

FOLK MUSIC OF THE AMERICAS

Issued from the Collections of the Archive of American Folk Song

ALBUM XIX

FOLK MUSIC OF MEXICO

RECORDED AND EDITED BY
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In 1943 the Library of Congress in cooperation with the Inter-american Indian Institute and the Department of Education of Mexico set up a project to record Indian music. Between 1944 when the work began and 1946, music was recorded among the following tribes: Seri and Yaqui of the State of Sonora; Tarahumara of Chihuahua; Cora from Nayarit; Huichol of Jalisco; and Tzotzil and Tzeltal of Chiapas. These tribes were selected because they are the most primitive tribes of Mexico and the least influenced by modern civilization. The music contained in this album is representative of the entire collection.

Many difficulties were encountered during the various expeditions: the Indian settlements were located far from the civilized centers and the heavy and delicate equipment had to be transported by mule over hazardous mountain trails; the general primitive conditions found in these areas imposed hardships on the personnel. Each new trip had its special burden: sometimes the machine broke down or the power supply gave out; occasionally a tired mule rolled over on his back, miraculously leaving the records intact. In some regions where the Indian settlements were dispersed over wide areas, contact with the musicians was a laborious task, particularly during the planting season when they would disappear for months at a time to their inaccessible mountain cornfields.

Many local and federal agencies of the Mexican Government facilitated the work. Such departments as the Cultural Missions of the Departments of Education and Indian Affairs, the Fishermen's Cooperative of Sonora, the Military Outpost of Nayarit, the Indian Affairs Department of Chiapas, and many individuals helped to realize the success of these investigations. The Indians, intrigued

by their first experience with a recording machine, willingly cooperated and made excellent guides and informants.

The official photographer of the expedition was Agustin Maya, of the Department of Education of Mexico. The photographs reproduced here were taken in the field by Mr. Maya.





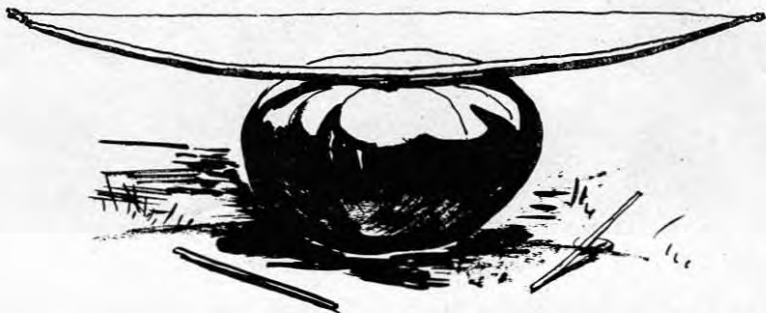
Record No. AAFS 91

The Cora Indians of the State of Nayarit were converted to Christianity in the seventeenth Century by Franciscan friars. Although nominally Catholics they still observe many of the ancient pagan rites as well as the principal Christian holy days. The music played during these festivals varies according to the type of celebration, and the musical instruments used for Christian ceremonies are never used for the pagan ones.

The two selections on *side A* are performed for pagan corn rites the most important of which are (1) *Fiesta de la Chicharra* (Fiesta of the Cricket) held at the beginning of the rainy season, (2) *Fiesta de la Quema de los Elotes* (Fiesta of the Burning of the Corn) held when the first fruits are harvested, and (3) *Fiesta del Esquite* (Fiesta of the Esquite) held at harvest time. These chants, the words of which are almost incomprehensible to the Cora musicians, are sung at various times during the festivities and also sung as accompaniment for the dancing. The singer, a native priest or shaman, accompanies himself on an instrument known as the *mitote*, a word which also means dancing. The *mitote* is a percussion instrument which consists of a long wooden bow with a gourd resonator. An ordinary string is stretched taut and wound around the two notched ends of the bow. The bow is set on the gourd which rests on the ground and the performer holds the two together with his foot, striking the string with two thin wooden sticks. The *mitote* is held to be of divine origin by the older Coras and is rarely used except for non-Christian ceremonies.

The instrumental music heard on *side B* is played during Lent (Cuaresma) and Holy Week (Semana Santa). During this period almost all the male Coras make reed flutes which they perform for any occasion, while working in the fields, visiting with their friends, or while making journeys through the mountains. Wherever one goes during this season one hears the strains of these melancholy pipes playing the traditional melodies. On Easter Sunday, when all the festivities are over, the flutes are burned and the music is not heard again until the following year.

The first selection is played on an unaccompanied flute; the second, on a reed flute and drum covered by a woolen cloth, a custom observed in this region during Holy Week.



No. AAFS 92

The Seri Indians, one of the few non-Christian tribes of Mexico, were once a warlike, seminomadic people who lived on the island of Tiburon off the Gulf of California, eking out an existence by fishing and hunting. About 10 years ago the Mexican Government finally persuaded them to form a permanent camp and since that time they have lived in Desemboque, Sonora, about 80 miles north of Kino Bay.

The Seris believe that their music is of divine origin and is transmitted to them through the medium of their medicine men. One story they tell concerns Nacho Morales, a medicine man, who, while walking one day, met a very tall woman. Identifying herself as God and his mother, she ordered him to hold a big fiesta in her honor in return for which she would teach him many songs. The Seris celebrated for an entire year while Nacho, alone in his hut, learned the songs. After the year was up, he called the tribe together and taught them what God had bestowed upon them.

There are songs on every topic—love, children, the sea, hunting and fishing. Except for the medicine men's songs there are few with religious texts inasmuch as Seri ceremonial life has all but disappeared in recent years. The first song on *side A* is about the trials and tribulations of a tired sailor; the second, a song to God; and the third, a medicine man's song.

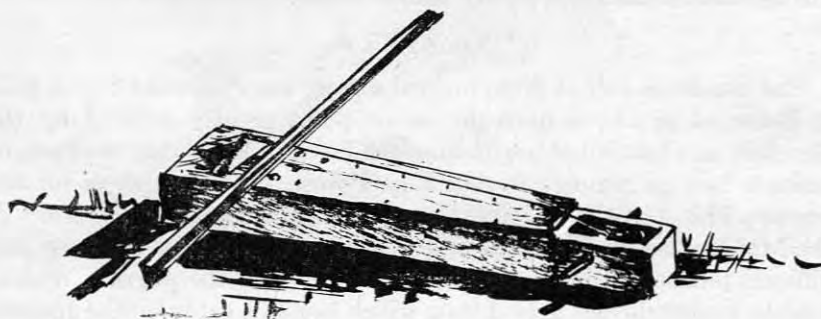
The two selections on *side B* are taken from the Deer Dance of the Yaqui Indians, who live south of the Seris. Although this dance is performed during Christian holy days, its origin is pre-hispanic. The music is sung by one performer to the accompaniment of two notched sticks over gourd resonators and a water drum, a primitive type of drum consisting of a half-gourd placed in a vessel of water and struck with a wooden stick. The singer is one of the two notched stick players. The words of the two songs are given here in Spanish translated from the Yaqui.

El Tecolote

Soy gente de noche
Sin que me hagan daño
Me voy quejando
No puedo ser mas de lo que soy
Yo soy gente de noche.

El Palo Verde

El venado va buscando
Las flores de un palo verde verde
Se fue yriendose por las ramas
Por todos los bosques
Y por todas las sierras.

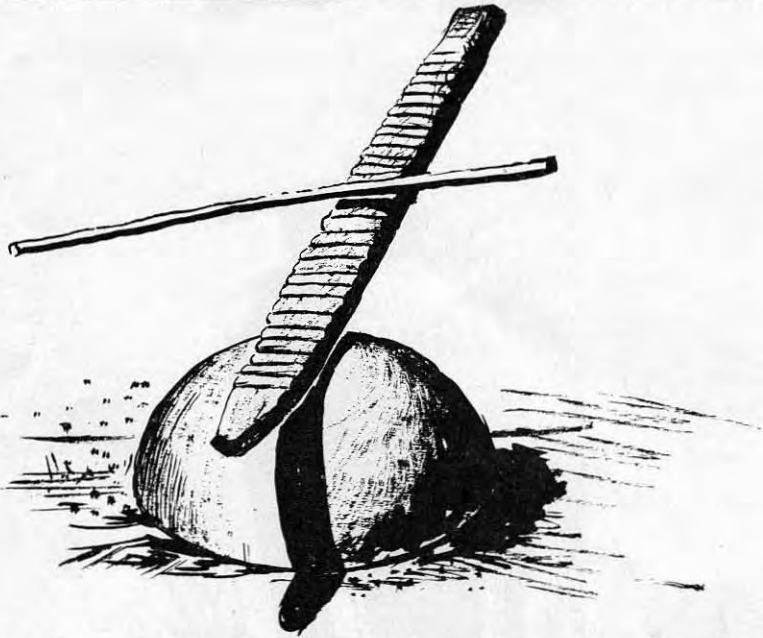


Ceremonies and rituals play a significant role in the lives of the Tarahumara Indians of the State of Chihuahua. The most important are held at harvest time but ceremonies are also observed on occasions of illness, disaster to the crops, and at death caused by *peyote*, a narcotic cactus plant about which the Tarahumaras have many fears and superstitions. Each fiesta is preceded by an entire night of dancing and singing which is followed at dawn by the sacrifice of animals and the drinking of *tesquüino*, the sacred drink made of corn. *Dutuburi* and *Yumari* are the Tarahumara names given to these dances and the chants which accompany them. The first is performed during the night, and the second, at the dedication of the food at dawn. At the present time these chants are sung without words but Carl Lumholtz, the anthropologist who visited the Tarahumaras at the beginning of the century, reported that they had words at that time. The chants, sung with the accompaniment of gourd rattles, are performed either by shamans or special singers selected for their powers of endurance and good voices. Although the general outline of the musical form in all the chants is similar, each singer varies the melody according to his own inclinations, but the rhythm is always the same.

The Tarahumara Indians became Christian several centuries ago. In most of the Indian country both Christian and native fiestas are held. However, in the region where these recordings were made, the church never was an important influence and today no Christian fiestas are observed, not even the all important Holy Week. Even the village church is in ruins.

More and more the natives look for guidance in their daily problems to the Mexican authorities. The young Indians are beginning to attend the local schools, play volley ball, dance the Mexican *jarabe*, and sing the popular Mexican tunes. It is interesting to note in this connection that, in spite of the tendency toward Mexicanization, the *mestizos* of this region have incorporated many of the aspects of Tarahumara culture—for example, most of the Mexicans know a few of the Indian ditties and young Mexicans enjoy participating in the *Matachine* Dance, a purely Indian affair.

The music on *side A* is performed during the *Fiesta del Peyote* held in honor of *peyote*, a narcotic cactus plant greatly revered by the Huichols as a symbol of health and well being. Each year the Indians make a holy pilgrimage to San Luis Potosi to gather *peyote* for the fiesta. This event is as important to the Huichols as the journey of the Mohammedans to Mecca and every Huichol makes the long and difficult journey at least once in his life. When the pilgrims return, a fiesta lasting days is held during which *peyote* is eaten. The Indians

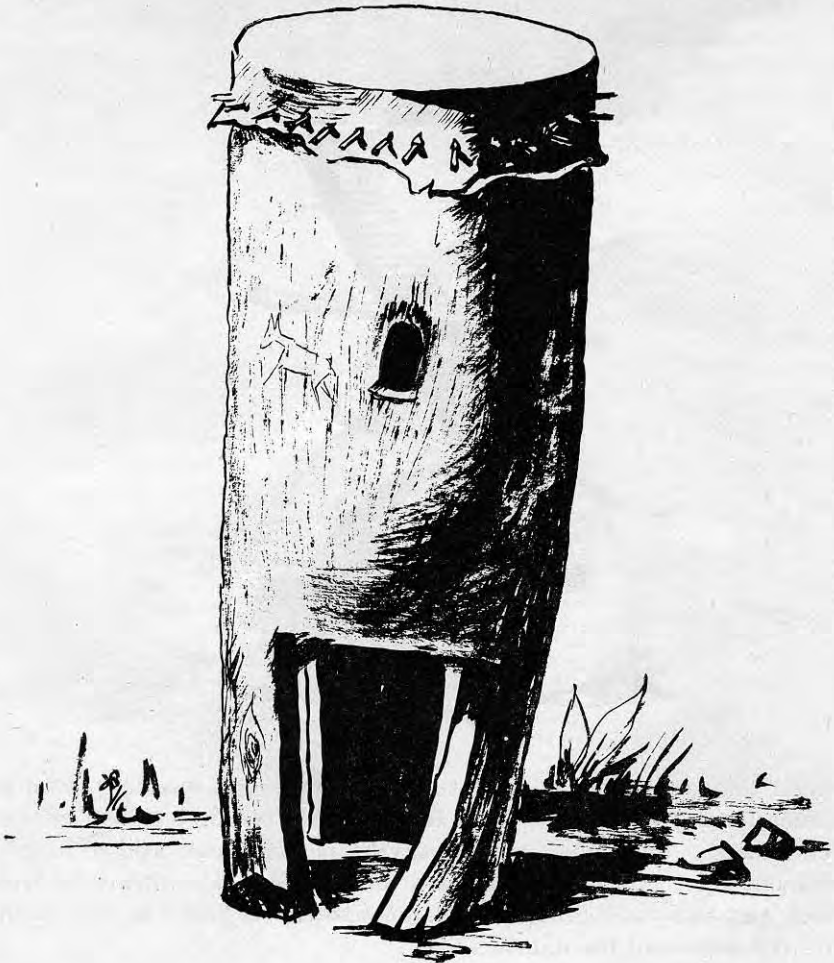


claim that eating *peyote* gives them great strength enabling them to dance for days and do without food without feeling any bad effects. The chants, which recount the myths of the tribe, are performed without accompaniment by a medicine man, called *maracami* in Hui-chol, and two assistants. The percussive effects heard in this record are the sounds of the dancer's feet.

When the first fruits of the land are ready for harvesting a fiesta is held to celebrate the event. This is the *Fiesta de la Calabaza* (Fiesta of the Squash) during which dancing and singing is performed as in the *peyote* fiesta except that a three legged drum of pre-hispanic origin known in Aztec as *huehuell* accompanies the singers and dancers. Music from this fiesta is heard in the first part of *side B*.

The second part of *side B* is part of the music performed at a ceremony for the purpose of petitioning the gods for good health and deliverance from disease. The shaman sings the theme first which is repeated by his assistants. Occasionally the rest of the participants at the ceremony join in. As in the fiesta of the *peyote* no musical instruments are used.

The main function of music in Huichol society is to petition the gods, through their singing shamans, to bring abundant crops and well being to the tribe. Each fiesta is preceded by a singing ses-



sion which begins at dusk and ends at dawn after which animals are sacrificed and the feasting and drinking begins. This all night singing session is of great importance to the Huichols for they believe that the success of their petitions depends on the skill and enthusiasm of the singing.

No. AAFS 95

In the sixth century of this era the Mayan-speaking peoples of Chiapas, Guatemala, and Honduras, abandoned their magnificent cities and migrated to the Yucatan Peninsula. Whether the modern tribes who live there now are descendants of those who remained behind or whether they are new tribes who came and settled there after the Mayas left for Yucatan is open to question. At any rate, the modern Tzotzils and Tzeltals of Chiapas, although speaking a Mayan tongue, have little association with the nearby Mayan ruins and seem to have preserved little of the oral tradition of the Mayas. Most of the musical instruments found in this area were brought there by the Europeans, and singing is done in harmony and in canon form taught to the Indians by Dominican priests.

Even though the instruments and musical form of Tzotzil and Tzeltal music is European, something of their older culture has been preserved. The mixture of the two forces has produced a new folk music, one which is neither European nor Indian, but characteristic of the people who make it.

Side A contains two selections which are performed for religious church processions. The night before each saint's day, musicians performing reed flute, drums, and metal trumpets roam through the streets of the village and by nearby farmhouses to announce the festivities of the following day. Generally one performer alternates the playing both of reed flute and trumpet while a second plays the drum, as in the first selection on this side. When three musicians perform, as in the second selection, the trumpet plays beautiful arabesques which sometimes imitate the flute but more often follows its own melodic pattern.

The music heard on *side B* is performed during carnival time, a fiesta which in this region revives some ritual practices of the pre-Christian era. The second selection is music to announce the "horse races" performed in honor of the patron saint of Chenalho. These races are performed as follows: In the plaza of the village two tall poles are placed from which a live rooster is suspended high up between the poles. Horsemen circle the plaza and as they reach the rooster they try to pluck its feathers or dismember it. If the animal is still alive at the end of the race, the last rider kills it by biting off its neck, and then triumphantly shows it to the crowd, the blood running down his chin.

