omission that could be explained by the general neglect of most female activities in the historical and ethnographic literature. Male sports, in contrast, are well documented as far back as the seventeenth century, and the ball race is not mentioned until the second half of the eighteenth century. That the repertoire of Rarámuri sports has changed is unquestionable: the rubber-ball game, widely distributed in various forms in the Americas prior to European contact, is recorded for the Rarámuri in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries but not thereafter.

\textbf{STUDIES OF RARÁMURI FOLKLORE}

No comprehensive, systematic study of Rarámuri folklore exists, but considerable information is available in books and essays published primarily in English, German, Spanish, and, beginning in the 1970s, Rarámuri. Of particular significance is the work of Rarámuri authors, which usually combines compilations of Rarámuri oral literature or descriptions of contemporary cultural practices with Rarámuri commentary on them, presented in both Rarámuri and Spanish. Such studies include Mares Trías (1975, 1982), Mares Trías and Burgess (1996), López Batista (1980), López Batista and others (1981), Palma Batista (1994), Gardea García and Chávez Ramírez (1998), Cruz Huahuichi (2000), and Palma Aguirre (2002).

The linguist Don Burgess participated in many of these studies and has drawn upon them in his own work, which includes collections of Rarámuri stories and songs in Rarámuri and Spanish (Burgess 1970, 1973), English translations of diverse examples of Rarámuri oral literature (Burgess 1985), and the only review in English of the state of research on Rarámuri folklore (Burgess 1981). A brief compilation of Rarámuri "legends" in Spanish is found in Muñoz (1965).

and Naylor 1979; González Rodríguez 1987). Sariego Rodríguez (2002) presents more contemporary historical information in his study of indigenous policies and programs in the Sierra.

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**TARAHUMARÁ.** See Rarámuri