

Reflecting Diversity: Variants of the Legendary Footraces of the Rarámuri in Northern Mexico

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ABSTRACT *The Rarámuri (Tarahumara) in northern Mexico are renowned for their footraces. This paper focuses on the interrelationship between footraces, social identity and sociopolitical organization. The legendary footraces of the Rarámuri are viewed as an arena of cultural meaning that is not fixed but, instead, open to negotiation and contest. Races in different settings, two rural communities and one urban community, disclose different ideologies of self-identification and principles of organization, showing that diverse Rarámuri groups do not necessarily adhere to the ethnic ascription imposed on them by the state.*

KEYWORDS *Ethnicity, sports, games, Tarahumara, Rarámuri*

The Tarahumara or Rarámuri, depicted by national statistics as one of Mexico's 56 indigenous groups, live mainly in the Sierra Madre Occidental, in the southwestern part of the state of Chihuahua, and its neighboring cities. Ever since the colonial period, during which the Jesuits installed a mission in this region, now commonly called 'the Tarahumara', their inhabitants have been associated with spectacular running abilities. The Jesuit Matthäus Steffel (1808:342–343) was the first to describe the unusual running events, during which men not only covered long distances, but also flipped a wooden ball with their feet while running. Onlookers betted at these races. Steffel was also the first to suggest that the name 'Tarahumara' should be translated as 'foot-runner' on account of the importance the participants attributed to the races. This etymology is still widely held and incites onomastical identification of the Rarámuri with the sport of footracing¹.

Starting with the turn of the 20th century the ethnographers Lumholtz (1902:281–294), Thord-Gray (1961:167–174), and Bennett & Zingg (1935:335–341) furnished more detailed descriptions of the Rarámuri men's and

women's races, though, in the same vein as Steffel they did not consider them relevant to their social, economic and political structure. Since the 1920s, physicians have tried to discover the secret of the formidable athletic prowess of these 'modern Spartans' with a view to improving racing sport and health conditions in their own societies (Basauri 1926, 1929:18–37; Balke & Snow 1965; Groom 1971).

In the 1960s, cultural anthropologists at last directed their attention to the history, function and cultural meaning of the races as well. Some of these studies on Rarámuri running reproduced a debate popular among students of culture at the beginning of the 20th century: Does the origin of races lie primarily in mythology and ritual, or in the pragmatic necessities involved in organizing social and economic life? (Culin 1907 in Nabokov 1981:67). Deimel (1994) is one of the anthropologists who see the meaning of the races as being primarily religious. He proposes that the races were originally ritual stagings of the 'mythical struggle between sun and moon which stand for the change between day and night, death and life'.² Scholars who have dedicated their time to analyzing footracing emphasize that the racing events are a force working in favor of social cohesion in 'centrifugal' Rarámuri society (Kennedy 1969, 1996:257–286; Irigoyen Rascón & Palma Batista 1985). The widely dispersed Rarámuri households are flexibly interlinked and do not recognize any central political authority. Kennedy (1969:19) discovered that the racing network functions much in the same way as the '*tesguino* network' (*tesguino* being the Spanish term for maize beer). As a diffuse system of interaction, it links households from great distances across the region. Residents of the economically largely autonomous households meet, forge alliances, and compete with one another. Rarámuri intellectuals support this view. They underline the social and economic aspects of the races (León Pacheco 1981; Irigoyen Rascón & Palma Batista 1985:86–94).

All these authors, nevertheless, do not take into account that footraces may assume different cultural meanings and be attributed different social values according to the social, cultural and economic conditions in which Rarámuri live. In this article I further the discussion by examining the concrete consequences of the races in the sociopolitical organizations of various Rarámuri communities and by focusing on the interrelationship between races and social identity by way of a comparative approach. Since 1983 I have spent three and a half years doing fieldwork in three Rarámuri communities. My observation is that the footraces staged by Rarámuri, although they may strike outsiders as a homogeneous practice, demonstrate a wide range of variation.

1993a).⁶ Since the presidency of Cárdenas (1934–1940), Mexican governments have made an effort to organize the Rarámuri into an ethnic group by providing them with a tribal council, the *Consejo Supremo de la Raza Tarahumara*. They have not succeeded, however. A cleavage persists between local versions of self-identification and the classification as a ‘tribe’ or ‘people’ (*raza*, later the terms *grupo étnico*, *grupo indígena* and *pueblo indígena* prevail) that is imposed by representatives of the state and adhered to by Mestizos. In theory the state nowadays defines the Rarámuri as a *pueblo indígena*, taking ‘objective’ cultural features like native language as well as the ‘subjective’ criterion of self-ascription into account. In everyday practice, however, regional bureaucrats employ this term with the same underlying conception of a ‘tribe’. They conceive the Rarámuri as a discrete bounded entity, as a descent group coterminous with a linguistically and culturally homogeneous entity and restricted to the enclave of the rural Tarahumara region.

The Rarámuri population does not concur with ethnic categorization according to this dominant code. Instead, the social category of Rarámuri is filled according to different criteria at different locales. The main principles of organization may vary accordingly. In some locales Rarámuri have a ‘non-tribal’ mode of self-ascription. Their use of the term Rarámuri hints at this. They use the word taking advantage of its multiple semantic layers. It may refer to a ‘human being’, or even more specifically ‘man’. The term can be extrapolated to the members of a local group, persons sharing the same language, or a category comparable to our term Indian comprising members of other Indian groups as well. The opposite pole from this most general level of Rarámuri are Mestizos, who are called *chabóchi* (lit. ‘whiskered ones’) on account of their facial hair.⁷ These agents define social boundaries in a fuzzy, ambiguous and situational way. In contrast, in the cities agents tend to define themselves as Rarámuri in consistency with the tribal consciousness that Mestizos attribute to the Tarahumara as a bounded entity. Accordingly, they have narrowed the semantic scope of the term.

In this article I seek to understand the connection between ‘culture’ and ethnicity within the wider context of the nation-state. I will view ethnicity simultaneously as a mode of consciousness and a set of relations (Comaroff 1987:306). As a mode of consciousness, ethnicity entails a claim to common identity based on putative shared descent. Membership in the ethnic category is usually validated by pointing to overt cultural diacritics (Bentley 1987:169; Eriksen 1993:157; Alonso 1994:391). As a set of relations it involves struggle over economic resources and political power, as well as over the capacity of

defining the value of one's cultural contributions to the nation-state (Williams 1989). I will consider footraces as formed from the interface of two intrinsically interconnected levels:

- (1) The micropractices of everyday life in the domestic arenas of family, household and neighborhood. Here the basic cultural contexts making up individual identity are reproduced. Individual agents at the same time engender as well as intentionally shape social identity via everyday activities which include the organization of and the participation in races.
- (2) The arena of indigenist politics within the society of the state of Chihuahua as a space of cultural struggle. It includes racing competitions, in which Rarámuri participate, organized by Mestizos. State politicians and church leaders invoke such events as an 'original' element of the Rarámuri culture to allege their claim that they are implementing an Indian policy that will reinvigorate the right to self-determination of the Rarámuri. In practice, however, they for the most part push through 'modernization' measures in the fields of education, agriculture and forestry without Rarámuri participation.

A brief sketch of two rural communities and one urban community of Rarámuri will demonstrate that competition for economic resources and cultural and political control influences footracing:⁸

The *pueblo* of Naráachi has relatively little land suitable for farming and little forested area. Consequently very few Mestizos have settled here. Periodically there have been intensive activities on the part of the Catholic mission and the Mexican government, but the Rarámuri's resistance has discouraged long-term engagement. The Rarámuri achieve a high degree of independence through mobility: They combine agriculture and animal herding with temporary work in the urban centers of Chihuahua. This combination is typical of the communities in the northeastern Sierra Tarahumara that are relatively close to the cities. The Rarámuri of Naráachi temporarily adapt to capitalist economy in the cities, in order to be able to bypass it at home in the country, where they practice a distribution process of goods, which is not considered as pertaining to the economic sphere. Their footraces support this arrangement. The principle of locality is of utmost importance for social organization and the footraces play a leading role as vehicles for the self-representation of flexible neighborhood groups. The organizers of 'large' races, the *cho'kéame*, in the rule men, are often at the same time religious specialists.

The *pueblo* of Norogachi in the central part of the Sierra Tarahumara is the community in which Catholic groups, among them the Jesuits, were most continuously active. This encouraged the influx of Mestizos and the mestizoization of Rarámuri. Mestizos now make up roughly 40 percent of this *pueblo*. Their mode of production, based on the exploitation of the forest resources as well as stockraising, has led to scarcity of land among the Rarámuri. The Rarámuri of this community are less mobile and combine farming with wage labor in the community. The Rarámuri's cultural orientation toward the mission has also promoted wage labor and free-market principles within the Rarámuri economy. A minority of mission school-educated Rarámuri constitute a culturally differentiated subgroup called *civilizados* by Mestizos. They are today influential in organizing the races, which are less frequently staged here than in Naráachi. *Civilizados* try to assert their cultural influence and improve their economic standing *vis-à-vis* the majority group of 'traditional' Rarámuri.

One relatively recent phenomenon is communities of Rarámuri located in the urban centers of Chihuahua. Several thousand Rarámuri today live in housing quarters specially built for them, as well as in dwellings and provisional shelters scattered within the state capital called *colonias* or *asentamientos*. Most of them earn a living from occasional wage labor, small-scale trade, and begging. Since the beginning of the 1990s, racing organized by urban Rarámuri has experienced an unexpected surge. Here the races are staged throughout the year and are attended both by permanently settled Rarámuri and by periodic migrant workers. Races in the city become relevant to the construction of a more self-consciously formed ethnic identity. One prevailing form of self-identification is based on proclaiming one's emotional ties with cultural practices regarded as 'traditional' of the Tarahumara region, for example footraces. This self-ascription is not identical to, but compatible with, the rigid ethnic code implemented by the state. Women, who have a dominant economic standing in the urban Rarámuri communities, prevail in organizing and participating in racing events.

The Principle of the Races

The following principle is the same in all three communities: the runners are expected to show less speed than endurance. Therefore, as a rule, the distance to be run should be as long as possible and the losers often have to give up before reaching the finish line. Rarámuri children run distances between 10 and 30 kilometers. The women's races, *rowema*, cover distances of 60 to 100 kilometers, and those of the men, *rarájipama*, sometimes cover distances of

150 kilometers and more.⁹ Runners and organizers agree at the beginning of the race upon how many times participants must cover a circular or figure-eight-shaped racing course.

Dexterity likewise plays an important role. Women racers throw a ring of twisted fiber using a curved stick and men flip a wooden ball with their feet as they run. Generally two or more runners form a team to accomplish these tasks jointly. If the hoop or ball should fall into a crevice or the like, the runner's party is at a disadvantage. Thus luck is also instrumental in determining the outcome of a race, a condition which endows the races with the character of games of chance. The Rarámuri seize this as an opportunity for gambling. *Cho'kéame* or racing managers are central persons who invite people of their community to support their teams and mediate the wagers. At large races participants bet considerable quantities of cash, clothing, and domestic animals on their runners. At large races that usually extend into the night, supporters carry torches of resinous pinewood to illuminate the course and urge their favorite on with shouts of encouragement. The Rarámuri races constitute one of the rare athletic events where the 'spectators' run along with the racers, displaying in this way noteworthy athletic abilities themselves.

The Naráachi Footraces

Rikubichi lies quite idyllically on the upper course of a river at an altitude of roughly 2,000 meters. Rarámuri dwell here in a dispersed settlement pattern: Farmsteads are established wherever agricultural plots can be found. Men, women, and children temporarily work in the closest cities, in this way providing their families with money for cloth, tools, coffee, and, when harvests fail, to purchase maize. The goods acquired in town are also wagered during racing events. The prospect of winning a wager is the primary incentive that motivates a surprising number of people in almost all age groups to challenge a matching opponent to a race. A woman in Rikubichi hardly finishes sewing her new skirt when a neighbor will urge her to compete with her and wager it in a 'small' race. Thus successful runners and wagerers have no need to journey to a town to acquire certain articles. This is one reason why the inhabitants of Rikubichi rarely resort to the *pueblo*-center of Naráachi with its stores situated at a distance of three to four hours on foot. Quite a few boys do attend the government boarding school there, although most only do this irregularly during a period of two to three years. Rarámuri-style races are not a part of the school's sports curriculum.

It is not only the circumstances of everyday life that make many people excellent long-distance runners. Children, who walk many kilometers per day on mountainous terrain herding livestock, are also explicitly taught the virtues of 'being resistant', *izwera*, and 'being swift', *warine*. Parents, who are generally quite indulgent, may at times respond unusually harshly to their children who have lost a race by cutting off their hair on the spot as punishment.¹⁰

Once the first small race has been run, the inhabitants of the winning and the defeated household unite and together with their best male or female runner, they challenge neighboring households. Neighborhood alliances forged in this way are gradually enlarged by means of repeated mergers. Irigoyen Rascón and Palma Batista (1985:85) were the first to refer to this as a 'conglomerative pattern.'¹¹ If a runner proves to be particularly good, his team of supporters will expand at an especially rapid pace. For the Rarámuri the ideal case is when shortly before the maize harvest major races are staged that pit the inhabitants of two *pueblos* or larger territorial units against one another.

Hence it is in connection with the footracing system that the Rarámuri form their largest social units. There are few other events that lead to comparable social units. They are related to the center-oriented territorial-political systems initially introduced by the Jesuits in the colonial epoch and continued by the Mexican state after independence. The various levels of social organization and their interlinkages will be considered below to establish the significance of the system of racing for group alignment.

The Principle of Locality and Levels of Social Interaction in Naráachi

The household is the basic economic and social unit. Household members express emotional closeness by addressing each other with bilateral kinship terms. A household, however, is by no means constituted exclusively on the basis of marriage and procreation. By establishing ritual kinship ties with friends and through adoption, the Rarámuri seek to concentrate land and to assemble the farmhands that are needed to cultivate it.

In contrast, the members of neighboring households – even those including close consanguineal kin – are described by territorial terms. They connote a spatial-social distance that stands in contrast to the kinship idiom. The competition and the alliances between neighbors and neighborhood groups form the focal point of the footracing system. Its lowest level, the first small races, characteristically witnesses two neighboring households pitted against one another. When they discuss the potential winner or loser, Rarámuri always refer to their party as the inhabitants of a place. Spatial orientation fol-

lows either the flow of rivers or the inclination of the terrain. The composition of neighborhood groups, identified by a toponym, is in fact negotiated via the racing system. Besides racing, other networks through which food, prestige goods, labor, and religious activities are exchanged also serve to connect households in Rikubichi.

The flexibility of these diffuse structures contrasts with the *pueblo* system introduced by the Jesuits. The households as a result see themselves as belonging to a given community, a *pobora* (from Spanish *pueblo*), with a church at its center. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Jesuits still tried to impose their economic and religious discipline with the aid of right-hand men which they entrusted with the cargo of *gobernador*. The *gobernador* offices in Nará-rachi continue to have functions that are judicial and centralist-political in nature, but today they are controlled by Rarámuri. The *pueblo* officials ensure that up to one hundred persons find their way into the *pueblo* center on the occasion of church fiestas. Beginning in 1920, the state government organized the mission *pueblos* into collective *ejidos* as part of the agrarian reform program of the Mexican Revolution, installing a new political organization, the *comisariado ejidal*. The *comisariado*'s main task is to facilitate the exploitation of the *ejido*'s forest resources by private and public sector companies. It provided for a joint political representation for Rarámuri and Mestizos in contrast to the older system of *pueblo* offices reserved to Rarámuri.

The few Mestizos who live in Nará-rachi are descendants of Rarámuri who have assimilated to Mestizo ways as a consequence of mission school education. They define themselves as Mestizos. They dedicate themselves to farming and small-scale commerce for a living and do not participate in the redistribution networks of the Rarámuri. Ethnic discourse is not very salient in the community. The Rarámuri state that these Mestizos could be classified as Rarámuri because of their Rarámuri descent. They are only Mestizos because 'they do not want to be Rarámuri'. In contrast, they may deny a Rarámuri identity to some Rarámuri from other communities, for example to several *civilizados* from Norogachi and Rarámuri living in the cities, on account of their adoption of a Mestizo lifestyle and habitus.

A minority of Rarámuri who are school-educated and experienced in wage labor have preferential access to the *ejido* offices and now exert influence on issues that in former times more exclusively controlled the *gobernadores*. In addition, since the racing system leads to the constitution of large neighborhood groups, races can influence appointments to the *gobernador* office as exemplified by the following case.

The Rikubichi vs. Sarabichi Footrace

While any adult can organize smaller races, only experienced specialists are in the position to stage major races that bring together households from great distances across the region. Only men perform this function in Naráachi. San Juan, in his mid-fifties, is a *cho'kéame* or racing manager who lives in Rikubichi.

Beginning in March (1992), San Juan concentrated on finding the 'right' runner for a major men's race, ideally someone who has proven his worth but is not widely known for his prowess as a runner. He organized and attended minor races. San Juan then coached his runner by furnishing him with the support of *bakánowa*, a medicinal plant and deity. *Bakánowa* healers rank below the peyote healers, who in Naráachi often also assume the political offices in the *ejido*. Peyote and *bakánowa* are known for their ability to promote good luck in games. Since all large races are, in the end, decided by supernatural means and powers, the *cho'kéame* are also religious specialists. The Rarámuri emphasize that special training for running ability is not part of the coaching. Runners, though, do practice by participating in small races and the issue of whether they train privately is controversial (see below).

In May of 1992, San Juan challenged a *cho'kéame* from a region two hours on foot down the river. San Juan and the others from Rikubichi had no day-to-day contact with these people, but were accustomed to inviting them now and then to major household drinking parties. Both of the *cho'kéame* then tried to convince supporters of their runner's certain victory. While the *cho'kéame* are expected to choose their supporters from contiguous households, they often will leave a certain household out within this region because of a quarrel or include a more distant household on grounds of friendship ties. Since such invitations are an indicator of the prestige that a person enjoys, the Rarámuri are highly concerned about whether they are invited. As a rule the *cho'kéame* and their helpers formally call for bets a few hours before the race, and so it is only then that the final makeup of supporter groups takes shape. When this race finally took place at the end of August, San Juan's party, the *Rikubíi* or 'inhabitants of Rikubichi', included some twenty households from up the river, while the opponent's party, the 'inhabitants of Sarabichi', came primarily from the opposite direction down the river. 'Rikubichi', which at that time generally was used to refer to a group of three households, thus expanded to constitute a major portion of the *pueblo*.¹² Rikubichi is an important term of self-identification, as is also highlighted by the fact that Rarámuri living in this neighborhood group use it as a last name, changing it when they shift their main residence.

At the venue – a pine-covered plateau – supporters of the rival parties displayed a routine antagonism by camping out of sight of one another. Only the *cho'kéame* and their helpers met halfway between the groups to exchange wagers which consist mainly of skirts, glass beads, fabrics, hand-woven belts, and money. A routine demonstration of the rivalry between the parties was an angry exchange of words to abstain from cheating just before the race started at dusk. As the runners started off all spectators gathered. All told, they were some two hundred persons, which is an impressive number considering that seldom more than one hundred people ever attend a church fiesta in *pueblo* Norogachi. Neither of the runners pulled ahead during two rounds. As day was about to break, and after running over roughly 100 kilometers in total, the runner of the 'inhabitants of Sarabichi' won the race.

Since their material losses were considerable, the inhabitants of Rikubichi did not join the winners in organizing an even bigger event against a neighboring region this time. As mentioned earlier, for the Rarámuri the ideal case is when major races are staged that pit the inhabitants of two *pueblos* against one another shortly before the maize harvest. The territory inhabited by a party of this sort need not necessarily coincide with the *pueblo* introduced by the Jesuits and occasionally extends beyond this *pueblo's* territory. The term of self-reference *Narari*, 'inhabitants of Narárachi', has therefore a wider semantic scope than one might suspect.

This particular race had long-range consequences. The following year a comparably large race was held during the same season between similarly composed parties. San Juan died in March of 1993 so the inhabitants of Rikubichi turned to a *cho'kéame* inexperienced in big races. They again lost, but this time they accused their opponents of fraud. They claimed the rival runner was able to overtake in the last round, only by sneaking a new ball into the race. The hostilities reached their peak when the rival *cho'kéame* was rudely sent home upon his arrival at a drinking party in Rikubichi. This was an unusual rebuff in view of his position as a renowned healer.

The dispute gradually effected a change in the neighborhood group of Rikubichi. The members of the three households of Rikubichi allied with two more neighboring households and together sought closer cooperation with the people who live up the river toward the neighboring *pueblo* of Pahuichique. In 1992, they still had entertained close contacts with people from down the river, who likewise belong to the *pueblo* of Narárachi. Because of the deterioration of relationships the *gobernador*, who came from Rikubichi, neglected his duties. Hoping to amend this state of affairs, the *pueblo's* politically influ-

ential men in an election held in May of 1994 seized the occasion to replace this *gobernador* with a person who lived closer to the center of the *pueblo*. During my stay between 1993 and 1994, the Rarámuri of Naráachi therefore understood Rikubichi as the unit of these five households oriented toward *pueblo* Pahuichique – a substantial change in its make-up.

The Norogachi Footraces

Kabórachi, a day's journey from Rikubichi, belongs to the *pueblo* of Norogachi. Footraces here are organized less often than in earlier times, as I have observed since the early 1980s. Some of the elders point to the school as the reason why runners with stamina are lacking. The children who attend the mission boarding-school scarcely have an opportunity to run, since they do not herd the household's goats. Yet running is indeed kept up at the mission school. It dons the garb of the 'traditional' in that the children use stick, hoop, and wooden ball as running utensils. But instead of upholding gambling, which is linked to the principle of luck, the principle of individual merit is encouraged. The victor is rewarded by the teacher with a ball-point pen, for instance. Also, the pupils run over level ground, covering shorter distances of the type usual in national athletic events.

In the late 19th century an important number of Mestizos moved into Norogachi because it played a key role for provision and transportation of important mining centers. Some of them married local Rarámuri women. Their descendants mainly assumed a Mestizo identity, though a minority opted for a Rarámuri identity. This corresponded to a choice of different economic strategies. Mestizos are market-oriented entrepreneurs and live from farming, stockraising and the exploitation of forest resources. Rich Mestizos have usurped Indian land and thus have caused the shortage of land in the territory, which is now settled mainly by Rarámuri. The basis of the Rarámuri's economy is farming in combination with occasional wage labor for Mestizo *patrones*, the mission, or in the *ejido*-owned sawmill. Wage labor is prompted by the values imparted at school. One third of the children from Kabórachi attend school regularly, for a period of four to six years.

Large races are commonly held on Sundays, close to the Norogachi *pueblo* center along the airstrip. Not infrequently they are incited by well-to-do Mestizos. Some of these Mestizo racing enthusiasts 'buy' a race result by secretly bribing a well-known runner so that he will intentionally lose while betting on his contestant. They regard cheating the Rarámuri of their wagers as a *peccadillo* since by nature Rarámuri are held incapable of keeping their money

together. The Rarámuri of Kabórachi rarely organize races, preferring instead merely to place bets.

In contrast to Narárachi, the racing culture here does not display a 'conglomerative pattern' that includes a series of small races followed by large ones with mergers of growing betting parties. The races also do not influence the composition of neighborhood groups. Interethnic conflicts over land provide for more sharply-defined, permanent boundaries. Kabórachi, a series of *ranchos* with 40 households, for instance, is clearly delimited by Mestizo farms to the south. Interestingly the *gobernadores* in Norogachi have less influence in settling land-inheritance issues than in Narárachi. In Norogachi the political systems of *pueblo* and *ejido* are not closely intertwined but are instead marked by an ethnic cleavage. Owing to their literacy skills, school-educated Rarámuri play a more important role in settling interethnic land conflicts than the *gobernadores* acting as informal middlemen.

The group of school-educated Rarámuri who, in ideological terms, are close to the mission, are called *civilizados* by Mestizos. Opposite them stand the majority group of 'traditional' Rarámuri, who remain ideologically aloof from the missionaries.¹³ Both Rarámuri groups view the Mestizos as invaders of their original land and question their moral values. They are, however, split on many concerns, including school education and healing concepts. The *civilizados* take issue motivated by their self-image as 'true' Rarámuri. Their opinion is that traditional customs have been adulterated in the course of the imposed communal life with Mestizos. They feel themselves as more empowered than 'traditional' Rarámuri to stop the deterioration of such customs.

For this reason *civilizados* get involved in long-distance races that the Rarámuri call *maratón* and are organized by Mestizos.¹⁴ From the Rarámuri's perspective the characteristic features of a *maratón* are that they are conducted without a wooden ball, cover a (relatively) short distance, and require the organizer to place prize money on the winner. *Maratón* run by Rarámuri take place when the mission dedicates a new medical station, the radio station of the National Indian Institute celebrates an anniversary, or a new governor of the state of Chihuahua assumes his office.

Joaquín Castillo from Norogachi – he now lives in Guachochi, a small Mestizo town in the Tarahumara – is a central figure in organizing events of this type. He has graduated from a mission secondary school. His talent as a middleman paved Joaquín's way to a career in the field of Indian policy. Officially, he is often conceded no more than the job of translator. Unofficially, however, he is a person of considerable influence in staging cultural and political

events. For example, it was Joaquín who in 1992 supported the PRI candidate for the governorship of the state of Chihuahua during his election campaign by honoring him, in a rally, with a staff of office characteristic of the Rarámuri *gobernadores*. *Civilizados* like Joaquín also play an important role as translators and mediators for the Jesuits, a factor that encourages them to retain a Rarámuri identity, though they could easily assume a Mestizo identity like the Mestizos of Naráachi who are descendants of Rarámuri. *Civilizados* from Norogachi classify these Mestizos as Rarámuri *civilizados*, because they have a similar cultural background and orientation.

When organizing a *maratón*, Joaquín is forced to rely on his younger brother's help. Martín, who lives in Kabórachi, is still in touch with good runners from the hinterland like the region of Rikubichi (see above). In order to encourage participation, Martín is pressed to offer spectators the prospect of a steer being slaughtered at the venue and the promise that they will be picked up by truck and returned home on the same day. Some Rarámuri of Rikubichi are quite fond of such events because they have an opportunity to display their superiority over the Mestizos. They enjoy it when the politicians and church dignitaries honored by such a *maratón* extend their recognition to the runners – particularly when the cameras of the press are focused on them.

Such *maratón* have probably influenced the contents of the Rarámuri-style racing events ever since the 1920s. In the late 1920s, long-distance races were enjoying extraordinary popularity throughout the world and Rarámuri runners participated in racing competitions in the United States. A flurry of excitement over the Indian runners broke out in Chihuahua's Mestizo society. Inhabitants of the border towns Ciudad Juárez and El Paso founded a 'Tarahumara Olympic Committee' striving for the introduction of a 100-kilometer competition at the Olympic Games (*El Correo de Chihuahua*, 9.4.1927). Mexican anthropologist Carlos Basauri was involved in organizing a test run covering this distance. Two Rarámuri, Aurelio Terrazas and José Torres, represented Mexico in the Olympic marathon in Amsterdam in 1928 (Nabokov 1981:185). Although they disappointed, even Mexicans in the United States suddenly took pride in the Rarámuri. Hank López (1974:58), who experienced a long-distance race between four Rarámuri and the legendary Finnish runner Paavo Nurmi in Los Angeles, relates that this event motivated him to claim Rarámuri, instead of Aztecs, Mayans and Zapotecs, as his Indian ancestors.

This appropriation of Rarámuri footraces was accompanied by a new emphasis in northern Mestizo identity. Nowadays Mestizos in Chihuahua claim

the running prowess of 'their' Indians as part of a regional Chihuahuan identity. Mestizos especially take pride in Rarámuri runners since they at last triumphed in an international competition in 1993. Several Rarámuri successfully participated in the 100-mile race at Leadville, Colorado, and fiftyfive-year-old Victoriano Churo won the race with a 40-minute lead, outclassing the US athletes (Williams 1994).

I experienced how the outcome of the Leadville race also influenced racing competitions in Rikubichi. It was exhaustively discussed weeks later at drinking parties. On the one hand, the inhabitants of Rikubichi expressed their admiration for the runners (besides Churo, two other Rarámuri had finished in second and fifth place) but not only for their athletic performance. They also claimed that the runners had been forced to run the better part of the way back home from the city of Chihuahua because the foreign organizers had not given them enough money. For the people of Rikubichi, the runners had once again proven that people with endurance – i.e. Rarámuri – were in no way reliant on the money of the *tiringo* (from Spanish *gringo*), whom they consider a subgroup of the Mestizos who inhabit the edge of the world. But on the other hand, they played down the performance of the victor, since, after all, he came from the *pueblo* of Panalachi and is therefore their rival when it comes to rural racing events. One *cho'kéame* subsequently undertook efforts to organize a large race and challenged the victor of Leadville. Confidentially he told me that participants in 'western-style' races secretly train the way Mestizo runners do and are convinced that this will help them to win at home as well. And this he intended to debunk publicly in a race run Rarámuri-style. In the months following, several foot-races were held in which one of the runners with experience in the United States competed against a local talent – with equal outcomes. Thus participation in an international sporting event gave rise to a regular racing fever throughout part of the countryside.

The Urban Racing Boom

Those wishing to experience an Indian-style footrace have the best chance to do so in the city of Chihuahua. Rarámuri stage races throughout the entire year. The races at first sight strikingly resemble those organized in the country. City dwellers, nevertheless, have conveyed a new social significance to the races.

Rarámuri already organized footraces in the city of Chihuahua on a regular basis at the beginning of the 20th century. Men from communities in the northeastern Sierra Tarahumara like Naráachi used to travel regularly to the

cities to sell medicinal herbs to Mestizos or to ask for *kórima*, a term which means both an 'offering' and 'to ask for a gift'. Rarámuri households with adequate supplies are expected to give supplicants *kórima*, a gift of maize. In the cities, Rarámuri transferred this concept to the Mestizos and received left-over food from them and sometimes reciprocated it with work. Rarámuri met in the dry river bed to organize races as an alternative to the Sunday visits to the *pueblo* center and to household drinking parties back in the country.

The beginning of the 1990s saw a boom in urban racing. This was associated with the higher visibility of Rarámuri visitors starting in the mid-1980s since especially women and children were now starting to practice a new, more rewarding form of *kórima*-begging.¹⁵ At busy intersections, they would ask motorists for *kórima peso*, or a donation of money. The Mestizo population then began to view the Rarámuri as migrants and as a problem. Indian affairs bureaucrats considered concentration into a housing project (*asentamiento*) as the most effective means of assimilating the migrants who had already settled permanently in town to a Mestizo way of life. A recently founded state agency of Indian affairs, the *Coordinación Estatal de la Tarahumara* initiated the building of Colonia Tarahumara in 1992.¹⁶ Most of its inhabitants are increasingly emphasizing their cultural identity as Rarámuri giving rise to a new Rarámuri community, a development bureaucrats did not foresee.

Viewpoints as to what constitutes Rarámuri-ness are changing dynamically in the urban milieu. This is related to the heterogeneous background of the inhabitants of Colonia Tarahumara, some 50 families. Those stemming from mission strongholds like Norogachi have usually attended elementary school (*primaria*). Some few Rarámuri who have graduated from school and hold regular better-paying jobs claimed a Rarámuri identity to secure access to a house in Colonia Tarahumara. In most other contexts, however, they identify as Mestizos and are accepted by Mestizos as such. The majority of the inhabitants of Colonia Tarahumara are opposed to this 'integrationist' faction. This applies to persons coming from a region with a high percentage of Rarámuri population, from *pueblo* Naráachi among others, and with less school education. *Kórima*-begging carried out by women and children is their basic economic activity, even though the *Coordinación* presses them to train in qualified jobs as seamstresses.

Soledad Batista, originally from Norogachi, is the leader of the larger 'anti-mestizoization' faction in Colonia Tarahumara. She claims that those who have Rarámuri ancestors will remain Rarámuri and therefore 'must' acknowledge their identity. Soledad regards cultural practices she estimates as 'tradi-

tional' and authentic of the Tarahumara region, for example ceremonies, games and food, as essential elements of the identity of the urban Rarámuri, even though many of these customs cannot be practiced 'the way they should be' in the city. They nonetheless remain an indispensable part of their emotional cosmos. Soledad's perception of the 'Tarahumara' (she prefers the Spanish term) is different from that of the Mestizos, since she acknowledges having reevaluated traditional culture and considers herself as an innovator. But her perception is compatible with the image the Mestizos have of the Tarahumara as a tribe with clear-cut social boundaries coterminous with cultural boundaries. Defining an ethnic community in this way, she has been successful in obtaining donations from Indian affairs institutions. Her role corresponds to that of the *lideres* of Mestizo quarters of town who, thanks to their connection to a political party, are able to procure benefits for their clientele. She assumed this role guided by a neighboring *lideresa* (Kummels 1996).

Factionalism in the Colonia Tarahumara soon created problems for representatives of the state and the church, and they gradually returned to central structures that had been used by the Jesuits in the colonial period, in order to secure their power. One of the means of doing this was to promote the 'traditional' system of *pueblo* authorities undermining the *lideresa* structure.

In this context it is noteworthy that the urban Rarámuri continue to organize footraces without any encouragement from Indian-affairs institutions, and indeed sometimes even in the face of their resistance. They associate their racing system with a non-egoistic relationship to goods that they contrast with greed, which they ascribe to Mestizo society. They also employ racing to reinforce community ties without need to recourse to a conspicuous community leader. It therefore allows them to bypass factional conflicts as well as state and church intervention in their community affairs.

The majority of the women and some of the men of Colonia Tarahumara regularly organize small footraces on Sundays. As soon as the Jesuit priest – he disapproves of the races because of the 'waste economy' they involve – has finished celebrating mass, the preparations get underway. Luisa, who lives in a small settlement, has crossed town from one end to the other to organize a race as *cho'kéame* against her co-mother Anita from the Colonia Tarahumara. Their ten-year-old daughters are to compete. Luisa, who stems from Norogachi and now works as a maid in a Mestizo household, is very aware of the peculiarity of the city races. She remarks that each woman brings her own skirts to the rival party to be inspected and then picks them up again, but that in Norogachi, even at small races, this is the *cho'kéame's* job. Furthermore, the rival

parties sit only several meters apart. They have therefore dropped the larger spacing reflecting routine rivalry. What strikes me however, is that the two girls master the total distance of roughly thirty kilometers so well. As in the country, their mothers' encouragement is a decisive factor.

Major races are so popular that occasionally several of them are held on the same Sunday at different locations on the outskirts of town. One afternoon I come across over one hundred people that have gathered in the midst of a bare hill along a dirt road. One group's *cho'kéame* is a woman about fifty years old, who lives in *pueblo* Naráachi and is in town only for a few weeks. Her supporters are residents of Colonia Tarahumara as well as other Rarámuri who live in a number of unplanned settlements on the north side of town. The rival group, likewise around fifty people, is mainly from 'El Oasis', the housing project in the western part of the city. The rival party's *cho'kéame*, a lanky young man wearing a cowboy hat and red-white checked shirt, was brought up in Chihuahua and is a permanent city resident. Both parties are made up of both periodic visitors and permanent urban Rarámuri.

The attire the runners wear is significant of an ethnic competition embodied in some of the urban races. One runner is dressed in an embroidered loincloth in addition to his polo shirt and headband. The rival party's runner, shirtless, is wearing gym shorts and a baseball cap. This assemblage of contrasting Rarámuri and Mestizo styleteam-apparel sometimes signals that an urban dweller competes against a visitor from the country or that the match is set up with the intention to compare racing techniques. Lorenzo, a former runner, also told me that when he moved from the *pueblo* of Samachique to the city about twenty years ago he decided to jog daily along the river carrying a heavily loaded backpack. This soon enabled him to win an urban footrace against a well-known rural runner.

Some church and government representatives have attempted to discourage the Rarámuri-style races, especially because they disapprove of the 'waste economy'. For several months, a state physical-education teacher tried to incite Rarámuri youths to adopt 'western-style' long-distance running. In an attitude characteristic of many Mestizos he stated that 'they should learn what a clean race is, because they have been corrupted by gambling and are guided only by their interest in winning. They have to grasp what sports are all about.' The 'clean race' was finally staged on a national holiday and promoted with the aid of prize money. Yet only a few of the youths and their parents took part. At the same time the Rarámuri-style races continued to be immensely popular.

Conclusions

Rarámuri footracing has hitherto been viewed as tied to one set of meanings or social values and thus as a uniform and rather static practice. It has implicitly been taken as a marker of an established, unchanging social identity as witnessed in onomastic identification of the Rarámuri as 'the footracers'. By taking a closer look at Rarámuri-style footracing, this paper indicates how Rarámuri 'culture' and ethnicity can be conceptualized in a way that avoids reification. Reification is implicitly conveyed by comparative studies that identify community or subgroup-based 'subcultural variants' with discrete entities (e.g., Weaver & Arrieta 1998:430). On the other hand, I conclude that the racing variants are not arbitrary transformations of a cultural practice, but grounded in microregionally varying social, historic and economic factors.

This article therefore seeks to make a contribution to the wider anthropological debate concerning the issue of the dual character of culture and society addressed by Bentley (1987) and Eriksen (1991, 1993:57). Seeking to transcend the sterility of the primordialist/instrumentalist dichotomy in the ethnicity debate, these scholars examine the microprocesses by which collectivities of interest and sentiment come into existence. Both question the degree of consciousness that is involved in the selection of goals or choice identified by instrumentalists as the motivating factor for ethnic identity and organization (see Banks 1996:43). Eriksen (1991:139) suggests that the values that one strives after are established through the 'immediate struggles' in the family and among close friends. Only then are they carried into the arena of institutional politics. As to the Rarámuri, cultural negotiations in such private arenas concern food consumption and exchange (Kummels 1996), ceremonies, as well as games, manifestations popularly regarded as intrinsically innocent and free from relations of domination. Footraces can be fashioned into a powerful force for the negotiation of social identity at the level of institutional politics, because it is employed for such purposes at the household level.

An analysis of the cultural and social significance of footracing must furthermore take into account that Rarámuri-style footracing is constantly being recreated in a complex, long-term interaction between Rarámuri, regional Mestizo society, government agencies and the Church. The latter groups exert power: they are in a privileged position to define the Rarámuri's position in the nation-state. Mestizo society attributes enormous running prowess to the Rarámuri and invokes this power to confer uniqueness to Chihuahuan regional identity. At the same time, Mestizos adhere to an ideology of racial purity keeping up the bipartite ethnic categorization. In the course of the

20th century the symbolic weight of footraces in different locales has been enhanced through a dialectical process: a mutual positive assessment of footracing on both sides of the shifting ethnic boundary.

Rarámuri, on the other hand, do not merely react to the outside process of social categorization and cultural resignification. They have attributed a different social significance to the races depending on the dynamic social, cultural, and economic situation they live in. Contemporary transformations of racing depend upon variables such as ecological-economic conditions in the settlement areas, degree of Indian-related activities developed by mission and government, population makeup, intensity of the interaction between Rarámuri and Mestizos, and control over cultural knowledge. Distinct social categories of Rarámuri are engaged in negotiating footraces. They differ as regards educational and economic opportunities as well as choice of strategies. One key difference concerns the ways in which they utilize the races as a vehicle of self-representation and emphasize diverse forms of socio-political organization:

In Naráachi, the diffuse neighborhood groups substantially define themselves by means of the footraces. A broad circle of participants stemming from contiguous households are actively involved in forming alliances, constantly recombine neighborhood groups and by this means form coalitions that are a basis for the negotiation of political power at the *pueblo* level. Coalitional identification characteristic of the racing system is therefore an integral part of Naráachi's *pueblo* system, which is more rigidly configured by its political and church fiesta organization.

In Norogachi, Mestizos and agents of the Catholic mission interfere directly in the organization of racing events and in racing as part of socialization. They back up the center-oriented system sustained by both the *pueblo* and *ejido* organization which dominates economic, religious, and political affairs and in this way marginalize the significance of the footraces in these spheres. The footraces here resemble a 'sport' that is structurally irrelevant to economy and politics. Culturally and religiously differentiated subgroups, Rarámuri *civilizados* and the 'traditional' Rarámuri, use the racing events as an arena for the negotiation of cultural matters.

In the urban milieu of Chihuahua, a Rarámuri group that is very heterogeneous and includes seasonal migrants as well as Rarámuri who have taken up permanent residence in the city, organize and practice the races as a platform of shared ethnic identity. Since the 1990s, footraces play a crucial role in the independent indigenous construction of a modern Rarámuri identity,

which as yet encompasses only these urban Rarámuri as a group. Urban Rarámuri employ footracing to bypass factional conflicts and maintain a certain autonomy in relation to the Indian affairs policies of the state and the church. They take advantage of the fact that 'sport' in terms of popular Mestizo belief is perceived as disconnected from politics and economy. Footraces therefore possess the advantage of being inconspicuous in comparison to the salient, centralized forms of sociopolitical organization.

A second key difference among these groups concerns the cultural significance attached to the races: All three contemporary transformations of footracing reflect on a discourse of colonial character pervasive in the regional society of Chihuahua. This discourse opposes Mestizo society as associated with modernity and the Indian tribe as associated with primitiveness. Mestizo and Indian-style races are equally identified with contrasting social values: endurance as opposed to speed, chance as opposed to merit and transfer of goods integrated in sport as opposed to dissociation of sport from the economic sphere. Footraces do not simply mirror these values in a structuralist manner. Rarámuri in all of the three locales systematically use footracing as a means of reflecting on this marked ethnic cleavage in regional society. Nevertheless, they propose different answers to the debated issue of the preparation of the runners: In *pueblo* Naráachi, the runners were not supposed to train physically, other than during the racing events themselves, and great importance was attached to securing supernatural assistance for the runner. At some racing competitions, however, the customary training techniques of Rarámuri and Mestizos were deliberately compared, by matching *maratón*-experienced runners with local talents. In *pueblo* Norogachi, the mission boarding school promoted the principle of merit by motivating runners with prizes. Because of this, many school-educated Rarámuri found it difficult to identify themselves with races subjected to the capriciousness of chance. Finally, in the city of Chihuahua, a confrontation between runners who use different training methods is organized. Urban Rarámuri reify the races as an authentic cultural practice and use them for proclaiming their emotional ties with the Tarahumara region.

Such subtle shifts in the cultural significance of footracing reveal that local versions of self-identification and principles of organization are not formed from within local communities, but in a national frame. A historical view of footracing highlights that local differentiation in connection with diverse ideologies of self-identification and principles of organization among 'the' Rarámuri have been intensified in response to processes of centralization, homogenization and ethnic ascription on the part of the Church and the state.¹⁷

Contemporary transformations of Rarámuri footraces therefore relate to the fact that group self-identification and social categorization by others may clash, yet are at the same time inextricably linked.

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Notes

1. Researchers applying this etymology are among others Lumholtz (1902:282); Bennett & Zingg (1935:335); and Rodríguez López (1999). For a discussion see Deimel (1980:34).
2. For similar interpretations, see Plancarte (1954:54); Lartigue (1983b); Noriega Arjona (1988); and Slaney (1991:234).
3. Irigoyen Rascón, for example, mainly examines empirical data from *pueblo* Norogachi but draws conclusions that he judges as generally valid for all Rarámuri communities (Irigoyen Rascón & Palma Batista 1985:79-92).
4. Comparative studies include Kennedy & López (1981); Lartigue (1983a); Weaver & Arrieta (1998) and Levi (1998). They attribute cultural variation among diverse Rarámuri communities mainly to ecological adaptation, influence of capitalist enterprises and Mestizos and, in the last case, ideological resistance to Mestizo hegemony.
5. A recent survey conducted by the Coordinación Estatal de la Tarahumara indicates that in 1999 some 3,50 Rarámuri lived in the city of Chihuahua.
6. Elwert (1995:105) points to the usefulness of the concept of 'we-groups' for the understanding of processes like ethnicity, nationalism and religious movements that share the same driving forces and systemic patterns.
7. The multiple semantic levels of the term 'Rarámuri' were first noticed by Merrill (1988:78), who, nevertheless, did not deal with their situational employment in everyday life. Levi (1993:216, 244) elaborates on this point in his study of the Rarámuri-Simaroni (Gentiles). His findings differ from mine in respect to the importance he attributes to the feeling of 'diffuse sentiment of kinship among the members who belong to this indigenous ethnic group'.
8. A *pueblo* is composed of *ranchos* that contain a number of contiguous households, whose residents congregate at the same church. With an eye to the better understanding of community characteristics I here refer to the *pueblos* instead of the *ranchos*, where I actually conducted fieldwork. I use pseudonyms only for the names of the *ranchos*.
9. *Rowema* and *rarájipama* are verbs that can be translated as 'to run with the hoop' and 'to run with the wooden ball'. The nouns *roweri* and *rarájipari* are seldom used in the communities I deal with (see Brambila 1976:450, 495).

10. See Kummels (1993b) on child-rearing among the Rarámuri of Norogachi. Though physicians assume that genetic factors play a role in the outstanding racing abilities of many Rarámuri, they have not been able to prove this hypothesis (Balke & Snow 1965:300).
11. One should bear in mind that races for girls, boys, women, and men are often organized in parallel and that alliances tend to overlap. People who live along the boundary between neighborhood groups often take the opportunity to switch alliances. Thus the pattern according to which a neighborhood group increases in strength is not exactly predictable.
12. The semantic scope of the term 'Rikubichi' is complex: *Rikubichi* ('place of the rock') can be used to designate an uninhabited place with a conspicuous rock. On the other hand, the term can also be applied to respective households nearby, like San Juan *betérachi*. This household, however, is, to be exact, located at a place called Awárire ('place of the *awaka* trees'). Yet Awárire is used exclusively as a place name, while Rikubichi also designates the flexible neighborhood group.
13. Rarámuri seldom use *civilizado* as a term of self-reference. They mostly employ it as an adjective to make distinctions along a continuum between two kinds of Rarámuri-ness, one that is less influenced by Catholic doctrine and school education and another that complies to both. Persons are accordingly classified as 'more' or 'less' *civilizado* or as 'more' or 'less' *rarámuri* (see also Levi 1993:224). I have paraphrased this last group 'traditional' Rarámuri.
14. Rarámuri use *maratón* (from Spanish *maratón*, also as a plural term) as a generic term for races of a 'western-style' principle.
15. Rarámuri designate this new form as *kórima wenomí* (to ask for money) and distinguish it from *kórima* practiced in the countryside and formerly in the cities.
16. Today Rarámuri live in over one hundred small settlements within the city of Chihuahua. Three large housing projects have been especially developed for Rarámuri, 'El Oasis', 'Sierra Azul', and 'Colonia Tarahumara'.
17. In my opinion this argument applies to other cultural practices as well. Investigators who debate the significance of baptismal rites for Rarámuri personhood and ethnicity (see Merrill & Heras Quezada 1997; Slaney 1997) have not taken into consideration that interpretations may vary microregionally according to specific social and historical circumstances.

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