

Urban Poverty Among Mountain Raramuri Women:
Migration, Fiesta, y Familia

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I. Introduction.

The Raramuri are an indigenous group that has lived in northern Mexico since well before the conquest. When the conquest reached them, they moved to the high Sierras of Chihuahua to preserve their independence and traditions. The Raramuri¹ have remained relatively isolated in spite of incursions by Mexican society to exploit the mountains' natural resources. They have resisted official efforts by the Mexican government and Christianity to integrate them into the national society and culture. They experience serious economic deprivation (as assessed by official Mexican standards) accompanied by high infant mortality

¹The terms Raramuri and Tarahumara both refer to the same people. Raramuri refers to the language spoken by the people and is their preferred term. Tarahumara is the preferred Mexican and Spanish term drawn from the name of a mountain range in Chihuahua.

and malnutrition. Yet, a rich cultural tradition and a successful adaptation to the arid mountains has allowed them to survive and preserve a vibrant way of life and community.

In the past fifteen years two major trends have affected many of the Raramuri. Population growth and a severe drought have forced many to migrate from the mountains to the cities and the rural commercial farms of Chihuahua. Many are seasonal migrants who seek work in the orchards during the fruit seasons and who return to the Sierra when the apple harvest is over. These migrants are often men who bring their families with them and live in makeshift dwellings. Others are more permanent migrants who live for longer periods of time within the cities and take more permanent work. Some groups of migrants have established colonies and settlements in the cities of Juarez, Cuauhtemoc, and Chihuahua City. The more permanent migrants include two parent families, single mothers and their children, and single women and men. The Mexican government, the state government, and municipal governments have implemented some programs to assist with the conditions of these migrants who live with severe economic and cultural deprivation. There is little social scientific knowledge of the situation of these migrants, their culture, or the effectiveness of the government programs.

The research reported here is designed to provide insights into the living conditions and poverty of the Raramuri women themselves. As such, it is a case study which examines, in depth, the problems and conditions of these women: their culture, roles, and life stories in the cities. We attempt to present their conditions as they choose to describe them rather than as outsiders' accounts. While a focused case study, this research fits within the context of generalizing studies of poverty. Our research is part of a growing interest in expanding the work on poverty to the non-economic dimensions and to expand the definitions and discussion of poverty to include the

interests and opinions of the poor expressed in their own terms (Narayan, et. al. 2000). “There are 2.8 billion poverty experts, the poor themselves. Yet the development discourse about poverty has been dominated by the perspectives and expertise of those who are not poor-professionals, politicians, and agency officials” (Narayan, et. al. 2000 2). This research was designed to make contributions to this general discussion of poverty.

It is important to recognize the complex relationships between the power of the state, the global market, and the local conditions. Raramuri poverty occurs embedded in the Mexican nation and the global economy. Increasingly they have been forced to deal with both due to expanded tourism in the mountains where they are the object of the tours, and participation in the external labor market. Additionally, recent research on poverty has begun to emphasize non-economic features of poverty.

This paper is organized into three following sections. Section Two examines some research on indigenous Mexican poverty. The third section is a discussion of the history and culture of the Tarahumara. The next section examines the nature of Tarahumara women’s poverty in the cities of Chihuahua. The final section provides conclusions.

II. Indigenous Mexican Poverty.

Poverty has been rather extensively studied in Mexico including the World Bank Studies (2004), Velez (1994), Trejo (1993), and Arteaga (2005). In fact, the classic work that produced the theory of the culture of poverty was from Lewis’s (1959) research in Mexico. Much of the research since that time has been revealing and informative. However the study of indigenous poverty in Mexico is not simply an extension of poverty in general, because of the position of the indigenous in Mexican social structure and the distinctness of the native cultures.

‘Indigenous’ is defined best through its relationships to existing power and economies, not as a self-defining and self-contained collectivity. This view is an extension of work by three key students of the conquest and following events: Fernando Mires, Aguirre Beltran (1991), and Roberto Fernandez Retamar.

Beltran’s (1991) Regions of Refuge details the nature of a Latin American veil between the ruling segments of society, and the indigenous peoples.

Two societies exist, side by side, in the same nation which are founded on distinct economic principles and practices: 1) a modern industrial society with a complex culture, metropolitan foreign people, and the governing elite, and 2) a traditional or archaic society represented by the subjected indigenous masses. (27)²

The division is reflected in the content of knowledge, politics and economics. It is pervasive and multidimensional. Each dimension characterizes the non-indigenous people as being superior and preferable. The dominant side is presented as a national culture of science, technology, and rationality, while the indigenous culture is primitive, technologically simple, and magical. Schools and other institutions affirm the inferiority and strangeness of the indigenous.

A dual economy is present where the dominant economy has unlimited needs, monetary mechanisms, and corporate mechanisms while the indigenous has limited necessities, little use of

²En el territorio del mismo país convivían, una al lado de la otra, dos sociedades fundadas en principios y prácticas económicas distintas: 1) la sociedad moderna de tipo industrial y cultura compleja, representada por la población extranjera metropolitana y sus descendientes, constituía la élite gobernante, y 2) la sociedad tradicional o arcaica, representada por los indígenas, formaba la masa sometida. (27)

money, and communal interdependence. Cultural distinctions are also reinforced by language where the official language is that of the rulers and skill in its use a key to the veil. The indigenous speak Spanish without fluency or command. Their use of a native language marks them as inferior.

Additionally, in this view poverty is largely an outcome of this dual system. The dominant side defines official poverty which joins other concerns such as education and economy to demonstrate the inferiority of the native. For the native to escape poverty, he or she must leave the native territory, join the market economy, be educated formally, and move to cities, and participate in national politics and health care procedures that are alien to them. It also means a loss of language, practical skills, etc. Thus, poverty eradication for the national and state government in regions of refuge often means that the natives are poor by being native, do not control the definition of their poverty, and must cease to be native to cease to be poor. People who are indigenous and officially poor may not be poor in their own eyes, community, or region. In fact, being poor may be diametrically opposed to the of the dominant society. A person with great economic wealth, but who does not have family, community, or spirit can be poor in the indigenous setting.

Many of the indigenous are forced to immigrate to cities where they lose their self-esteem and their ethnic identity is delegitimized. They are also isolated from access to justice, “para las demandas indígenas en cuestiones de tierras, danos ambientales, disputas laborales, robos y atropellos cometidos por terceros en contra de personas, familias, comunidades o pueblos, asi como para apelar las decisiones del sistema de justicia” (61).

This is the context for the analysis of poverty among the Raramuri or Tarahumara.

III. The Raramuri: History and Culture.

The Tarahumara Indians of Chihuahua, Mexico lived in the Mountains of western Chihuahua and along the fertile river valleys to the east for centuries prior to the coming of the Spanish colonizers. They developed a way of life that was well-adapted to the arid, mountain setting. Many small, egalitarian communities loosely integrated around communally held land holdings were common. They emphasized community, reciprocity, and respect for the individual to such a degree that they rarely organized beyond the community level. In the community, each person's views were valued and respected. They developed culture and religion that was consistent with their living conditions. The Tarahumara were characterized by the lack of urbanization. They resisted both the spiritual and military conquests led by the Spanish and Mexicans, at times in war and at other times through geographic isolation and cultural resistance.

The period following Mexican independence was characterized by exploitation of resources, mineral and timber, by the whites with little benefit going to the Tarahumara. The Tarahumara remained as small village groups with little overall organization. Life was characterized by difficult living conditions and a life lived with pleasure and enjoyment through the fiesta, dance, and tesguinada³.

It appears that population and living conditions remained rather stable for the Tarahumara from the seventeenth century until the mid 1950's. Similar numbers, around 35,000 to 40,000, are reported throughout the long period, but there is substantial variation in estimates. Since the 1950's, isolation has declined considerably as tourism has increased and many Tarahumara

³Tesguino is a kind of fermented corn drink that is a significant part of the fiesta both as a key part of the religious ceremony and as part of the celebration.

workers have been forced to enter the external labor market. The 1980 census indicates that there are 56,400 Tarahumara inhabitants in Chihuahua with 16,000 living outside the Sierra. Those who have migrated live in urban centers where they work in jobs that are extremely low paying or they go begging. The numbers of urban Raramuri have grown consistently since 1980 due to population growth and migration brought on by the drought.

The vast majority of the migrants live in severe poverty by the national definition and by their own standards. Thus, a dual poverty exists. Life in the cities has made it extremely difficult for the people to maintain traditional cultural patterns and life style. Women often find themselves forced out of their traditional roles with the necessity to beg, work in unreliable and menial jobs, and even enter into prostitution. Life in the mountains is also extremely difficult due to the poor condition of the land, the drought, and the numbers of people living there. The Mexican government has instituted several programs to attempt to provide improved educational opportunities and health care for the Tarahumara. There are also programs that attempt to support economic development.

The Tarahumara have developed a cultural system that has received substantial attention Cajas Castro (1992), Merrill (1988), and Velasco Rivera (1987). While there is other work that was completed earlier and more recent work, these three provide a basic view of the cultural considerations: all based on observations and life in villages in the Sierra, not the city. In fact, the culture, itself, is based on rural village life with a hybrid form of Raramuri traditionalism and Mexican culture with a dominance of the Raramuri. The cross can be placed on a Catholic chapel or in front of it and remind one of Catholic symbolism and, simultaneously, of the pre-conquest reverence for the sun, the Earth, and the four cardinal directions. In addition to the published

work, we have spend some time living in villages in the Sierra and will add our experiences to the written material. Here we mention only a few select aspects of the Tarahumara culture. The Tarahumara did not develop a writing system, or system of formal education as did some of the other groups in Mexico such as the Maya and Mexica.. Their history is only maintained through oral tradition and there is little or no specialized system to maintain orthodoxy. Each community and family, much to the frustration of some scholars, has its own unique and legitimate version of the world. However, some key features are generally held in common.

The villages are not highly structured and the dwellings are widely dispersed. The homes are build adjacent to the fields with a living quarter, fields of corn and beans, and out buildings for storage and livestock. The families raise goats or cattle, but they are not consumed by the individual families privately. Meat is consumed in fiestas by many village families. This is seen as a mode of redistribution of wealth where the owners of livestock provide meat for all. They also raise turkeys, chickens, and pigs. The villagers take great care to limit erosion and to use animal waste to fertilize the fields. A village has no formal boundaries but people define themselves as being part of a center with a local name and a few central buildings which may include a church, clinic, school, and small store. The clinic is serviced once every week or two by a nurse or other medical professional who does simple diagnoses and provides some generic medicines. Most villages have a resident practicioner trained in rudimentary nursing. The school is often a one or two room building with one or two teachers who ordinarily are not Tarahumara and often don't speak Raramuri. Most villages only have primary school and children will travel several kilometers through the mountains, though the local availability of secondary schools is increasing. Often the teachers live in buildings next to the school and leave the village for

weekends. Many schools experience very high teacher turnover. The church building is almost always Catholic, but most are rarely visited by a priest. The building does not have pews, only have benches along the walls. The building will typically have the usual Catholic paintings and icons blended with some non-Catholic native artifacts. The building is used for mass and for community meetings including justice courts. The store, if there is one, is operated by the community and only has a few basic items.

The community is governed by the villagers, with a highly democratic system where unanimity is sought in all issues. This reflects the egalitarian nature of the village. Typically there is a small group of officials in the village. One is a governor [siriamé] along with a counsel. These are highly respected people who see their position as a means to serve all. Villagers will often have group projects that are either to benefit the community as a whole, such as building a communal storage facility, or individual. When an individual needs help, the villagers join in the project. The project's completion is signaled by a fiesta. It is a tradition called Korima where a person can call on another villager for assistance and it must be given, without obligation of inferiority on the part of the person asking.

Los tarahumaras conservaron sus propias autoridades indígenas, su código moral...y su sistema judicial. Y aceptaron el sistema de gobierno más complejo, que les permitió ablutinarse y defenderse de las autoridades blancas. (260)

In the village work is very demanding physically. Each villager will have his agricultural land and keeping it productive is time consuming. There is no mechanization and plowing, planting, caring, and harvest are all accomplished by hand with very rudimentary tools. Occasionally a family will have a burro to aid with some of the heavy work. This form of life

guarantees that the Tarahumara will be independent of the non-natives: it means independence and the ability to maintain their own laws while promoting community solidarity.

The Tarahumara do not separate the daily features of life, cultivation for example from their spiritual and religious life. The products of their work are directly related to their own survival and to their spiritual well-being. The challenges and hardships of work are counter-balanced by the fiesta. Work and fiesta are the basis of community and affirm it. Some of the fiestas seek the purification of community which is much more critical than removing individual faults. There are two general types of fiestas, those that are from the Tarahumara tradition, such as those for birth, health, death, and work completion, and those from the Mexican tradition, such as the Holy Week and Christmas. The Mexican fiestas reflect the fact that they are being celebrated by the Tarahumara who take control of the fiesta and who have introduced many aspects of their own history. The fiestas usually start at sundown and continue at least until dawn. They begin with the erection of a pine cross or crosses, and a killing of a goat or other animal which is killed with great skill and care. The animal's throat is cut in such a way that death is painless and instantaneous and the blood captured for ceremonial use. The meat is cooked overnight to create a kind of stew. Through the night tortillas and other additional items are prepared. All of this is done in a very social setting with a casual religiosity to it. At about sundown the singer and other assistants begin a kind of a dance in front of the crosses. The dance and singing continue throughout the night. At the killing of the goat and the collecting of blood, tesguino is also introduced. It is a corn beer which all drink during the night and which is shared with the divine. It serves as a connection to the divine, between community members, and as a source of contentment to each adult. The fact the tesguino is of corn is significant spiritually and

symbolically. “Bailar promueve la vida, el triunfo del bien sobre el mal; por eso bailar es ser hijo de Dios” (Velasco Rivero 151) and “para no estar solo el tarumara baila. (Cajas Castro 139)

The fiesta promotes a mind set that opposes accumulation of goods, power and riches. It reinforces the engagement of the people in a traditional economy. “Los blancos estan muy afanados, por eso viven muy poco. Al Tarahumar no le gusta trabajar con los blancos, el Tarahumar siembra la tierra y con lo que saca puede vivir y alimentar a su familia” (306).

Velasco Rivero argues that given this culture, in which there are no poor, in the local sense, the people do not migrate to the cities nor to the U.S. The culture makes it impossible. However, the fact of the matter is that increasing numbers of the Tarahumara have migrated in a fairly complex set of patterns. In the city, the difficulty in living the spiritual, the community, and the fiesta leaves most of the Tarahumara ‘poor’ by their own cultural standards and often poor by the Mexican standards as well. They come to occupy what Leon Portilla once called “Nepantla,” a place that is no where. It leads many scholars to deep pessimism.

Las nuevas generaciones amenazan convertirse en nomadas urbanos; su sistema de creencias es materia de disputas teologicas entre los viejos jesuitas y las nuevas sectas evangelicas; sus miticos y legendarios organismos caen abatidos por el fuego de los soldados y los narcotraficantes y por enfermedades erradicadas en otros sitios. (244)

IV. Urban Poverty Among Raramuri Women.

Our research, which is still in progress, is to examine the lives of Tarahumara women living in the cities of Chihuahua and Cuauhtemoc. We are conducting conversations with the Tarahumara women. The discussions are left open so that the women will be able to a) provide their own views of their lives in general and their own definitions of well being and poverty,

including involvement in health care, education, etc. The women are urban immigrants living in a variety of living arrangements. They are invited to discuss the experience of living in cities and the unique problems involved there. The conversations are transcribed and analyzed using standard ethnographic techniques. The interviews are conducted in Spanish, not Raramuri, by three interviewers, two are mestizo and one is Raramuri. At present we only have the preliminary results of the interviews.

The women we have interviewed live in a wide range of conditions. Many live in temporary arrangements which are temporary shelters, others live in scattered houses where they are isolated from other Raramuri, and still others live in colonies or settlements. The shelters are of three types. The state of Chihuahua runs some shelters where rooms are available for the women and their families. These shelters are usually managed by an employee of the state who understands little of the Raramuri. The people who use these shelters feel like wards of the state with little sense of worth or connection. They are usually under-utilized. The municipalities make some facilities available. For example, the City of Cuauhtemoc made an unused school building available. The building was open so that the people could sleep inside or occupy areas within the building. The toilets and showers in the building were non-functioning. Many of the people lived in the open on the old school grounds where each family had its own metal barrel for its belonging and some sort of makeshift cover, such as old blankets. This sight was characterized by a serious lack of control or regularity. There were frequent fights and almost nightly drunkenness on the part of the men. The municipality recently closed this shelter because it was such a problem. The third type shelter is a private shelter run by a person who has devoted her life to helping the Raramuri. She usually has about 80 to 100 people in the shelter where the

residents share their resources and there is food, water, and sanitary facilities for all. The woman who owns the shelter contributes her time and pension to providing food and water. This temporary shelter allows people to stay as long as they wish and some women and their families have lived there for several years. It is a safe place where the women are respected and safe.

The colonies are set aside by the municipal government as places where the people can build homes and establish a more-or-less permanent living arrangement. One of these colonies is also located in Cuauhtemoc. It is arranged in such a way that there are houses around the perimeter with a meeting house and open field in the center. This colony is a place where they have a governor and council and hold their own fiestas and council meetings which reflect the traditional meetings. They continue to go to the Sierra to seek herbs and other medicines and ritual materials. The residents find work in very unstable, low-paying employment. The schools and health care is an improvement over the Sierra, but they are inferior to that available to the non-Raramuri. Other colonies are less successful in seeking to establish the village arrangements and live in homes and settings designed for them. These have dwellings that are more complete than the colony just described, but they lack the meeting and fiesta facilities.

Our interviews with the women reveal the sense that they live in a setting where many experience a loss of the Raramuri traditions and culture without replacing it with something that works for them. They are simply existing. The women's comments indicate that traditional birthing and child rearing skills are being lost. Some women indicate that young women simply "drop their babies" without understanding the birth process or how to care for the baby when it arrives. The women often start having children at a very young age, as they do in the Sierra, but they have lost the family and community support to guide them through the processes.

The women describe a series of serious conditions that illustrate their major concerns. They describe situations of alcoholism where the men and women have gone from a situation where they drink tesguino as part of the fiesta to where drinking is done as a way of escape with the use of cheap tequila. The youth are caught in cycles of crime, drug use (including the use of gasoline and paints), and detachment from family. In almost every account the women describe lives where their family and fiesta have been lost. The very heart of Raramuri life has been lost. Efforts at creating the fiesta are often only partial without the involvement encountered in the mountain.

While education is promoted by the government as a solution for the Raramuri, the women interviewed see education as having little value. They send their children if it is convenient, but they often need the children to help provide an income and the older children to care for the younger ones. The women themselves rarely have more than a couple of years education. Their children may have a little more, but they are almost all significantly behind grade level. One of the main attractions of school for the women is that they sometimes offer breakfast to the students.

V. Conclusion.

The urban setting is generally a hostile place for the Raramuri women. They experience a loss of the village community, opportunity to be actively involved in the fiesta and traditional family. The living conditions are unsafe and precarious. The men lose traditional skills and are often involved in spouse abuse, substance abuse, and meaningless activities. However, some of the women and men are making heroic efforts to reconstitute the Sierra life in the cities. They strive to hold the races, fiestas, and communal activities. Many still maintain the tradition of

sharing and help. They strive to offer traditional health care and teaching of tradition. One woman interviewed commented that “This race ought to be physically decayed, but it has resisted for four hundred years. It has overcome all that has attacked it in the past: civilization, mestizaje, war, winter, and drought. It will find a way to overcome migration, also.

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