

After Artaud: An Introduction to Tarahumara Lifestyle, Taboos, Rituals and Religion

The Tarahumara Indians, one of the largest and least acculturated Indian groups north of Panama, live in the mountainous southwestern portion of the Mexican state of Chihuahua. This tremendously rugged series of barrancas and mesas forms the part of the Sierra Madre Occidental where approximately 50,000 Tarahumaras eke out a marginal existence from depleted soil and eroded pasturage. Kennedy & Lopez (in *Semana Santa in the Sierra Tarahumara*, p.7)

The ability of the Tarahumara people to preserve their cultural integrity derives chiefly from the circumstances that their environment is among the least hospitable in Mexico. It has been extremely difficult to build roads through the precipitous canyon country they call home, and the relative scarcity of tillable land has deterred would-be settlers from invading the region in large numbers. . . . Their territory used to be much larger, but through processes of encroachment and displacement by members of the dominant Mexican society, along with the mestizoization of the Indians, it is now restricted for the most part to the most inaccessible fastnesses of the western Sierra Madre mountain chain. The core of this region, where most of the Tarahumara preserve their indigenous culture, is notable for its magnificent canyons—the great *barrancas* of the Urique, Batopilas, and Verde rivers, which wind westward, and the slightly lesser canyons of the Concho, which flows eastward. . . . The tributary streams of all four of these river systems criss-cross the north-south stretching mountains with a maze of arroyos, valleys and canyons. Cool pine-covered slopes of the plateaus and uplands are found in proximity to the warm semi-tropical recesses of the larger *barrancas*, some of which descend sharply more than 6,000 feet. Kennedy (in *Tarahumara of the Sierra Madre*, p.1-2)

The larger rivers have gouged out formidable *barrancas*, or gorges, as deep as 8,000 feet below the surface of the plateau. . . . The high altitude of 8,000 feet gives this country a cold, bracing, salubrious climate, which, though not severe, makes it the coldest part of Mexico. Zingg (in *Behind the Mexican Mountains*, p.15)

The Tarahumara language belongs to the Uto-Aztecan stock, the distribution of which, with a few breaks and enclaves, extends from Mexico City to Utah. (Kennedy, p.12)

Their community settlements were called *rancherías* by the Spaniards, since they were not gathered into villages, such as the invaders were accustomed to; instead their houses were scattered along river valleys or on hillsides wherever somewhat level plots of cultivatable land could be found. The missionaries and political administrators found this dispersion very inconvenient and much effort was devoted to programs of “reduction,” that is, bringing the Indians together in compact settlements where they could be “civilized” more efficiently, and, of course, more effectively organized as a labor force. (Kennedy, p.18)



Home in a cave

Photo credit: Bernard L. Fontana

The difficulties of reaching the Tarahumaras were exaggerated. In point of fact, a railroad provided access. That a primitive tribe could have remained uninfluenced by this most efficacious carrier of civilization was puzzling. But the explanation was simple. The railroad was as primitive as the Tarahumaras. . . . This railroad luxuriated under the formidable moniker “Kansas City, Mexico and Orient Railroad.” (Zingg, p.3)

It was four o’clock in the morning when our train slid down the Continental Divide to Creel, the metropolis at the end of the “Kansas” railroad. . . . It was run by a Chinese, who proved himself a vital member of our expedition, and who served intelligently and loyally as our banker and agent. (Zingg, p.7)

Each Indian’s long hair was arranged in two long tails, often with a new ribbon braided into the ends. (Zingg, p.100)

The Tarahumaras are generally agreed to be the greatest long-distance runners on the planet, and in one of those bizarre, surreal paradoxes that Mexico is always throwing at you, they are also one of the drunkest tribes on earth, getting utterly smashed on fermented corn beer once or twice a week, often for two or three days straight. “I remember coming up on these Tarahumaras once they were roasting a rat over a fire by the side of the trail,” said Joe Brown. “They had it on a stick and its tail was hanging down and the tail caught fire and it started scorching the meat and they didn’t care in the very least bit. The fare is a little bleak, to say the least, but that’s going to be the least of your problems.” . . . “I read somewhere that rat tastes better than squirrel,” I said. “And a lot better than boiled whole vulture, which is supposedly eaten in the Sierra Madre during lean times and also considered a cure for venereal disease.” (Grant, p.12-13)

Tarahumara houses . . . are temporary. A person may have one at his rancho and another near his fields. If he is used to moving from the high country to low country and back again on a seasonal basis, he might also have a rock shelter down in the barrancas he can call home. Should someone die in a house, formal tradition demands that the house be destroyed, although sometimes the custom is either ignored or a shaman is called in to perform a ceremony that will eliminate the need to dismantle the structure. Anthropologist John Kennedy points out that Tarahumaras do not separate their daily lives in terms of “indoors” and “outdoors.” Their use of space is flexible. Cooking, sleeping, making baskets, shaping pots, eating, fornicating, drinking, loafing—these are things that can be done outside of houses as well as inside them. If warmth is provided by a fire, four walls, and roof, so can it be provided by an outdoor fire, heavy wool blanket, and extra skirts. One can sleep where one becomes sleepy. (Fontana, p.36-37)

Lumholtz reports that the word *chavóchi* referred to the “bearded ones” or “sons of the devil.” *Chavóchi* still connotes these meanings, along with the general notion of “disliked and envied outsider.” (Kennedy, p.36)



Photo credit: Wendell C. Bennett and Robert M. Zingg

Because a major part of curing and divining is done in dreams, requisite qualifications are imagination and a propensity for dreaming. Generally, the *owerúame* dreams that a person's souls are in some kind of danger and he rescues them, thereby affecting the cure. A boy who dreams a great deal and is very imaginative is likely to begin to think of himself as having curative powers and will be encouraged in this. (Kennedy, p.148)

The Tarahumaras identify breath with the soul, as is shown in their word for the soul, *iwigala* (*iwi*, to breathe), and in their belief that the soul passes in and out of the windpipe and lodges in the heart. (Zingg, p.234-235)

Mutual misunderstandings between anthropologists and Indians occurred, however, as when the Tarahumaras thought that Zingg was killing and skinning local birds in order to take them back to the United States where he would bring them back to life (instead of using them as zoological samples as was his intention). (Zingg, p.xv)

[During an ethnographic survey, a Tarahumara] thought I was somehow transferring the souls of the individuals to the paper along with their names, and further generalized that, like other goods taken from Indians by Mestizos, these souls must have commercial value. (Kennedy, p.7)

It seems that a German expedition, passing slowly through the sierra, had given the women the idea that the movie camera was a diabolical device for looking through their dresses. (Zingg, p.49)

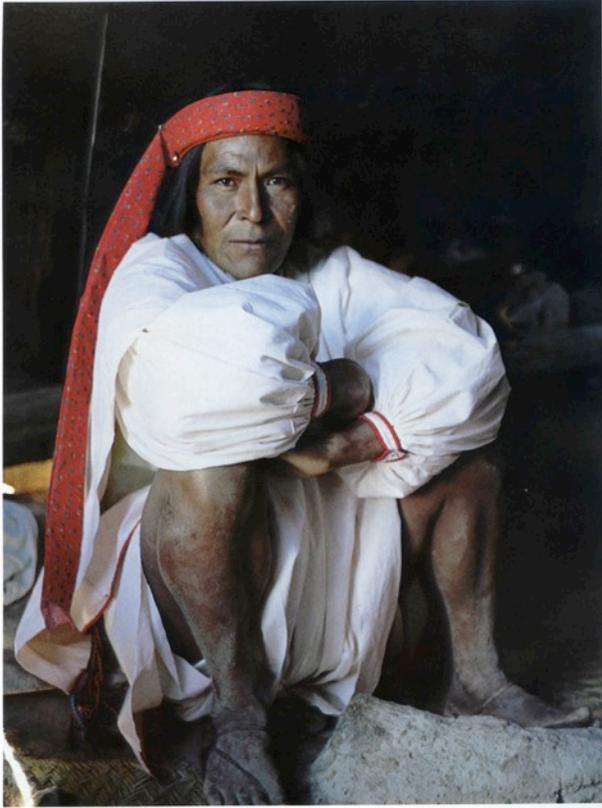
The men run the race, wearing women's clothing for this part of the ceremony. (In the *fiestas* given near Panaráchic and Naráchic the men wear women's clothes as a regular part of the ceremony.) Bennett & Zingg (in *The Tarahumara, an Indian Tribe of Northern Mexico*, p.246)

The *disagiki* is a small bird or animal of unknown classification, about the size of the end of the little finger. ... The bird, at the will of its owner, goes to people's houses and makes them sick by eating part of their food or by defecating on it. (Bennett & Zingg, p.265)

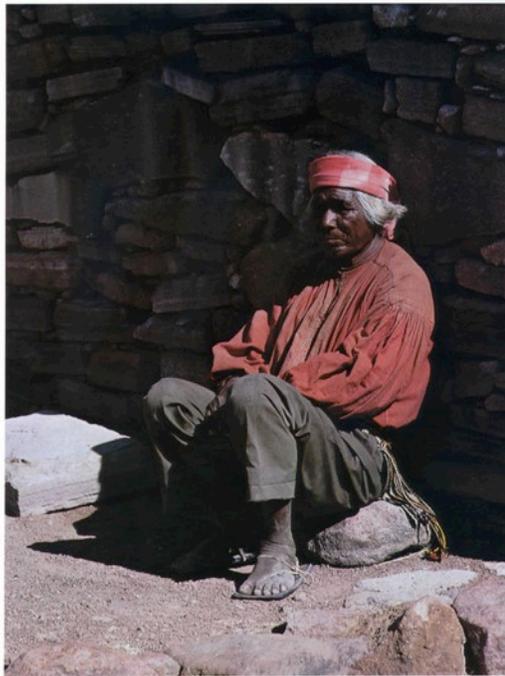
A Tarahumara who sleeps with his mouth open is in danger of having his soul snatched. (Bennett & Zingg, p.266)

The horned toads, according to a Tarahumara legend, asked God for a sickness to send after the Indians, who were becoming too numerous and stepping on them. This wish was granted, and so the horned toads are called *sukihíame* to this day. (Note: *sukihíame* means "wizard.") (Bennett & Zingg, p.325)

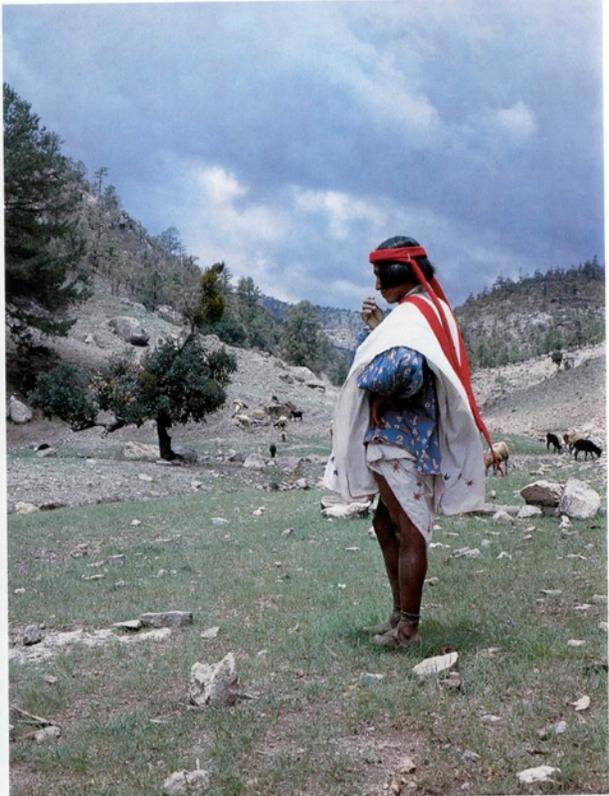
Occasionally flies, grasshoppers, locusts, caterpillars, and various insect larvae are toasted on coals and eaten. Tarahumaras also gather wild honey and eat tadpoles and various kinds of lizards. (Fontana, p.61-62)



Red, white and brown



Village elder



Francisco Torres Batista

Photo credit: Bernard L. Fontana

For cases of severe pains in the stomach the Tarahumaras take light-colored feces of a dog, which they toast on a stick until consumed. The ashes are mixed with water and drunk. Likewise, in a bad case of toothache that cannot be relieved by other remedies, the gums are rubbed with human feces. (Bennett & Zingg, p.264)

The position of a first-rate shaman in the community is unparalleled. He stands higher than any official—higher than the wealthiest man. (Bennett & Zingg, p.252)

He still cannot suck out worms, a skill of powerful full-time *owerúames*, but he occasionally uses a crucifix to suck small stones out of people's arms or legs which have been in their blood, causing pain. (Kennedy, p.150)

Sometimes the sorcerer is believed to eat one or more of the souls of his victim, causing him to become ill or to die, but often he is thought to project objects such as worms, stones, or knives into the victim's body causing pain. (Kennedy, p.153)

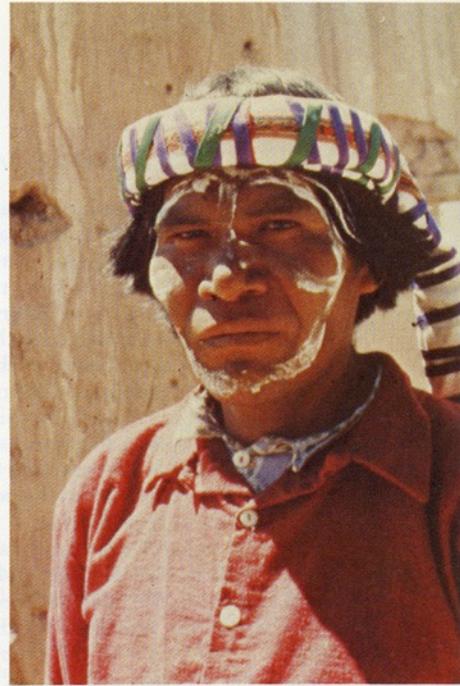
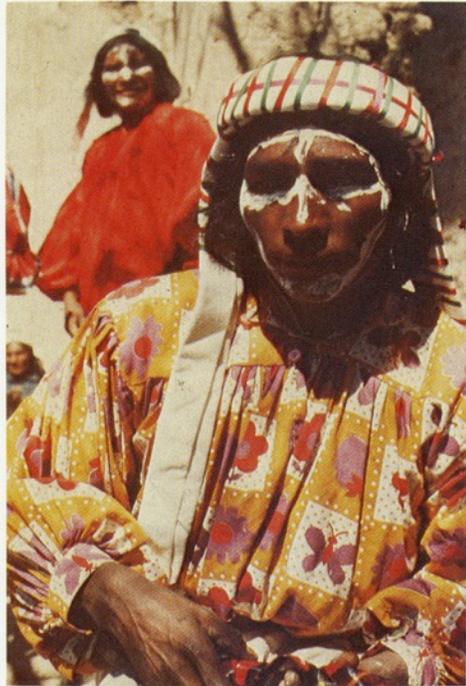
Not being a full shaman with a knowledge of the artifices used in curing, he really thought the shaman spit out maggots which he had sucked from the body of his patient. (Zingg, p.45)

The [shamanic] doctor, dealing with the forces of nature and the other world, wields a power; and power is always slightly feared. Moreover, the power that does good might conceivably be turned to evil... The next class of shamans, and the ones most important in Samachique, are the full-time doctors who practice for a livelihood. Their principal trick of trade is the extraction of maggots (*gusanos*) through the medium of sucking tubes. (Bennett & Zingg, p.253)

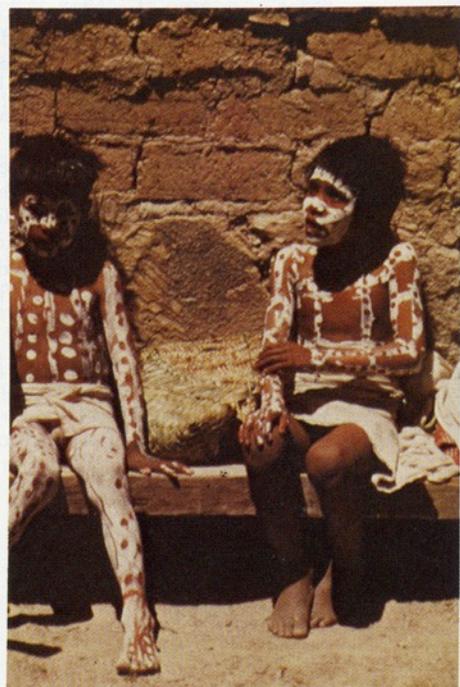
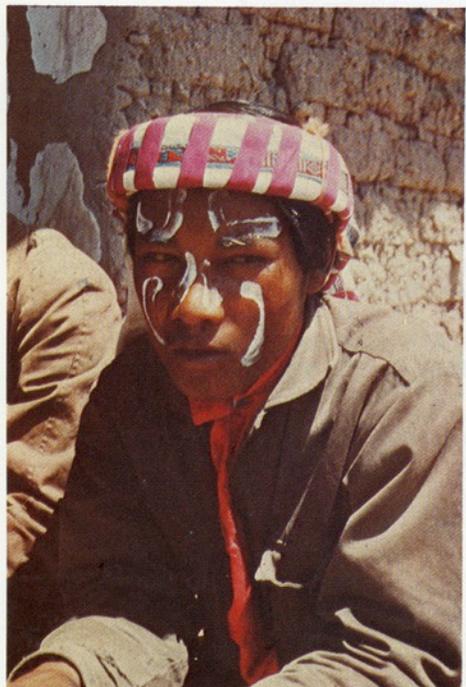
(No later than 1935) San Juan was the last of the peyote shamans who practiced in the region of Samachique. (Note: Norogachi, the village where Artaud resided in 1936, is approximately 20 miles southeast of Samachique and would be considered well within the region, thus casting some considerable doubt on the author's claim to have participated in a peyote ritual.) He knew the art of maggot-extracting. He was the only doctor who could cure the sickness resulting from the breaking of the plant *debúka*. (Bennett & Zingg, p.255)

In some cures, the doctor does not use the tube but applies his mouth directly to the temple, neck, shoulder, or affected part of the patient. (Bennett & Zingg, p.260)

Curing rituals are usually performed on a specially cleared spot which is found nearby any Tarahumara dwelling. ... When thus draped and blown by the wind, the crosses give the appearance of human figures. Lumholtz claimed that they represented Father Sun, Mother Moon and the Morning Star, the three major aboriginal deities... (Kennedy, p.157)



The men appointed by the morogapitane (moro capitán) to accompany the pascol dancers, and small boys, have their faces painted differently. See pages 315 to 318.



New Color Plate 79

Photo credit: Wendell C. Bennett and Robert M. Zingg

These [meat] offerings are meant for Father God, referred to by Tarahumaras either as *Tata Dios* or *Onorúame*. It is put there for him to enjoy its essence by smelling it before it is eaten by the people. Ollas of *tesgüino* (locally produced beer) are placed behind the crosses. There is also an offering in a piece of broken pottery under the table for *El Diablo*. It consists of worthless food scraps, such as peach pits, and is put there to keep El Diablo from helping himself to the food put out for Tata Dios. (Fontana, p.57, 60)

This apparently worthless offering is for *Diablo* or sometimes it is said, for the fox spirit, to keep him from getting up and interfering with the sacrificial food for *Onorúame*. ... Under the sacrificial table are also placed the “medicines” which have been collected for various curing purposes, and which will be taken out and used during this ceremony. (Kennedy, p.158)

The Tarahumara drum now in use shows a Spanish influence. It is called a *kapora*, from the Spanish word *tambor*, drum. ... It has two drumheads, made by stretching two circular pieces of wet buckskin over each end of the drums. (Zingg, p.205)

But [the Semana Santa] suggests that the source of their play is ultimately the medieval Spanish miracle play, the “*Moro-Moro*.” The “*Moro-Moro*” portrays the wars between the Moors and the Christians during the eight centuries of Spanish history when Spain had received the westernmost thrust of Islam... (Zingg, p.207)

Dr. Bennett clearly shows that the essential elements of this and all pagan Tarahumara ceremonies involve the dancing *patio*, the aboriginal *dutuburi-yumari* dance, and feasting and drinking. (Note: the idea of the “*dutubúri*” dance – or alternately “*tutubúri*” – would have a major impact Artaud’s late works, specifically a section of the radio play “To Have Done with the Judgment of God” (1947) in a section called “*Tutuburi, the Rite of the Black Sun.*”) (Zingg, p.228)

Feasting is an essential part of every native *fiesta*. For any “cure” that involves the dancing of the *dutubúri*, an animal is sacrificed and food is prepared. Goats are killed for an ordinary *fiesta* and cattle for a large function. ... The performance is practically the same at native *fiestas*. The animal is thrown on the *patio* and bled. The blood is dedicated to the four directions and then cooked immediately. The animal is skinned, and the whole carcass is hung up on a pole placed in the ground at the north end of the platform. The head is set on the ground in front of the pole, and the feet are placed on the table. After the meat is hung for a while, some of it is taken to be cooked. (Bennett & Zingg, p.270)

After twenty minutes or so we reached a small *rancho* known as Casa Blanca, where a group of men were stripped down to their underwear and cut-off shorts, swilling back *tesgüino* and daubing themselves and each other in black-and-white stripes, zigzags, and whorls, using firewood ash for the black and limestone for the white. (Grant, p.218-219)



A gathering in the church

Photo credit: Bernard L. Fontana

The pictures of Our Lady of Guadalupe and of the Sacred Heart of Jesus were Christ; the counterclockwise path around the church was the Via Dolorosa; the pauses were in memory of condemnation, agony, Crucifixion, and entombment; and by a series of almost mystical transformations, the Pharisees and soldiers who had been united at Jerusalem were no longer united, but appeared to be on opposing sides in the eternal war between good and evil. (Fontana, p.142)

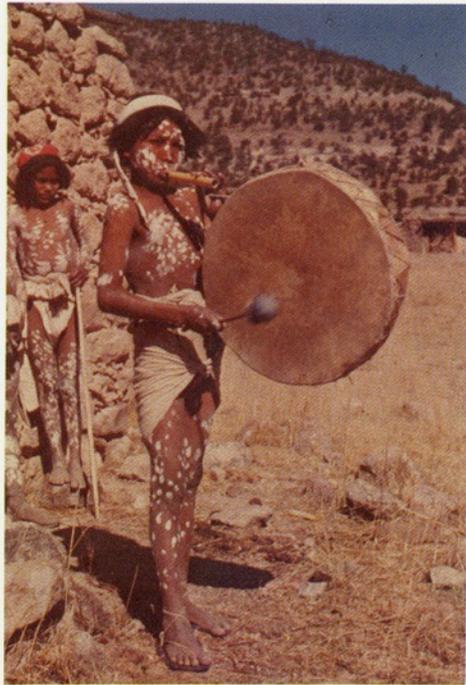
The *Gentiles* are those Tarahumara whose ancestors rejected the efforts of the early Jesuit missionaries to convert them. ... They did, however, adopt many agricultural practices and tools and absorbed some Christian beliefs and practices, which they modified and incorporated into their own religious system. On the other hand, the majority of the Tarahumara accepted baptism and became "Christians." They retained most of their aboriginal beliefs and customs, adding the new set of practices onto the older set. ... Originally the word *Gentile* meant "Pagan," and was a label applied by the Catholic missionaries to native peoples outside the fold of Christianity. It designated the yet "unsaved" or "unbaptized" ones, since baptism with water became the symbol of identification with the Christian system of beliefs and practices. It took on negative connotations because it referred to the recalcitrant resisters, or those who did not accept the new "enlightened" beliefs and life-style proffered by the invaders of their homelands. ... *Cimarrones* and *Broncos* are two other terms much less commonly used by people of the Sierra to refer to those whom I, and all scholars before me, called *Gentiles*. Both of these appellations mean "nonchristians," but both also have the added connotations of "wild ones" or "savages." (Kennedy, p.1-2)

The Christian Tarahumara ... retained nearly as many of the aboriginal religious customs and beliefs as did their more rebellious counterparts, the *Gentiles*. (Kennedy, p.26)

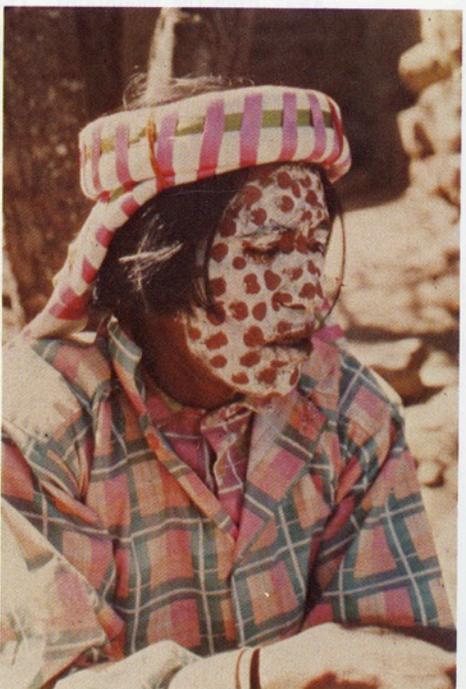
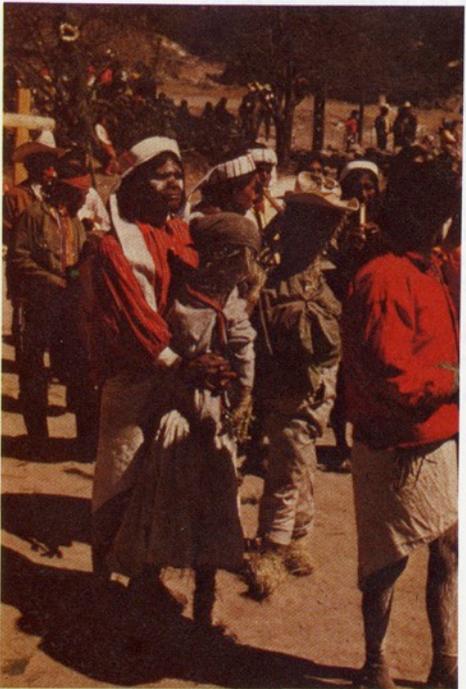
One of the Indians, an official called *maestro* (lay reader), approached the altar and knelt. He recited a line or two of the Lord's Prayer in Spanish, repeating these lines over and over, so slight was his knowledge of both Spanish and the Catholic religion. Even his fragment was unintelligible, not only to us but to the Indians as well. Then all knelt and chanted in unison, but in Catholic fashion rather than Indian. Finally they crossed themselves, arose, and filed out, the men first. ... We were less surprised at this tangential imitation of the Catholic service than we were that it should exist at all. But the impression left by the few Jesuit missionaries had been so strong that the church had been built and kept in repair by these half-naked Indians, who gathered in it every Sunday without fail. And this in spite of the fact that a priest had not lived here for forty years, or visited the place any more frequently than from year to year. (Zingg, p.31)

This was indeed strong magic, because the Tarahumaras identify the Sun Father with the Christian God as their chief deity. (Zingg, p.33)

And yet I wondered if they had really stayed to honor Him whose birthday they were to celebrate, and whom, not knowing His right name, they called Saint Joseph of Christ. (Zingg, p.91)



Two pascoleros prepare two processions; one procession of Judas's, and the other of Pharisees. The Judas's carry their effigy figures around the church and finally burn them. See pages 315 to 318.



New Color Plate 83

Photo credit: Wendell C. Bennett and Robert M. Zingg

He who was sent to earth to expunge the horrible conditions of cannibalism and the like which, they believe, prevailed among themselves in ancient days. (Zingg, p.96-97)

I have seen pictures of railroad lines with each telegraph pole gruesomely ornamented with the bodies of “*Cristeros*,” poor deluded [anti-Catholic] peasants [directly preceding Bennett & Zingg’s 1930 expedition], hanging limply in their cotton, pajama-like *calzones*. (Zingg, p.142)

[The] Tarahumaras are as little interested in the foreign teaching of Christianity. Since they do not know even the correct name of Jesus Christ, it is not surprising that they know nothing of His crucifixion or resurrection. Christ they identify with Saint Joseph as *San José su Cristo*, who, with Benito Juárez (defender of Mexico against the French-supported monarch Maximilian I), came among the ancient Tarahumaras to better conditions and convert them from their cannibalistic practices. (Zingg, p.204)

The shaman’s business is very little affected by the church and its *fiestas*, which were introduced long after the shamans had established their traditional functions. Since the shamans are, in a sense, the conservatives of the community and the preservers of the old, it is not surprising to find that they have been completely left out of the church *fiestas*. ... Although most shamans are professed Christians, they seldom attend church services, and on the whole present obstacles to the work of the church. Although the church is thought of as a conservative institution, as a rule it is a radical element in Tarahumara culture. It is the church that is constantly urging and effecting changes in the marriage system, in the beliefs, and in the practices. Thus as guardians of traditional methods, the shamans constantly feel the intrusion of the church. The church christens, but the shaman cures, the child. (Bennett & Zingg, p.267)

God is the giver of light, which re-emphasizes his connection with the sun. Aside from such identification, there is little conception of his appearance. Having lived many years, he is an old man with a long beard, though old Tarahumaras do not have beards. (Bennett & Zingg, p.322)

Four centuries ago the Jesuits had tried to bring Christianity alive for the Tarahumaras by staging Easter morality plays. They formed the Indians into companies and showed them how to reenact the persecution of Christ, the Crucifixion, and the Resurrection. In the Jesuit days, the soldiers and the Pharisees were the joint persecutors of Christ. But many drunken Holy Weeks had passed since then and now the Pharisees and the soldiers had ended up on opposite sides, representing good and evil, although their affiliations are switched in some villages. Here it was obvious who was who. You can always tell the evil bastards in the Sierra Madre by their AK-47’s. (Grant, p.216)

In the above quotations, all underlinings and parenthetical notes are my own.

-- Richard Hawkins, Sept 2016

Bibliography

Bernard L. Fontana, *Tarahumara: Where Night is the Day of the Moon* (1981); Richard Grant, *God's Middle Finger: Into the Lawless Heart of the Sierra Madre* (2008); John G. Kennedy, *Tarahumara of the Sierra Madre* (1996); John G. Kennedy and Raúl A. López, *Semana Santa in the Sierra Tarahumara: A Comparative Study in Three Communities* (1981); Wendell C. Bennett and Robert M. Zingg, *The Tarahumara, An Indian Tribe of Northern Mexico* (1976); Robert M. Zingg, *Behind the Mexican Mountains* (2001)



Moreami censing the holy images



Pharisee dance

Photo credit: Bernard L. Fontana

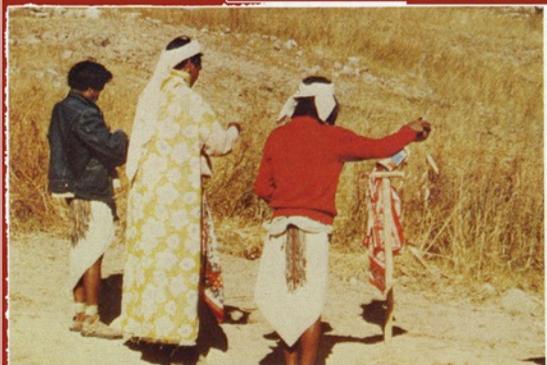


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