

## JOHN KENNEDY AND THE TARAHUMARA\*

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John G. Kennedy's studies of the Tarahumara Indians of Chihuahua in northern Mexico stand as landmark contributions to North American ethnology generally, and to the fine-grained ethnography of the indigenous peoples of Mexico in particular. At a time when most American anthropologists interested in Mexico were setting their sights farther south, traveling to the heavily indigenous regions of Chiapas and Oaxaca, John instead distinguished himself by working in northern Mexico among one of the most populous but "least acculturated" and little studied peoples on the continent. The Tarahumara, or Rarámuri as they call themselves in their own language, are a Uto-Aztecan speaking people inhabiting about 35,000 square kilometers in some of the most spectacularly corrugated landscape in the world, including a network of chasms four times the size of the Grand Canyon in Arizona, and in places over a thousand feet deeper. The area, known locally as the Sierra Tarahumara, is located in the Sierra Madre Occidental, the rugged spine of northwest Mexico. Today, the area is still a rugged and largely roadless region. When John undertook his pioneering fieldwork there in the late 1950s, it was even more so.

Although John Kennedy was not the first to conduct ethnographic research among the Tarahumara, he was the first to conduct long-term fieldwork in a community of unchristianized Tarahumara, or *Gentiles*. Whereas others, such as Carl Lumholtz in the 1890s and Wendell Bennett and Robert Zingg in the 1930s, had spent some of their time in the field among these most isolated of the Tarahumara, Kennedy was the first to make them the focus his research. The significance of this accomplishment should not be underestimated. Until John's path breaking work there were various ideas, none very well substantiated, about this Tarahumara subgroup whom the Mexicans generally regarded as uncivilized heathens, but little grounded ethnographic knowledge. The Tarahumara sub-

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culture of *Gentiles* are tiny communities of widely scattered households located in the most remote reaches of the Sierra Madre's great canyons, usually accessible only after hours or days of travel by foot over precipitous trails, whose famously reclusive members not only reject the sacraments of the church and most contact with the state, but generally speaking, virtually all contact with outsiders. That he was able to work there at all, especially in the 1950s, is a testament to his determination and resilience.

In fact, it was Kennedy's work among *Gentiles* in the community of Inápuchi which first led me to contact him in the mid 1980s for fieldwork tips before I too set off to do two years of doctoral field research among *Gentiles* in another community in a different part of the Sierra. Although I was convinced I had great theoretical ideas about ethnicity and interesting hypotheses I wanted to test about inter- and intra-ethnic relations, in actuality I had little idea how I would, in practice, go about doing research among a people who, usually, silently just melted into their cornfields or the surrounding forest at first sight of my approach or, when they did speak to me, usually gave answers that were seldom more than one or two words. But whereas other anthropologists facing an eager-beaver, wet-behind-the-ears, graduate student looking to do essentially a restudy of a people on whose culture one had already devoted years to studying and publishing on extensively, might be reticent to be entirely forthcoming in assistance, such was not the case with John Kennedy. In view of the "my people" syndrome so widespread in our discipline (given the heavy emotional and intellectual investment involved in trying to understand a people) it is perhaps understandable that we are –dare I say– sometimes less than welcoming of others we perceive as trespassing on "our" ethnographic turf, but John Kennedy seemed to be entirely free from this disciplinary paranoia. On the contrary, from the very first time I met with him at the American Anthropological Association meetings in Washington until the last time I saw him in a restaurant in Santa Fe, John was not only invariably helpful and creative in helping me think through my own research agenda and fieldwork dilemmas, but he was, furthermore, authentically encouraging.

This, perhaps more than anything, shows the kind of man that John was, not just as an anthropologist but as a person: quiet, kind, reflective, generous, and empathic, an excellent listener possessed of a serene and relaxed self-confidence that inspired trust and radiated calm assurance to all those with whom he came into contact. Small wonder that he was so well accepted by the Tarahumara, establishing rapport in record time among a people who are famously silent, shy, and retiring even among themselves. Indeed, more than anyone else I have known who has spent time with the Tarahumara, John possessed naturally one

of the virtues most admired by the Tarahumara themselves. That is, he possessed a spirit that they would call *kiri.i.kiri huḱo*, in other words, one that is “tranquil, calm, at peace.”

I would now like to reflect in greater depth on the nature of John’s fieldwork with the Tarahumara.

## FIELDWORK

With the assistance of Francisco Plancarte of the Instituto Nacional Indigenista, Mexico’s National Indigenist Institute, and in the company of fellow American anthropologist, Thomas Hinton, John first entered the Sierra Tarahumara in the summer of 1957 to check out fieldwork possibilities. He was obviously impressed by what he saw because a little over one year later, in early November 1959, he again showed up in the Tarahumara region, this time with his wife and nine month old daughter in tow, ready to initiate long term field research in a community of *Gentiles*.

Yet there were difficulties from the start. Writes John of this period, “[O]ur initial problem was to locate a community with a sufficiently large concentration of *gentiles*. I also had to find a suitable guide-interpreter from within the chosen general area. These two apparently simple goals proved unforeseeably difficult to meet” (Kennedy 1978: 2-3). How well I can relate to the dilemma John describes is shown by the fact that in my own fieldwork, although I was eventually able to solve the first problem, that is find a community where *Gentiles* still existed (in my own case in the Cuervo district southeast of Batopilas), I was never able to solve the second, ie. find a guide-interpreter who resided with me at the fieldsite, as did Venancio Gonzalez with John and his family. Instead, I was forced to stumble around the gorge on my own and make out as best I could in my broken Tarahumara, both of which proved incredibly frustrating for me, but an endless source of entertainment and humor for the Tarahumara. Equally impressive is that during the course of his field research, John and his family lived virtually as the Tarahumara did themselves in that region. Consequently, they inhabited a cave and subsisted largely on a diet of corn, beans, and assorted wild greens. To better appreciate the difficult field conditions under which he worked, there is no better source than John himself to describe it:

a number of circumstances prevented intensive work in a single community until early spring. Several times I was unable to make reconnaissance trips because of alternating snow and rain. Also slowing our progress was the scattered distribution of *Gentiles*; they are the most isolated of the notoriously isolated Tarahumara ... At first we were not welcomed by

the Indians, so we did not force ourselves into one of their ranchos. Instead, we located our field camp in close proximity to a number of them. This had the advantage of allowing equal time to be devoted to several ranchos so that a larger sample of behavior could be observed. Unlike a village situation, the scatter of small Tarahumara ranchos and hamlets is such that no concentrated body of happenings is occurring each day in any one place. Thus, on any given day we would select one of many places to visit, basing our decision on our estimate of whether individuals were likely to be at home, or whether group activities would be occurring.

My general schedule was to walk daily to one of the ranchos in the vicinity... If possible, a one to three hour interview was conducted, and daily activities were observed and photographed. Usually I returned to our cave in the evening, though on many occasions when a beer [*tesguino*] party was in progress I stayed at a Tarahumara rancho overnight. This schedule required from two to four hours of hiking daily, in addition to several hours necessary for observing daily life and conducting interviews... This routine was so strenuous that I usually found it necessary to rest one day after each four days of work. Some longer rests were needed to recover from various illnesses, and once five days were lost due to the severe effects of a poisonous mushroom, which I foolishly believed to be identical to some I had seen Indians carrying when passing by our cave (Kennedy 1996: 4-5).

Make no mistake about it: this was rough, robust, romantic fieldwork, big as a Cadillac, and, in my estimation, on a par with the legendary exploits of Malinowski in the Trobriands or Evans-Pritchard among the Nuer. Many of us have conducted field research in out-of-the-way places, but who among us has lived in a cave exposed to the elements for months on end, or was forced to spend nearly half his time each day hiking to and fro over rugged mountain trails just to find someone he *might* be able to interview?

Such was the arduous nature of Kennedy's field research, but I would be remiss if I simply left you with the sense that John only or primarily considered his time among the Tarahumara as a taxing experience. Both in his public writings and private conversations he revealed that despite inhabiting a harsh and unforgiving terrain, as a people he regarded Tarahumara as "elegant, graceful, handsome, in short, genteel" (Kennedy 1996: 3), and as individuals he held them in high esteem.

Evidently the feeling was mutual. During my own field research in the late 1980s, on one occasion I was in Chihuahua City with some Baja Tarahumara from the western canyons who were seeking to file complaints about invasions on their land from neighboring Mestizos. We went to the house of one of their friends in the city who was regarded by them as someone who could be of help. The elderly gentleman, whose name I seem to recall was Guadalupe Fierro, was dressed as a Mestizo but spoke Tarahumara and said that he was also part Apache. When he learned that I was an anthropologist studying the Tarahumara

*Gentiles*, he said that many years ago he once knew another anthropologist who likewise had studied them. The man's name, he said, was Juan Kennedy. "Yes, I remember him well", said the old man. "He was kind and determined and patient. He lived in the mountains with his wife and little child. And they lived just like the Indians too, in a cave, eating their food, and going to their ceremonies. I didn't think he'd make it. But he did. It was really something. I'll never forget it." That John G. Kennedy should remain something of a legend in the Sierra Tarahumara, even thirty years after his initial fieldwork, is impressive testimony to the measure of the man.

In the few moments that remain, I would like to remark briefly on John's specific contributions to Tarahumara Studies, which fall in three principal areas: namely, the analysis of cultural ecology, social organization, and religion.

#### CULTURAL ECOLOGY

Of the several books John wrote on the Tarahumara, three of them were monographs based on his community study of the *Gentiles* that explained Tarahumara social life from the perspective of cultural ecology. In his first book, titled *Inápuchi* and published in Spanish in Mexico by the Instituto Indigenista Interamericano (Kennedy 1970b), he argued that the principal shaping force in Tarahumara culture is their social organization and settlement pattern which in turn is conditioned but not determined by the special ecology of the Sierra Tarahumara, particularly the broken topography and environmental variations associated with differing elevations and marked seasonality. This is what accounts for the Tarahumara's mixed subsistence strategy combining agriculture with pastoralism and a settlement pattern that is both mobile and dispersed, such that Tarahumara can take advantage of the small pockets of arable land while they move with their herds between cool summers in the highlands and warm winters in the depths of the canyons. He showed that this overall pattern of seasonal transhumance not only is conducive to escaping the searing heat of the gorges and the snowy winters in the mountains, but also how maintaining a bilateral kinship system optimizes flexible social arrangements and makes it easier to capitalize on situational adjustments.

Eight years later, John came out with his second book, *Tarahumara of the Sierra Madre: Beer, Ecology, and Social Organization* (1978), which was one of the volumes in Walter Goldschmidt's *Worlds of Man: Studies in Cultural Ecology* series. Basically an extension and refinement of the arguments presented in the earlier book, here again John explained Tarahumara life in terms of the factors in the external environment that shape it. But unlike some (one might say "vulgar")

cultural ecologists who assumed *a priori* that virtually every belief or practice must necessarily be a functional adaptation to the environment, John avoided this neo-functional fallacy and radical relativism by bravely concluding that in addition to exhibiting rational adaptations and sound functions, cultures might also evidence customs entailing certain negative traits that translate into “costs” and “dysfunctions.” Here John argued convincingly that despite the many adaptive advantages to the institutionalized consumption and distribution of *tesguino*, or fermented maize beer among the Tarahumara, in fact the practice also has profoundly deleterious effects, ranging from conflict generation to serious impacts on health.

John’s third book analyzing Tarahumara society through the lens of cultural ecology, published in 1996, was *Tarahumara of the Sierra Madre: Survivors on the Canyon’s Edge*, which was essentially a second edition and update of the second book. However, there are also some noteworthy changes. While still relying on the ecological approaches advocated by Julian Steward and Walter Goldschmidt, he now also tempers the explanatory power of environmental variables by further appreciating the force of history in the shaping of human cultures. Another change found in this volume is the incorporation of contributions to the literature on the Tarahumara that had occurred over the twenty years since the second book appeared, including some generous comments about my own research, for which I have always been grateful. The volume offers such a thoughtful, clear, and comprehensive account of Tarahumara culture that I have assigned it to generations of students in my Introduction to Anthropology classes, even though the book is out of print and increasingly difficult to find. Beyond any doubt, it still remains the single best overall ethnography covering equally all aspects of Tarahumara history, society, politics, economy, and religion.

#### SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

Besides cultural ecology, Kennedy also contributed substantially to our understanding of Tarahumara social organization, principally in the areas of network analysis, joking relationship theory, and the social function of the Tarahumara’s much lauded practice of foot racing. While virtually every ethnographer has commented on the significance of *tesguino*, or fermented maize beer, in Tarahumara life and livelihood, Kennedy was the first to describe it in terms of a formal structural-functional analysis. Thus, in an influential article in *American Anthropologist* (Kennedy 1963), he analyzes the central role *tesguino* plays in religion, economics, community structure, status ranking, legal affairs, and entertain-

ment. Moreover, he not only recognized that *tesguino* carries a heavy functional load within and between each of these domains, but also sees how it defines an overarching structure that constitutes the most basic unit of social organization above the level of the nuclear family. This is what Kennedy calls the “tesguino network” –a reticulate but flexible and implicit organization linking households and individuals who regularly drink together into a lattice-like social structure stretching over the whole of the Tarahumara region.

Furthermore, in two other publications (1964, 1970a), Kennedy shows how descriptive data on the Tarahumara advances our understanding of joking relationship theory, a classical problem in kinship studies ever since Radcliffe-Brown first defined it (1952). Kennedy observes that Tarahumara joking relationships, as in other cultures, are prevalent among alternate generations and brothers-in-law. Yet whereas previous theorists had analyzed the function of joking relationships as a form of “permitted disrespect” and catharsis in kinship relations that otherwise are typified by tension and/or avoidance, Kennedy challenged this reductionistic perspective. Instead, he argued that while joking relationships may have these functions, they are equally or more often about play and sociability, that comic drama, entertainment, and humor are institutions fostering cohesion and harmony just as effectively as customs of social control.

The Tarahumara practice of foot racing, which over the years has attracted increasing international and media attention (McDougall 2011), was another subject to which Kennedy turned his anthropological gaze (1969). John maintained that whatever else Tarahumara foot racing was about, it also was significant for socio-economic reasons. Unlike indigenous societies farther south in Mesoamerica that relied on markets as redistributive mechanisms, the Tarahumara, who lacked markets, had no such option. Therefore, the vigorous betting that invariably accompanied Tarahumara foot races, especially large inter-community ones, functioned as important redistributive mechanisms, especially in the absence of markets. Of equal or greater importance was the *social* role of racing, for in bringing together individuals from the remote and dispersed ranchos scattered across the countryside, it broke up the monotony and loneliness that invariably accompanies Tarahumara existence, and as such fostered critical cohesive bonds and solidarity both within and between communities.

## RELIGION

The third area to which Kennedy has significantly contributed to our understanding of the Tarahumara is the religion. He rightly notes that in comparison with

other Native American peoples, Tarahumara seem relatively uninterested in mythology, but this is compensated for by an emphasis on ritual, the chief activity of which is dancing. Tarahumara have calendrical rituals, rites of passage, and curing ceremonies for people, crops, and livestock as needed.

Witchcraft and sorcery are also important aspects of Tarahumara religion. Kennedy writes:

The fear component of the Tarahumara religious system is outstanding. Much of it seems related to the uncertainties imposed upon life by their precarious adaptation to an unpredictable economic situation. The isolation from other people is certainly a component in the distrust of others revealed in the beliefs, accusations, and aggressive acts relating to sorcery. The fears of the dead appear related to the absence of fixed and permanent social ties... Taken together... the pronounced and unrelieved fear aspects of Tarahumara religion certainly seem consistent with the ecological conditions.

Although fear may be the overriding concern in Tarahumara religion, it is by no means the only one. This is most clearly seen in the most elaborate and complex ceremonial, namely the corpus of rites associated with Easter Holy Week, or *Semana Santa*, which was the subject of a book John co-authored with Raúl López, *Semana Santa in the Sierra Tarahumara: A Comparative Study in Three Communities* (1981). In this publication, *Semana Santa* celebrations in three Tarahumara communities, representing differing levels of acculturation, are described and analyzed. More than in his other books, Kennedy here is concerned with the question of meaning, concluding that the ceremonial is primarily concerned with three themes: 1) fertility and agricultural abundance, 2) community identity and unity, and 3) fiesta, drama, and *tesguino*.

Before I close, there is one more thing I wish to mention. A couple years ago, John's wife, Sylvia, sent me a box with the slides John had taken over the years on his various trips to the Tarahumara. In another box were several big, heavy canisters with the film he and Ron Ovadia made on the Tarahumara (with John Houston providing the voice-over). She also sent me one other item: an old, well-worn, handmade Tarahumara violin, an object of pride in nearly every household lucky enough to have one among traditional Tarahumaras. It now sits in my office, above my desk, right behind my computer. Not a day goes by that I don't look at it... and think of John. Thank you.



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