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CORA INDIAN FESTIVE MUSIC

RECORDED AND EDITED BY E. RICHARD SORENSON AND PHILIP R. LENNA

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KNIFE DANCE
VIOLIN IMPROVISATION AND FLUTE ACCOMPANIMENT
SPONTANEOUS SINGING
MUSIC AND REVELRY
FLUTE SOLO
VIOLIN IMPROVISATION
MUSIC AND REVELRY WITH MEXICAN SONG
FLUTE SOLO
MUSIC, MASS SINGING, AND REVELRY
CEREMONIAL DANCE AT SAN PEDRO DE HONOR

CORA INDIAN FESTIVE MUSIC

Cover Photo: E. R. Sorenson
COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

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FOLKWAYS RECORDS Album No. FE 4327

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by E. RICHARD SORENSON
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Side A
Band 1. Knife dance
Band 2. Violin improvisation and flute accompaniment
Band 3. Spontaneous singing
Band 4. Music and revelry
Band 5. Flute solo
Band 6. Violin improvisation

Side B
Band 1. Music and revelry with Mexican song
Band 2. Flute solo
Band 3. Music, mass singing, and revelry
Band 4. Ceremonial dance at San Pedro de Honor

In remote regions, still difficult of access, in the Sierra Madre Occidental Mountains of western Mexico, there still remain pockets of Indians who have not yet adopted the predominent Mestizo culture of Mexico; Indians, who by virtue of their remoteness, have kept their own tribal identities, cultures, and languages. Such a tribe is the Cora, living in the mountains of the northwestern part of the state of Nayarit, Mexico.

A relative to the ancient Aztec, the Cora belong to the important Uto-Aztecan linguistic family together with many other North American Indian tribes distinguished by similar but mutually unintelligible languages. The Uto-Aztecans have occupied Indian territory extending from Idaho through most of the western American states and south to Tabasco, Mexico, with but a single break in Arizona. Within the Uto-Aztecan family the Cora belong to the Aztecoid subfamily along with a few other tribes including the Aztec, Huichol, and Toltec.

The Cora Music:

The distinctive Cora music is noticably similar to those of other Indian tribes in northwest Mexico in both its emphasis on rhythm and its instruments. Very likely all these musics have similar origins, and all have probably been similarly modified since pre-Columbian times. However, the Cora music is still uniquely Cora and can be distinguished from the musics of related neighboring Indian tribes and Mestizos. Its roots, however, are obscure, and we have not been able to determine how much earlier styles have been influenced or changed by the Spanish conquest and the Roman Catholic missionaries. We do know that Jesuits introduced the violin to this part of Mexico in the 17th century and that it has become an important and integral part of the present day Cora music, as it has of many of the other northwestern Mexican Indian tribes. It is also apparent that some of the Cora violin music possesses a melodic quality not altogether like the other more rhythmic Cora music. Today, during visits to nearby Mestizo regions, the Cora have some contact with the music outside their region, and many are familiar with some of its phrasing. But, as yet, it has not made decisive inroads into the style of the Cora. Occasionally, however, intruding Mestizo melodies can be heard during Cora singfests or parties; but during the traditional celebrations, the music is strictly Cora. Except for the occasional visits of some of the Cora men to Mexican villages outside the Cora region, the Cora have had little contact with the commercial recorded Western music of today. They are aware of such music from their visits; but as yet there is nothing resembling it played or sung within the Cora region. This may be due to the lack of electricity, phonographs, or radios.

Photo: E. R. Sorenson

Cora dancers from Santa Cruz dancing in celebration of the fiesta in honor of the Virgin of Guadaloupe at San Pedro de Honor

Cora music is largely rhythmic, and much use is made of percussion instruments. This is particularly true in the traditional ceremonial music for dancing, which, at first, seems monotonous to the ear in its deliberate rhythmic repetition. Even the violin, an important instrument for the ceremonial dancing, seems at these times particularly rhythmically oriented so as to provide a beat for the dancing rather than as music in its own right.

The percussion instruments vary from huge rectangular drums carved from tree trunks to percussion bows and hand rattles. A special instrument, called the mitote, consisting of a large gourd and stringed bow, played with two sticks, is played only during the spring ceremonial dance in honor of the maize. We were not able to hear the mitote, but we were told that it was played by placing the bow on a gourd on the ground and hitting it lightly with the sticks.

Recording Sites and Setting:

The recordings of Cora music presented here were made within and just outside the Cora tribal area. The selections on the first nine bands were recorded in the Cora village of San Blasito on the San Pedro River and that on the last band in the neighboring, isolated, Mestizo, mountain village of San Pedro de Honor.

The selections from San Blasito were recorded during a drinking party organized by the Cora chief partly because of our interest in recording and partly because of his own desire for diversion. On the appointed evening, after nightfall, in the pouring rain, over a dozen local Indians arrived at the village meeting house. They shouted, danced, sang, and reveled until daybreak while consuming several gallons of tequila. At times there were lulls in the activity, and toward morning intoxication and fatigue became increasingly evident. However, never did the spirit of camaradarie and revelry completely subside until the party slowly broke up after dawn.

None of the abundant music at this party was performed for presentation as to an audience. Rather there prevailed a spontaneous outpouring, subject to the mood of the party and the whim of the individual participants. The singing and shouting was, for the most part, in the Cora language; but an occasional Spanish phrase or word was heard. During lulls in the party, a particularly interesting, less noisy, solo performance on the flute or violin would briefly attract the attention and attentiveness of the group. Some of the flute and violin variations presented here were performed at such times. The bulk of the instrumental music was provided by a repetitious rhythmic violin and a large drum. The tone of the single flute provided contrast. Initially the flutist preferred to play in accompaniment to the violin. However, as the evening wore on, he also improvised and innovated by himself.

The most spectacular instrument was the large wooden drum, about two feet square on one end and about eight feet long, which rested on the ground and was played by the feet of dancers taking turns -- one man at a time or one man with one woman. Some of the men dancers clashed and swung large knives together behind their backs or necks, in front of their bodies, and beneath their lifted legs.

Throughout the music was spontaneous and unsolicited; it was performed in an atmosphere of ease and familiarity. A spirit of camaraderie devoid of competition or attention to prestige was evident during the party -- a trait consistent with the Cora manner at other times as well.

Many traditional ceremonial dances portraying old legends are still carefully performed at the prescribed time, usually corresponding with one of the Catholic feast days. These dances seem to be of old, traditional Indian origin and without elements from European or Christian sources. During some Catholic festival days, Cora performers may walk long distances to a Mestizo Catholic church outside the Cora lands, where they present their Indian contribution to the Christian holiday. The dance ceremony recorded here was performed by Indians from the Cora village of Santa Cruz in the Mestizo village of San Pedro de Honor -- a two days' walk over mountain trails. The occasion for the celebration was the fiesta in honor of the Virgin of Guadalupe, held throughout Mexico shortly before Christmas each year.

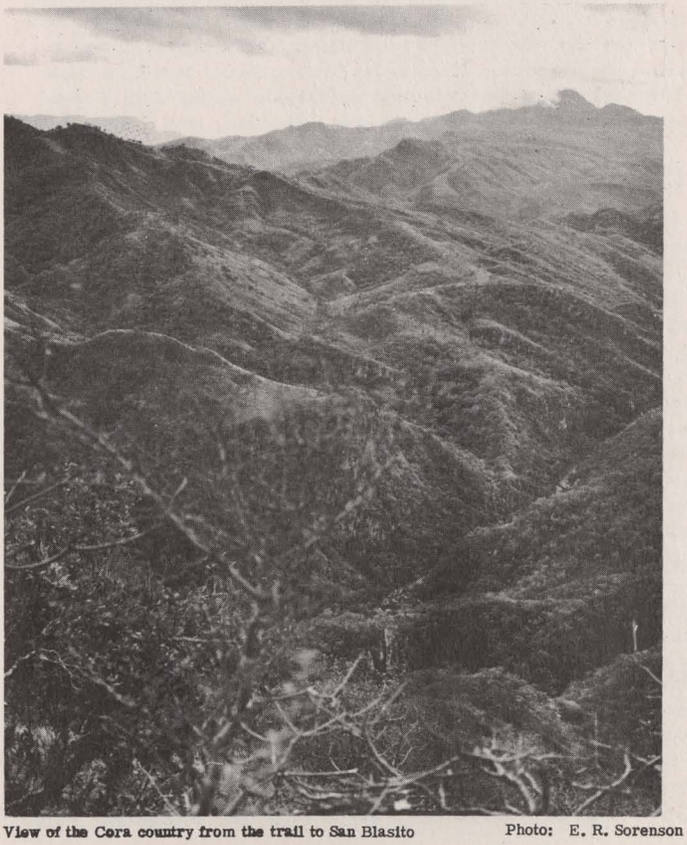
No resident priest ministered to the people of San Pedro de Honor, and the villagers themselves arranged to celebrate the principal Catholic feast days in the small, bare adobe church. On the fiesta of the Virgin of Guadaloupe, the Cora Indians from Santa Cruz contributed both on its eve and during the fiesta day by performing their tribal dances in front of the church while the villagers gathered inside singing and praying. The Indians did not participate in the services within the church; rather they danced out their legends before the church doors while the Mexican Catholic service went on inside. Singing and praying with respect and dignity, the San Pedro villagers seemed simply to accept the activities of the Cora as part of what was to be expected on this holiday, and they showed no hostility or annoyance at the noisy performance just outside the open church doors. Elaborately costumed, the Cora dancers performed with a similar dignity and sense of appropriateness. Their violinist played from his clearly customary position beside the door to the church. Gathered outside as an enthusiastic and interested audience for the dancers were many villagers not attending services in the church.

Ranging in age from about five years to mid-twenties, these Cora dancers moved back and forth with a smoothness which indicated long and careful rehearsal. Shouts were the only vocal accompaniment except, in two dances, for a humorous repartee in Spanish by two masked buffoons. Children of San Pedro laughing at the sometimes bawdy remarks of these buffoons can be heard in our selection here. The instrumental accompaniment for the dances was, with the exception of the violin, by the dancers themselves using rattles and percussion bows.

Our recording of the music accompanying the dancing, *Side B, Band 4*, starts with the ringing of the bell of the church of San Pedro de Honor and the singing of the Mestizo women and children filing into the church. As soon as they have entered, preparatory sounds for the Cora dance and a brief warm-up drown out the still barely audible singing from inside the church. The Cora quickly start their elaborate dances which continue with few short pauses until the church service is finished. During one of these pauses, we moved our microphone inside the church door to pick up a fragment of the singing in progress.

Observations of the Cora:

The village of San Blasito is connected to the surrounding world only by mountain trails which, during the



View of the Cora country from the trail to San Blasito Photo: E. R. Sorenson

rainy season are difficult to negociate. These trails were located so that they could be traversed by pack mule and burro, although considerable caution and skill was needed in many places. At some of the more difficult sections, there were alternative, longer trails which could be used during bad weather or by less experienced or more encumbered travelers or traders. The traveling time to San Blasito from the nearest point accessible by road was about three days with pack mule.

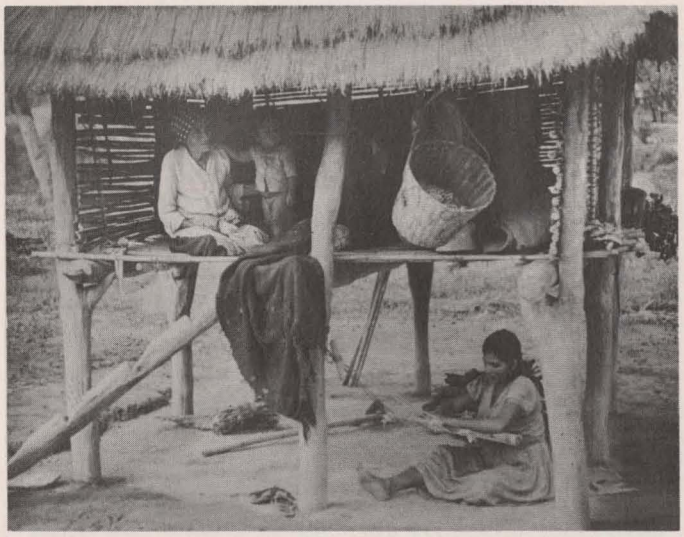
San Blasito itself consists of a loose grouping of about twenty houses scattered at approximate intervals of 1/4 mile on both sides of the confluence of the Rio Jicaras and the Rio San Pedro. There were no streets, and narrow foot trails ran between the dispersed houses. That this diffuse grouping of houses was indeed a distinct community was confirmed by the absence of dwellings beyond and the small civic center comprising a meeting hall, unused church, and unused school.

Living on the outskirts of San Blasito, in somewhat adjacent sites, were three Mestizo families, whose entry into the region was said to be recent. These Mestizos maintained their own way of life; and their contacts with the Indians, although almost daily, were formal rather than familiar. Separate social gatherings were the rule and neither Indian nor Mestizo participated on a familiar basis in those of the other. The Mestizos referred to themselves as "gente de razon" (people of reason) to distinguish themselves from the Indians, although they were no further advanced economically. They clearly considered themselves more civilized. There was, however, no sign of overt friction between the two groups.

Economically the community of San Blasito is virtually self sufficient, with but a small amount of outside commerce carried on through occasional traders with pack mules. The few regular imports are vegetable cooking oil, salt, sugar, and tequila, although a few miscellaneous commodities such as knives, axes, saddles, cotton cloth, cooking utensils, and ornaments were occasionally brought in. Expecially esteemed among the imports were the vegetable oil and salt. All wool material was manufactured locally, as was a fiber cloth made from a local plant. The women, when not occupied with food preparation, spent much of their time spinning, weaving, and embroidering. The food, with the exception of the imports mentioned above, was produced locally in areas largely outside the confines of the village itself.

As throughout Mexico, maize was the staple crop, and the twice daily meals normally consisted of tortillas and soft cow's milk cheese. Beans were eaten infrequently; and pork and chicken, the only domestic meats, only for special occasions. A locally grown coffee, water, and occasionally milk were the beverages. Salt and chilis were the typical condiments, and sugar cane, oranges, and lemons, grown on a limited scale, were eaten as seasonal treats. Some fishing and hunting (by bow and arrow) augmented these foods.

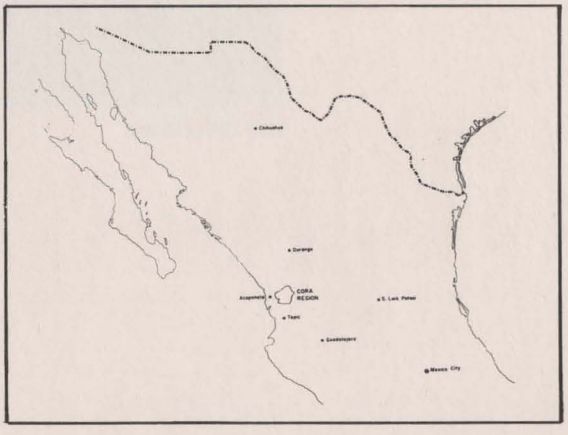
The typical Cora house was a single story, single room structure made of poles driven vertically side by side into the ground and partially plastered and chinked with adobe. The roof was a thin but tightly woven thatch attached to a lashed wooden frame. Furniture consisted of small chairs with cowhide seats and rectangular wooden frame beds with taut rope nets for support. In one corner stood the stove, a large clay platform built up from the dirt floor to a height of about four feet, upon which the bulk of the food was prepared and eaten. The kitchen area was usually in the house proper, although sometimes it was semi-detached or in a completely separate building. In all cases there was no chimney, and the smoke simply escaped through the thatch roof. Near some houses there were also small auxiliary bamboo buildings with floors about four to five feet above the ground attached to poles. Access to these was by a log into which notches had been cut as steps. These building were used for sleeping, working, and storage.



Cora dwelling and storage house in use during the day Photo: E. R. Sorenson

The Cora maintained a style of dress distinct from that of their few Mestizo neighbors. The women used more brightly colored fabrics, and their dresses consisted of skirts reaching to the ankles and a tightly fitting blouse. Their many ornaments were largely beads, finger and toe rings, and brightly colored combs worn in the hair. The men wore white cotton pants secured about the waist like a breech-clout rather than with a belt. These pants also had draw-strings around the legs to tighten or regulate their length. The men also wore loose pull-over shirts and nearly always carried an elaborately embroidered bag slung over the shoulder. Their sandals differed from those of the Mestizos in having a thong passing between the great and first toes. Occasionally, for everyday wear, but more commonly for ceremonial occasions, the Cora men wore a hand woven straw hat with a round brim and bowl shaped crown.

Polygamy was in evidence among the Cora, although far from universal. Families seemed tightly structured, with the eldest male the unquestioned head. The Cora chief's household, in which we were guests, seemed in most respects typical even though the accomodations were larger than those of the other Cora families. The chief, who appeared to be in his late forties, was the unquestioned head of the family. When he was away, as was



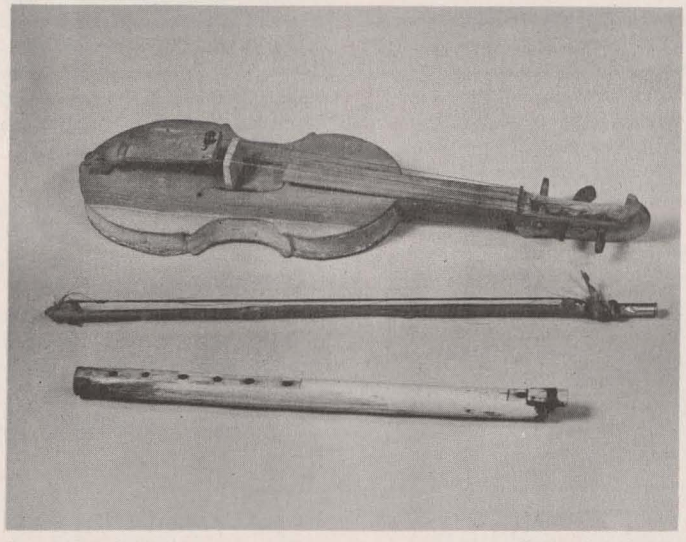
frequently the case, the authority over the household was assumed by the next eldest male, his son-in-law, who appeared to be in his late twenties. Cora women were more subordinate to men than are Mestizo women to their husbands. Cora women would never pass in front of a man or through a group of men, and would instead, often go to considerable trouble to go around or behind, even to the extent of moving furniture. In one case the chief's daughter moved a bed, in order to get to some supplies on the other side of a room in which her husband was talking with two other men. There was, however, no evidence of any resentment on the part of the women resulting from the male dominance.

In the chief's house, his elder wife, who was about forty years old, was in charge of the women's activities. It was she who rose first in the morning, set the pace in the work, and, when necessary, gave orders to the other women. It was the chief's younger wife, a girl in her early teens, however, who provided him with the female comforts and attentions which he required. The wives worked, talked, and joked together amicably and shared equally in the task of looking after both the young wife's baby daughter and the older wife's seven year old son.

The division of labor between men and women is clearly established. The men do most of the farm work, tend the sheep and cattle, and handle the outside business. They also spend much of their free time visiting neighbors. On the other hand, the women's place is strictly in the home, where they spend most of the day in preparation of the food and in looking after the younger children. Any time left over from these pursuits is spent in spinning, weaving, and embroidery. The women rarely get away from the house and do very little visiting.

Of the two sons of the chief in the household, we noted a marked difference in position. One boy was about seven or eight years old and the other about twelve. The older spent his time with the men and was expected to work and act like a man. His relations with his mother and the other women were formal, and he could categorically refuse attentions, including meals, from them. The younger boy, on the other hand spent most of his time with the women, played at random, when not helping to look after the baby -- a task which he seemed to enjoy -- and, like the baby, his behaviour was received with indulgence. However, both boys were quite obedient, following orders immediately, precisely, and with no sign of resentment or fear. The younger boy, however, would take instructions from the women; the older would not and was not so expected.

At present it seems unlikely that the Cora, who number from 350 to 500, will maintain themselves as a distinct cultural group for many more years. They themselves are now eager for change and would like to be more closely incorporated into the Mexican national economy and culture, to have schools, roads, and work for wages. Steps toward attainment of this goal are at present being realized with the help of a local member of the PRI, Mexico's ruling political party, with whom they get on very well. According to this representative, the Cora territory has received special legal status as an area to be protected and developed under the auspices of the Department of Agriculture and Cattle. No persons but those born within the area may own land, and these acting through community councils set up under the Mexican ejido system, are empowered to borrow money from the government to improve agriculture. The goal is to set up community owned coffee, banana, and citrus plantations, build roads, and establish processing facilities. When this comes about, the distinct Cora culture, as we know it today, will have passed away.



Cora violin and flute

Photo: E. R. Sorenson

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