Life with the Tarahumaras

A Tarahumara woman making baskets at Copper Canyon

1 In a remote area of the Sierra Madre[1] in northern Mexico, an indigenous group of people called the Tarahumaras live in almost total isolation. Aside from owning some cooking utensils and farming equipment, the Tarahumaras exist much as they did before the Spanish arrived in the 1600s. They live in caves or in huts made of stone and wood, and they eat what little they can grow on the dry, rugged land.

2 [In the late 1980s] linguist James Copeland entered the world of the Tarahumaras to study their language and culture. Since then, he has been visiting the Tarahumaras three or four times a year, sometimes spending as much as a month with them. Part of his strategy when he **embarked on** this lifetime project was to learn to speak Tarahumara so that he could deal directly with the people. Learning Tarahumara is no easy task since it is not a written language. "There are no language police," Copeland says. "Children are seldom corrected by their parents. They learn by observation of speech in context and by imitation."

A Tarahumara woman stands in front of her cave home.

3 Copeland **acquired** the language through his frequent exposure to it and by analyzing the grammar. His linguistics skills and **mastery** of German, Spanish, French, and Russian, plus a partial knowledge of some twenty other languages, also helped. Drawing on his research, Copeland plans to produce a Tarahumara grammar book in English and perhaps one in Spanish. He is putting together a bibliography of all the linguistic research conducted so far on the Uto-Aztecan languages, the group of thirty indigenous tongues to which Tarahumara belongs.

4 Copeland is also collecting stories and myths that have been passed down from one generation to the next. Many of the stories are being lost because they are not as well remembered. One story he has recorded is about a figure very much like the **elusive** Bigfoot, or Sasquatch,[2] of the northwestern United States. In the Tarahumara version, the central character is either a big bear or a large hairy man who **descends on** a valley and steals an unmarried young woman. He hides her in a cave and they have a baby, who is half-human and half-bear. The Tarahumaras eventually kill the bear by tricking him into eating poisonous vegetables. They also kill the centaur[3]-like baby and rescue the woman.

[1] The **Sierra Madre** is a mountain range in northern Mexico.
[2] **Bigfoot** or Sasquatch is a mythical man-like beast believed to have inhabited Canada and the northwestern United States.
[3] A **centaur** is a creature from Greek mythology which has the head, arms, and trunk of a man and the body and legs of a horse.

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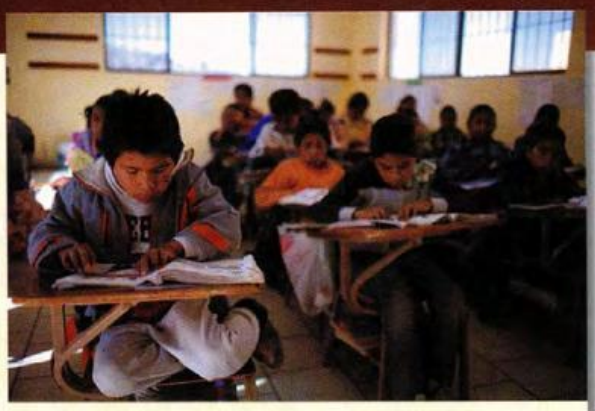

Tarahumaran children in school

5 In addition to his research, Copeland is consulting with a group of government officials from the state of Chihuahua about producing a literacy[5] program for the Tarahumaras. Most of the 60,000 Tarahumaras are not literate, even though many, to varying **degrees,** are bilingual in their native tongue and Spanish. Copeland hopes to convince the officials that the Tarahumaras be taught to read in their native language, and in Spanish, up to the sixth grade. The Tarahumaras, unlike other indigenous peoples, are not in danger of extinction, but Copeland is not sure what effect the literacy program will have on their culture. Back in the 1600s, contact with the literate world caused some immediate changes in the culture. Since the Spaniards could not pronounce the tribe's real name, Raramuri, they called the people "Tarahumaras." "Raramuri" means "children of the sun god."

6 The idea to study the Tarahumaras came to Copeland in 1984, when he discovered that very little research had been done on their language. He made contact with a tribe member through a social worker who worked with the Tarahumaras in the border town of Juarez, Mexico. At first, the tribe member, who had taken the Spanish name of Lorenzo Gonzalez, was very reluctant to cooperate. He told Copeland that no amount of money could buy his language. But after Copeland explained to him what he intended to do with his research and how it would benefit the Tarahumaras, Gonzalez agreed to help. He took Copeland to his village and served as an intermediary.[5] "Over a period of a year our relationship became more intense, and warmer," says Copeland. "Thanks to him, the Tarahumaras started trusting us and understood what our mission was."

A Tarahumara woman dries clothes in the sun.

7 Entering the world of the Tarahumaras has been an **arduous** project for Copeland. To reach their homeland he must drive two and a half days from Houston, Texas, across highways, blacktop[6] roads, and finally a 13-mile (21 kilometer) stretch of rugged trail[7] that takes almost a day to **maneuver.** During the winter he sleeps in his truck, and in the summer next to the campfire in the way of the Tarahumaras. He loads up his vehicle with goods that the Tarahumaras can't easily get, and gives them to the people as a **gesture** of friendship. The Tarahumaras, who don't believe in accumulating wealth, take the food and share it among themselves.

8 For Copeland, the experience has not only been academically satisfying, but it also has enriched his life in several ways. "I see people rejecting technology and living a very hard, traditional life, which offers me another **notion** about the meaning of progress in the Western tradition," he says. "I experience the simplicity of living in nature that I would otherwise only be able to read about. I see a lot of beauty in their sense of sharing and concern for each other."

[4] **Literacy** is the ability to read and write.
[5] An **intermediary** is a person or body that acts as an agent between two parties.
[6] **Blacktop** refers to materials used to make roads.
[7] A **trail** is a marked path through woods or dense forest.

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Reading Comprehension
Check Your Understanding

A **Choose the correct answer for the following questions.**

1 Why did Copeland find the Tarahumara language difficult to master?
   - **a** The Tarahumaras live in isolation.
   - **b** Very few people actually speak the language.
   - **c** He did not spend enough time with the Tarahumaras.
   - **d** There are no written rules governing the language.

2 Which is NOT a factor that helped Copeland acquire the Tarahumara language?
   - **a** He got instruction from a teacher.
   - **b** He analyzed its grammar structures.
   - **c** He was exposed to the language frequently.
   - **d** He was skilled at learning languages.

3 What is the main idea of paragraph 5?
   - **a** Most Tarahumaras lack formal education and cannot read.
   - **b** The original name for the Tarahumaras is actually "Raramuri."
   - **c** The Spanish never introduced literacy programs to the Tarahumaras.
   - **d** A literacy program may have a good and bad impact on the Tarahumaras.

4 Why did the tribe member say *no amount of money could buy his language* (line 50)?
   - **a** He would rather be paid in other ways.
   - **b** He didn't think Copeland could afford to pay him for his services.
   - **c** He was afraid that Copeland was trying to exploit his culture.
   - **d** He had already converted his name and identity to Spanish.

B **Read the following sentences. Check (✓) whether they are true (T) or false (F). If the sentence is false, change it to make it true.**

		T	F
1	The Tarahumaras live with other tribes in the mountains.		
2	Copeland has visited the Tarahumaras three or four times.		
3	Tarahumara children learn the language by listening to and following adults.		
4	The central character in one Tarahumara legend is similar to Bigfoot.		
5	Copeland gives money to the Tarahumaras to demonstrate his friendship.		
6	Copeland follows the sleeping habits of the Tarahumaras in the winter and summer.		

Critical Thinking

C **Discuss the following questions with a partner.**

1 Do you think the Tarahumaras will eventually integrate with the modern world? Do you think they should?

2 What ideas about progress are common in the society we live in? How different are they from Tarahumara ideas?

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