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The "komakali" ball race.

**In the midst of the sierra, among the streams and woodlands, in the North of Mexico, the "jumames" - men - are ready to run; they have been preparing themselves day after day, year after year.**

## *The ball race in the Sierra Tarahumara*

**J**uan, Pedro, Jesus, names without faces, sharply defined silhouettes, strong bodies, absolute concentration. Their gazes are fixed, their hearts are thumping, their adrenaline is rising, their muscles tense, they have only one goal: to win the ball race.

The ball race, a tradition going back as long as the elders can recall, requires great dedication as the contestants run for hours, sometimes days. The terrain is rugged and the race track is defined by gullies; the competitors are guided by the trees. That is not all; just running is not enough: you have to kick along with your feet a small ball cut out of wood, known as a komakali, painted with red, white or blue stripes.

The main races are held at harvest time and in Holy Week. The agricultural calendar, rituals and entertainment together forge the day-to-day life of the Tarahumaras. The chokeame, a distinguished and important personality in the communities, and old and wise man steeped in ancestral traditions, coordinates the contests and organizes all the preliminary activities that precede the tournament. His decisions, together with those of the chokeames of other villages, are communicated to the other inhabitants at social meetings.

Each with their wooden ball the size of a baseball ball, made of white oak, Spanish ash or arbutus root, two teams of

between four and six men each run, slowly but firmly, with regular steps, controlling their komakali; whatever the terrain, night or day, the jumames continue on their way. They have been trained for this. In the magic of the mountains and the gullies, in the midst of the Sierra Tarahumara, they find their way, identify with the deer. blend with the natural world.

A few days before the contest, the runners begin their preparation ritual with shamans and medicine men. They are not allowed to become intoxicated; tescino - a drink made of fermented maize - is prohibited, as are sexual relations, for at least three days before the start of the competition. The ceremony to "cure" the jumames has begun; they must be protected from any mishap, avoid being bewitched by any of their opponents and ensure that they win. The chants and prayers begin and their legs and chest are "cured" to ward of any pain or cramps.

Then, they don the zapateca (a kind of loin cloth) and, over it, a belt of rattles made of deer hooves strung together with rope and bits of reed or small metal bells where such trinkets are available.

The belt symbolizes the speed and toughness of the deer, the being symbolically tethered to the waist of the jumame; it will bring the runner luck and keep him awake throughout his long journey. The first team to cross the finish line is the winner.

The rules are clear and have been learned from generation to generation, They are not written down anywhere but preserved in people's memories. The competitors and the village people know what is allowed and what is not. To write down the rules could be seen as betraying the trust that exists between them.

At the same time, the rest of the inhabitants of the Sierra Tarahumara begin the activities that accompany the race; the great day is approaching and the festivities have to be prepared. The women cook, the men lay their bets. The entire community is caught up in the festive atmosphere. The village of Huachochi against the village of Creel, in some parts of the sierra the races last two days and nights although in these races the runners do not run as fast as in the shorter ones that last between five and twenty hours. Today, the chokeames

have decided: 200 kilometres, five men on each team. Everything is ready. Huachochi will have a red-striped ball and Creel's colour will be blue. They will leave the community of the "reds", pass through the woods, cross a few river beds, taking care that no road or railroad disturbs their path. They will take many hours to finish the race; the jumames must not touch the ball with their hands; if it falls into some inaccessible place, they can use a stick to get it out, but in doing so they lose a lot of time and give their opponents an advantage.

The ball race has begun. Each team takes its ball with red or blue lines, someone kicks it forward and they continue to push it along with the instep until the appointed distance has been covered. Collective euphoria breaks out. Some shout, others laugh and applaud. Even the children have left their games to see the runners come out and imag-

ine when they will be chosen to run and represent their communities in future races.

The jumames follow the route marked out by the chokeames, who have placed small, distinctive strips on the trees or alongside the track. These must be followed and the runners are not allowed to leave the course; no one cheats, they all trust one another. Meanwhile, the festivities continue; the feasting, drinking, dancing and laughter. They are joyfully awaiting the end of the race and the night does not interrupt their revelling.

The heavenly bodies have changed position, the moon appears on the scene with the stars as companions. Its light bathes the landscape, the jumames are not alone, a shining silver mantle moves with them. A romantic mysticism sets in and pushes the runners on, while the magic of their belts gives them strength and draws energy;

the shamans are with them, hidden in the night.

The dawn breaks the night's enchantment, the king of the stars reclaims its place and the moon gives it up without reproach: when the sky takes on a soft, pinkish tinge, the moon, too, reddens. The morning dew refreshes the jumames, but they still have many kilometres to go before they reach the finish.

Amidst the feasting and drinking for the triumph of some and the dream of others, people constantly wonder who will win; the bets are a great incentive to wait patiently for the approach of the contestants and the end of the race. Finally, the cries of the crowd check the appetite, the runners are approaching the finish.

Everyone runs out to meet them, lining the finishing stretch on either side to welcome the exhausted runners as is their due. It seems that the red team is ahead, still kicking their komakali, tired but not exhausted. The shouting enlivens them, no one remembers the time, nobody knows what time it is or how far they have run; the welcome committee is very cordial, at last they are home and, what is more, they have won the most important ball race of the year, achieving the honour of victory for themselves and their community.

In Huachochi, no one can speak about anything else but the triumph of their runners; those who laid bets go to claim their winnings. The feasting continues the jumames are able to rest a little but they are not allowed out of the public arena; they are heroes and must be duly celebrated. For their part, the losers receive affectionate congratulations on their efforts and on the fairness of their race.

The night again starts to cover the woods, but this night too, there will be no end to the feasting and joy of the encounter between man and his mountains.

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*A racer's joy.*