

CORA INDIANS OF MEXICO



The Road to Jesus Maria Nayarit
Sierra Madre mountains of Mexico

Research on:

- Health Practices
 - Language
- Local migration history
 - Culture

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Introduction

The Supporting Immigrant and Refugee Family Initiative (SIRFI) on Immigrant Integration is a four year statewide effort funded by the private foundation; The Colorado Trust. Gunnison County Public Health received a planning grant in 2004 to create a comprehensive plan on Immigrant Integration. Representation by a broad community collaborative helped write a visionary plan on how best to create opportunities where newcomers (Immigrants) and the Receiving Community can interact in a way that promotes a Healthy Community. The \$300,000 grant was given to Gunnison to support current programs such as The Multicultural Resource Office and The Literacy Action Program. Old programs such as Wee Gatherings were resurrected and new efforts for outreach were taken on by The Gunnison Times, The Gunnison Bank and Colorado Legal Services. The Gunnison Times generously donated space to try out a Spanish Page called "Informate" for over a year. The Gunnison Bank has partnered with the Community Collaborative to do outreach about Banking. Living in America Workshops on Knowing your rights, Housing, Banking, Education and Community Resources were created by Colorado Legal Services. Other topics for 2007 will focus on Workers Rights and Emergency Preparedness. A new Education Liaison position in the Multicultural Resource Office has been utilized to its fullest. A family Resource Guide was made Bilingual by partnering with the REIJ school district, the Youth Crime Prevention Grant, Rural County Grant Funds, Bright Beginnings and Gunnison County Human Services.

Why is Immigrant Integration Important in a small community like Gunnison that has about a 10% Immigrant population?

In the last decade, Gunnison's increase in Immigrant population has been 112%. Colorado's Immigrant population has increased by 160% respectively and now makes up 8.6% of the state population. Healthy Community Solutions start with an inclusive environment. Immigrant Integration is a two way street that involves adaptation not only on the part of Immigrants themselves, but also as part of the community where they now live. In Gunnison Public Health, our goal is to be preventative in our programs with the focus on a Healthy Community. Health affects the entire community and we strive to engage those who are normally disengaged so that the goal of health can be achieved.

Why a guide on the Cora Indians?

Cora Indians make up approximately 40% of our Latino Immigrant population. Little is written or published about them, so WSC Spanish Major and Czech Republic Immigrant, Marketa Zubkova, decided to research them for a school project. The information was so interesting we thought it would be a good idea to get the information out to anyone who is interested in it. For a year; Marketa spent hours tirelessly interviewing Immigrants locally and in Mexico, watching video of cultural events, and contacting George Otis a known expert on the Cora. We hope you find the information as interesting as we do and use it to create awareness of those in your community.

With Peace
Mary Burt, Coordinator-SIRFI Immigrant Integration Grant

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Information on the Cora

There are two seasons: rainy season and dry season. The rainy season starts in June and lasts until October when the entire Sierra is green and lush. There is abundant water but also flooding and mudslides. The dry season starts in November and the temperatures drop down. In the higher altitude it may drop down below freezing, but it rarely snows in the Sierras. It warms up again in February and the temperature reaches 100 ° F in spring, especially in the canyons, and everything is dry. Although the adults are worried about the drought and harvest, local kids love the hot summers and spend them playing in the river.

Population

There are approximately 15,000 Coras living in Nayarit. Half of the population of the municipality El Nayar are the Coras, half are mestizos. The Coras, sometimes called Náayari, share their territory with other indigenous groups such as Mexicaneros, Tepehuanes and Huicholes. Although the Cora and the Huichol Indians are two separate indigenous groups with different languages, they have a very close relationship and marriages between them are often. The Huicholes have the most preserved traditions, followed by the Coras. However, there are only a few Huicholes living in Gunnison, most of them in Cora families - it's important to keep in mind that not everyone who comes from Jesús María are Cora.

What do they do for living?

Life in the Sierras can be tough but the Coras are used to hard work as many of their employers in Gunnison and Crested Butte know. "No one can outwork the Coras," says one of them.

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Information on the Cora

The Coras in Jesús María and surrounding ranchos still maintain a high degree of self-sufficiency in spite of all the modern changes in the area. They grow their own fruit and vegetables (corn, beans, and squash during the wet season), raise cattle, gather a wide variety of wild plants, hunt and fish. In the Cora society every man and woman should learn and develop special skills and thus make a living. The men are hunters, fishermen, builders, blacksmiths, bricklayers, musicians, and healers. The women can work as a midwife, potter, sewer, weaver, or in the kitchen, take care of the house and bring water which is scarce in the Sierras. Many Coras have a small shop, selling various items. Some of them work as administrators or teachers in the local school. During the winter and spring they migrate to the Nayarit coast and work as seasonal workers, picking tobacco, beans, coffee and other crops. Some migrate further north to Gunnison where the Cora men usually work on ranches or as construction workers and the Cora women work in the restaurants or hotels.

Many Cora leave and do not go back to Jesus Maria because of the growing industry of drugs. The cultivation of drugs started in the 90's and now some consider the drug crops as a supplement to the traditional crops grown in their region. Marijuana is similar to corn, beans and squash in the rainy season and opium poppies can be grown during the dry season. However, the drug cultivation and trafficking brings more violence and threatens the Cora communities. This causes many Coras to leave and never go back.

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Language

There are 5 main linguistic variants of the Cora language, including mariteco, which is spoken in Jesus María and southwest Colorado; principally in Montrose and Gunnison. The mariteco variant is perhaps considered to be a standard variant because Jesús María is the head of the municipality and where all the bilingual teachers come from. The Coras from different areas use different dialects and cannot always understand each other.

Cora and Huichol languages form the linguistic subfamily of corachol language and both of them belong to the group of yuto-aztecan languages, to which Ute is related. Some examples of words are:

SPANISH	CORA	HUICHOL	ENGLISH
agua	caa	ká	water
árbol	cuye	kuyeé	tree
piedra	tetec	teté	rock
cabeza	uhu	moho	head
labio	ceopa	teri	lip
perro	tzué	tzuku	dog

The Cora language has 16 consonants (*p, t, k, kw, h, r, m, n, s, sx, ts (ch), v, w, y*) and 5 vowels (*a, e, i, +, u*).

The Coras are using their dialect in a combination with Spanish. Some of the elders of the Cora community speak only the Cora language and the kids learn Spanish at school but speak Cora at home. The schooling depends on their location, economic situation, and how many siblings they have.

Some Coras who live in the ranchos isolated in the mountains or those who don't have money to buy books don't go to school at all. They don't need to read or

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write for their work in the field or in the rancho, but once they get to Gunnison there is more paperwork and the illiterate Coras use their literate children or interpreters from the Multicultural Resource Office. Most of the Cora who were born in the U.S. speak only Cora at home and that's the only language they know when they start school. They learn English at school, which they use among themselves (when they are playing, talking to each other or if they don't want their Cora parents to understand) but still speak Cora with their parents at home. Some of the Coras don't speak Spanish at all. However, some speak 3 languages - Spanish and Cora at home and English at school and with friends. The majority of the adult Coras living in Gunnison don't speak English. Some of them understand English but cannot speak, read nor write. Some of them can speak English but cannot read nor write. There are only few who are English literate.

Gunnison locals Karen Immerso and Paul Duba visited Jesus Maria in Fall of 2004. They met with family members of the Cora in Gunnison. Thanks Paul and Karen for the pictures!



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Health

The Mixto Hospital in Jesús María

The Coras explain sickness and health in very different terms from western medicine. The balance between a man-nature-cosmos will keep them healthy. They consider sickness as something supernatural caused by the imbalance around them. It can be a punishment from God for those who neglected their religious obligations and who failed to make appropriate offerings, not only to the saints but also to shrubs in certain sacred caves. "If you are Cora and you don't participate in the celebration of the Holy Week, you can get sick or have an accident," explain the Coras, "however, the sickness disappears if you fulfill your obligations."

Traditional medicine is very important for the Coras. *Curanderos*, traditional healers, are considered to be a bridge between God and man. They visit the house of the sick person and help people with their own healing methods, such as sucking rocks or corncobs. In the past, the priest would provide some of the medical services and sometimes he would meet with a curandero in the house of the sick Cora.

The Mixto Hospital in Jesús María was opened March 6, 2006 in order to preserve the traditional medicine of the Coras. It is a unique place where the modern medicine coexists with the traditional treatment. "The specializations of Western medicine in the Hospital are pediatrician, gynecobstetricians, anesthesiologist and internist. The general practitioners and nurses provide all sorts of consultations. The traditional, which include "specialists", such as a traditional healer, herb healer, bone healer, midwife, and herbal druggist were generally needed more often at the beginning although it seems now they are as busy as the modern doctors," explains Dr. Francisco Javier Amador Ponce, Assistant Director of the Mixto Hospital, about the role of the Hospital in the Cora community. "The majority of

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the modern medical personnel are mestizos while the traditional doctors are local Coras."

The pregnant Cora women can choose between a midwife or a doctor and sometimes they visit both. "The cooperation of a midwife-general practitioner-gyneobstetrician-curandero has been great in the last few years. During the prenatal visits the midwife gives massages to the pregnant woman and they decide where to give birth - at home or in the hospital. "I can't read but I know all the herbs around here, the herbs that are good for a woman in labor," says one of the local midwives. "I have assisted many labors and all the babies were born without problems, all of them are alive."

"Sometimes the prenatal, partum and postpartum are difficult for the hospital personnel because many Coras live on the ranchos scattered in the mountains and if they don't come to the hospital, there is no way of seeing them. The combination of geography, location in the mountains, their traditions and language has been a big challenge for the public authorities and medical personnel." says Dr. Ponce. The most common medical problems are infectious diseases, digestive problems, sexually transmitted diseases, cancer, tuberculosis and malnutrition. "We don't eat for nutrition here but to feel full and not to be hungry," say the Coras.

Although the Coras acknowledge the Hospital in Jesús María, the majority prefer to fulfill their religious obligations in order to be healthy and not to go to the hospital. The reason some Coras prefer the treatment of traditional doctors is fear, shyness and embarrassment. Many have never visited the hospital, their first contact with western medicine is when they come to Gunnison. "I am scared, this is my first time in the hospital" says one pregnant Cora woman before her first prenatal visit. " I have two kids who were born in my house with the help of

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Religion

The Cora religion is a combination of the Cora indigenous tradition and the Catholic Church. The religion is practiced through sacrifices, gifts to God, group dances, musical performances, story telling, praying and singing church songs. The Cora communities' don't have a fixed liturgical canon that all the Coras would follow. Every community and descent group carries out their own ritual with variations that correspond to the same cult and beliefs.

The Coras spend 40-60% of the days in the year celebrating their fiestas. The festivals represent the reproduction of the community life and the cosmos. All the members of the community participate in the preparations that are sometimes more important than work in the field. The majority of the Cora festivals are linked to the saints. For example, they celebrate Day of Saint Anthony and Day of Saint John in June or Day of Saint James in July. The music and dances are the most important parts of the festivals; the Coras express their relation with gods through music and group dancing. The fiesta dates are the same in every Cora pueblo but the demonstration varies. Some communities do theatrical performance, they dance, sing, some install statues of the saints.

The catholic festivals such as Christmas or Holy Week correspond with a life of Jesus Christ while the mitote ceremonies are associated with corn and correspond with a life of human beings. The Cora religion is voluntary. Anybody can participate in the fiestas. The priest in the church and the community elders lead the ceremonies; they should be a good example for others, especially in the fasting.

The mitote ceremonies

Every Cora is identified with corn and every family is represented by a bundle of 5 corncobs. This corn-related group has an elder who is considered to be a living

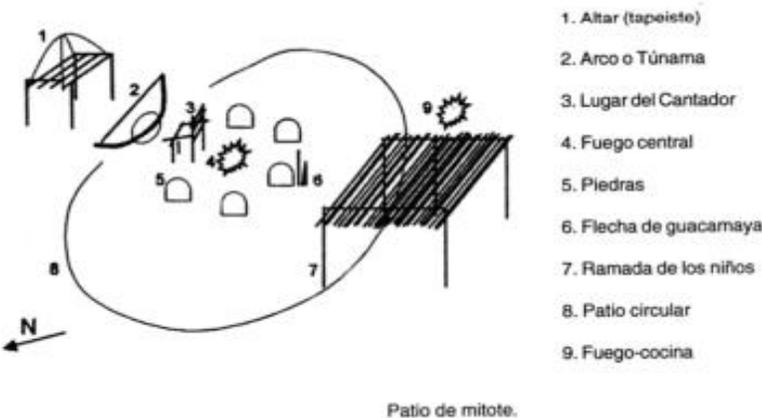
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community and the mitote ceremonies take place on the patio next to the elder's house. There is a sacred fire in the middle of this patio and on the east side is the altar. The Coras believe that fasting helps them to have a good harvest. Therefore, they fast from food and sex for five days and on the sixth day at the dusk the ritual begins. In front of the sacred fire they stick an arrow with a guacamaya feather which represents sun and fire. The singer sings songs describing mitote and the Coras interpret this ceremony through dances. Corn is present during the whole celebration. They dance and sing all night long and they believe that gods dance with them. Then the Coras pray until noon. They can eat after the elder sprinkles the mitote participants with sacred water.

Mitote ceremonies are performed three times a year and represent three crucial phases of the corn cycle.

1. The seed in May symbolizes the cicada maíz mitote
2. The roasted maíz mitote in September celebrates the first harvest
3. The parched maíz mitote in January or February celebrates the distribution of the corn seeds among people



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La Semana Santa Cora -Cora Holy Week

Cora Holy Week is one of the most important festivals in the Cora community. It's not allowed to take pictures or video without special permission from the indigenous authorities but some Gunnison Coras have video tapes with la Semana Santa which their relatives secretly recorded. The Coras enjoy watching the fiesta and describing it, pointing to their relatives. "...and here is the whole family of my señor, look at the masks. The Coras from other ranchos are coming down the hill...and now they are chasing Jesus, and look here is my house..." Carmelita Zeferino describes Holy Week in Jesús María: "The preparations begin 5 weeks before Holy Week, on Ash Wednesday, and the date is different every year. We start with *las pachitas* when people begin running around the village searching for things that they will need for Holy Week. It ends on Wednesday night when those who paint themselves during Holy Week meet. Every Friday night people sing songs and go around the village with little statues of Jesus Christ. It isn't allowed to eat meat, only fish or shrimp."

"All the Cora villages meet in Jesús María in order to celebrate Holy Week but the Cora fiesta is different from other places in Mexico. They have different rules, use different colors, offer sacrifices. It's more serious and exaggerated. Cora fiesta isn't a game, it's a remembrance of Jesus Christ who died, but it's more natural," says Carmelita.

"The Coras become Jews who represent demons trying to capture Jesus. The Jews can do whatever they like and no one can stop them. The Jews govern the village during the Holy Week. They prepare masks, make machetes and paint themselves. Each Cora man has to paint himself during Holy Week for 5 years . The first year they use

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The Gunnison Coras don't organize festivals in Gunnison, nor attend church. The situation is similar to Jesús María where the interest in practicing religion in the church is small. Although alcohol is prohibited during the Holy Week, in some Cora communities this fiesta and other festivals are associated with heavy drinking and violence. More people arrive to Cora towns to observe the festivals and the fights between the Coras and them, particularly with mestizos from cities, are common; sometimes small disputes can end in a violent fight and death.

The mitote ceremonies are more peaceful because the elders bring their descent corn group out of town to carry out the mitote ceremonies. The elders fear that their traditions are losing the real meaning of celebrating the nature, life and cosmos and their fiestas are becoming only opportunities for drinking and fighting. Therefore, they focus more on the corn mitote ceremonies, it's the way how to preserve their culture.

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Excerpt from Essay by Mexicano George Otis

translated by Marketa Zubkova

At the beginning of the 1980's, one of the mestizos from Jesús María who worked in Colorado became a "coyote", a human smuggler. He began to take Coras to Southwest Colorado, to the towns of Montrose, Delta and Gunnison. The first Coras who came to Colorado were single young men from Jesús María and worked as shepherds in the Uncompahgre National Forest in the summer. The American ranchers liked the Coras work and considered them good, responsible workers. They were paid minimum wage. Since their work was in the mountains, far from town, they didn't spend a lot of money and were able to save almost everything. Although the Coras do a wide variety of work in the area now, they are still known as "shepherds."

Since there was not a lot of work on the ranches in Colorado in winter, some of the first Cora immigrants returned to the Sierras. There is not much work in the field during the winter (dry season) in the Sierras either, and the Coras could enjoy their vacation in Jesús María and fulfill their obligations in the traditional indigenous government. In April and May instead of preparing for the corn sowing, they were preparing for the trip North. The Coras living in Jesús María, one of the poorest municipalities in Mexico, realized that they could have a better life somewhere else. The traditional life of peasants and farmers, hard work and poor life, was not attractive to them anymore. The rumor that there was a lot of work in "Morrós" (Montrose) was spreading very fast and each year more and more Coras were leaving Jesús María.

The Colorado migration phenomenon was not the same in every Cora town. For example, the first man who brought the Coras to Colorado was from Jesús María, so Jesús María has experienced a big migration, while Santa Teresa has not been affected at all. Santa Teresa has a perfect climate for the cultivation of marihuana and poppy and "the tereseños" are making good money from drug trade; they don't need to go to

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Viaje al Norte

A trip to Colorado has never been easy for a Cora without money and papers. After the mestizo "coyote" from Jesús María quit his job, the Coras had to find another way to get to Colorado. The biggest problem for them was money. Some of them sold their property or cows but the majority went to work on the coast or to Tepic to make money for their trip to the North. The trip is very expensive, difficult and risky, and the financial support from Colorado is much appreciated. The trip to the North is getting more and more difficult but the Coras are already experienced enough and have found other efficient methods of crossing the border. The Coras from Colorado who have money and know the system usually organize the trip and pay the coyote.

The Colorado Cora calls the coyote who lives anywhere in the country but usually close to the border, and they agree on the price, way and time. The route most common and direct between Nayarit and Colorado is in the border town Nogales, Sonora. There is also Nogales, Arizona, on the other side of the border and one of the popular crossing places is an indigenous reservation Pápago (Tohono O'odam). The Pápagos don't mind the constant influx of illegal immigrants that go through their reservation and, as a matter of fact, many of them are working as coyotes. In 2005, the crossing and the trip to Colorado cost from \$1,500 to \$2,000 per person. From the border to Phoenix, Arizona, it was half, around \$800 to \$1,000. After the Cora in Jesús María receives instructions from his relative in Colorado, he takes a bus to the border. He finds the coyote who then calls the relative in Colorado to confirm the meeting and gives him instructions to deposit money to the coyotes bank account. The migrant and his guide cross the border on foot at night, get in the car that the coyote left in the desert close to the border and drive to Phoenix, Colorado or another meeting point. The walk in the desert can last a few days and nights which is not hard for the Coras. They are used to long walks in the sun in uninhabited areas. However, when they are accompanied by other border crossers, the problems occur. The group gets tired and the

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chance to be caught by the Border Patrol is higher. There have been only a few changes in the Cora migration. Their system of crossing the border has evolved over the years but their destination hasn't changed much. We can find some Coras in Durango or Denver but the majority of them still live in Montrose, Delta and Gunnison.

One feature of the Cora migration that hasn't changed is the age of new immigrants. In the beginning, single young Coras arrived in Colorado and started their families here. The majority of the new immigrants are still single young men and women. The older Coras from Jesús María are not interested in living in Colorado.

The Cora Life in Colorado

In the past ten years, there hasn't been enough work for all of the Coras in the mountains and they had to find other kinds of jobs. Many left the mountains, moved to towns and became more involved in the US society. The Coras started to work in restaurants, shops, construction and other local businesses. They began to stay in Colorado longer and longer. Their jobs were not seasonal anymore and they feared losing their jobs if they left. They got used to the American way of life and the price and the risk of crossing the border was an important factor for them to stay longer in Colorado. Their visits to Nayarit became only temporary while their lives in Colorado became more permanent. They realized that even if they come back with money, life in the Sierras wouldn't be easy. They could afford to build a nice house there but it wouldn't resolve their problems with employment.

The Coras who made their lives in Colorado permanent and didn't want to go back invited their girlfriends, wives, brothers and sisters to join them. Other Coras married local Colorado women. However, there are cases when the men never returned to their families and their wives never saw their husbands again. The kids are another reason why the Coras stay in Colorado for a long period of time. The parents think that their children have more opportunities here; especially if their kids were born in the USA and are US citizens. Also, their children wouldn't accept a life of poor people in a foreign country.

The Coras prefer staying in their little community and they try

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make a lot of money. Workers in the restaurants or hotels can make \$7 to \$10 dollars per hour. Construction workers make more between \$10-15 per hour, but their work is seasonal. It often happens that the Cora family has only one income in winter, that of the wife. Although they are still making more money than in Mexico, they also spend more money in Colorado. There are some expenses that don't exist in the Sierras: rent, gas, car, heat, and health care. However, the Coras in Colorado are considered rich by their friends in Mexico.

The Americans don't differentiate between Coras and mestizos (this term is used to designate people of mixed European and indigenous non-European ancestry) but the Coras and the mestizos do. The mestizos despise the indigenous people. They consider them as uncivilized and savage. The Coras don't trust the mestizos, either. However, there are some elements that unite both immigrant groups. The Spanish language, both of them are looking for the same kind of jobs, they live in the same neighborhood and they share the same problems, they socialize, help each other to take care of their children. There have been Cora-mestizo marriages but still they don't trust each other. For example, if the Coras ask for an interpreter in the Multicultural Office in Gunnison, some of them don't want Mexican interpreters, who would then find out about their life.

The Cora migration to Colorado has affected Jesús María in many ways. The Coras used to build traditional small stone houses with wooden doors and windows, which stayed cool even in hot weather. Now they are building big brick or cement houses, so-called houses of the North because they are built from the money sent from the USA. Although many Coras don't return to the Sierras, they send money to their families who put the savings into building a new house. There are more cars and trucks in Jesús María. The majority have Colorado license plates.

Some of the changes in the Cora society are more profound and cannot be seen at first sight. The positive side of Cora migration is a better life for the Coras in Jesús María who are financially supported by their relatives in the USA. However,

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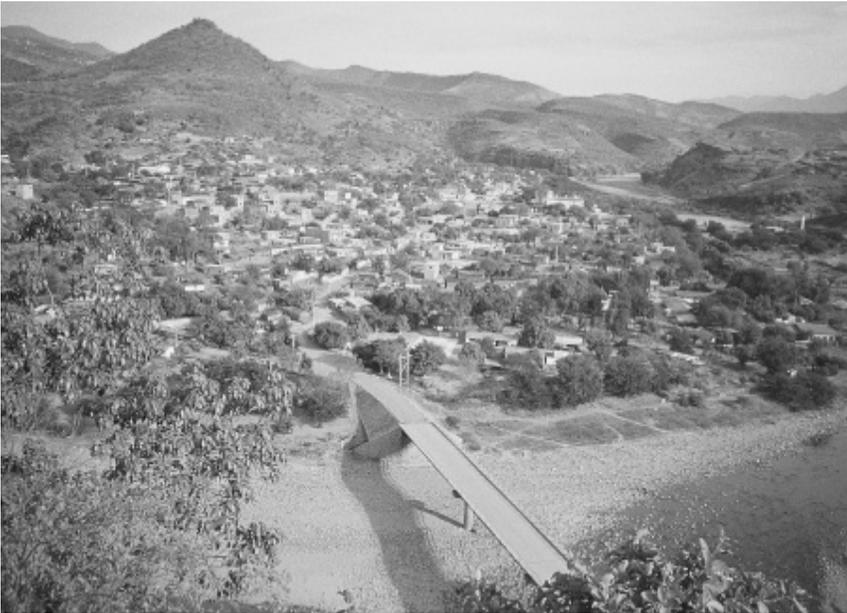
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migration changes the focus of one whole generation of the Cora Indians. They don't want to stay in the Sierras and a lot of them are already planning their trip to Colorado as soon as they can. "There is nothing here," can be heard in the Cora community in Jesús María. The Coras know that they have their own community in Colorado where they can come anytime. Therefore, many kids are already planning the future in the USA.

The elders are worried about the massive migration of young Coras. The elders feel that their traditional culture based on their customs and life in the community is falling apart. They might be right. The young generation was brought up with different values and the elders know that if the young don't find work in the Sierras, they will go somewhere else. The parents and grandparents don't know what to do about that. They try to involve the young people in the local government, hoping that the prestige of being in charge of the fiestas will convince them to stay. Unfortunately, it's not enough. As the young generation is leaving, many positions in the local government are filled with the elders.

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Jesus Maria, Nayarit, Mexico

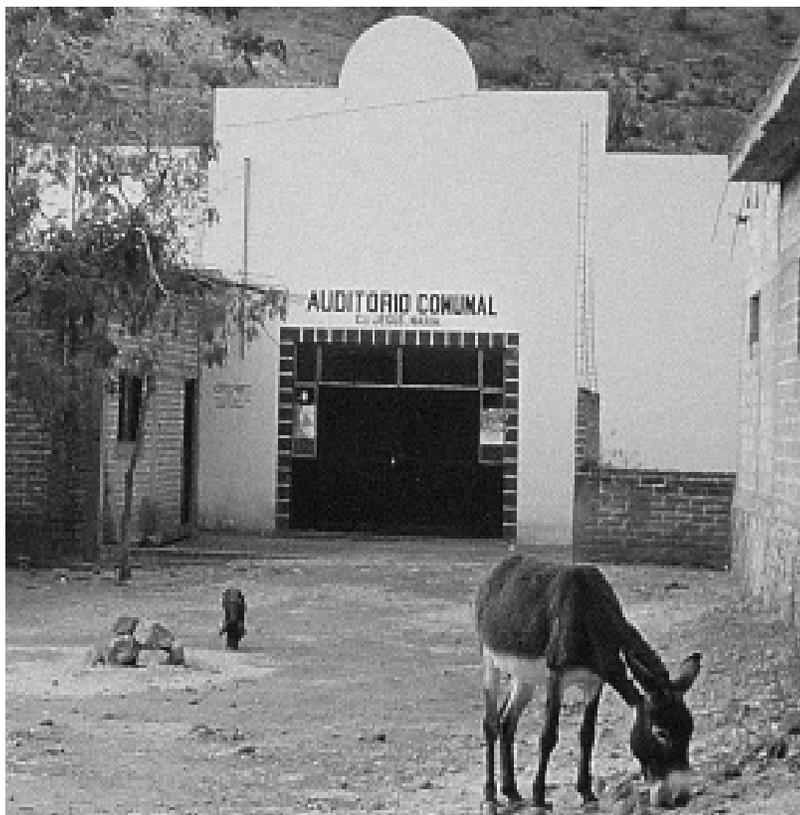


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