

Seri

ETHNONYMS: Cere, Ceri, Comcaac, Guayma, Heri, Sadi, Salineros, Sori, Tastioteños, Tepoca, Tiburone, Upanguayma

Orientation

Identification. The name "Seri" is of unknown origin and meaning. It was first applied as "Heri" in 1645. The Seri call themselves "Comcaac" (the people).

Location. In aboriginal times the Seri lived along a 208-kilometer strip of the central Sonoran coast between about 28° and 30° N, and on adjacent Tiburón and San Esteban islands in the Gulf of California. This region is one of the hottest and most arid portions of North America. At present, the Seri reside in two villages, El Desemboque de Los Seris and Punta Chueca.

Linguistic Affiliation. Serian is a Hokan language. Only one dialect is still spoken, but two other mutually intelligible dialects are recalled. They are considered isolates.

Demography. Population estimates for the early historic period vary from around 1,000 to 4,000. Severe population decline began with the onset of full-scale war with the Spaniards in 1750. Of some 500 Seri remaining in 1855, about one-half were killed in the next dozen years. By the 1930s Seri numbers had dropped to about 175. Since then, the population has rebounded, reaching 516 in 1990 and over 700 in 1994.

History and Cultural Relations

Archaeological evidence indicates that Seri occupation of their traditional territory extends well back into prehistoric times. The Seri were in contact with the neighboring Papago, Pima, Yaqui, and Cochimí, and some cultural borrowing occurred. After contact with Europeans, the southernmost band (Guayma) was absorbed fairly quickly into mission life. The island Seri and some coastal people rarely saw Europeans and retained a peaceable and traditional life well into the nineteenth century. The Seri the Europeans came to know were opportunistic groups that migrated into the interior of Sonora and took to raiding

and stealing livestock. The mission of Nuestra Señora del Pópulo was founded in 1679 to deal with these troublemakers, but the Seri had little interest in sedentary life, and the mission was never a success. Seri-European relations worsened and in 1750 erupted in open warfare that raged unabated for twenty years. The nominal peace that followed was soon punctuated by sporadic raids and reprisal campaigns.

After Mexican independence, the pace of hostile encounters quickened, leading to an abortive campaign to exterminate the Seri in 1844. That same year Pascual Encinas established a ranch deep within the Seri range, intending to pacify the Seri with jobs and good treatment. His efforts failed, and in the dozen years of the "Encinas War" beginning in 1855, about one-half of the Seri were killed in skirmishes with Encinas's cowboys. By the late nineteenth century the remaining Seri were shifting between a foraging existence along the coast and islands and eking out a precarious existence on the encroaching ranches. During the 1920s the emerging Mexican fishing industry at Bahía Kino encouraged the Seri to try commercial fishing. A fish cooperative was established in 1938, transforming El Desemboque into the first permanent Seri community. Increasing numbers of North American tourists arriving in the 1960s stimulated a revival of traditional crafts for sale. Although the Seri communities now include a school, a clinic, and an evangelical church, core aspects of Seri culture and social life persist.

Settlements

Aboriginally, the Seri were nomadic. Their movements reflected both seasonal and fortuitous changes in the food supply and in the most critical commodity, fresh water. People moved among temporary camps as resources shifted. Camps were occupied for up to several weeks and might be composed of a single nuclear family or as many as fifteen families. Although the Seri now reside in two permanent villages, the population of each fluctuates greatly as people move freely between them. Some traditional camps are still used during fishing or foraging expeditions.

Most activities were conducted outdoors, and shelters served primarily as windbreaks and for storage. Houses were fabricated of ocotillo branches and resembled a Quonset hut or a simple rectangular box. They were covered with brush, seaweed, or anything handy. Housing today in the two villages is more substantial. Here the Seri have built both Mexican-style *jacales* of wattle and daub, and small wood-frame structures. During the 1960s and 1970s the Mexican government constructed cinder-block bungalows for the Seri.

Economy

Subsistence and Commercial Activities. The aboriginal Seri economy was based on hunting, gathering, and fishing. The relative contribution of each of these activities may have been quite different for the different bands, and surely varied with the season. Many species of plants were gathered, notably mesquite seeds, amaranth, cactus fruits, agave, and a marine seed-bearing eelgrass (*Zostera marina*). The most important game animals were mule deer and

jackrabbits. Slow game included chuckwallas, iguanas, and desert tortoises. Some Seri groups relied heavily on sea products. By far the most important were sea turtles, hunted with a barbed harpoon (*balsas*) made from cane. Fish, including sea bass, mullet, groupers, snappers, and triggerfish, were speared with balsas or from shore. Shellfish and other littoral and intertidal creatures were sometimes gathered in quantity. Several types of large seabirds were stalked at night as they roosted. Gull eggs were collected in the spring. For coastal and island Seri, the diet probably changed little with the coming of the Spaniards. Those Seri who moved inland added cattle, horses, and other livestock to their roster of fair game during raiding, and thievery and soliciting handouts expanded their inventory of subsistence techniques. Farming was tried by some Seri at the mission of Nuestra Señora del Pópulo and later at the presidio of Pitic (now Hermosillo) but without lasting success. Nor did they adapt to wage labor on ranches in the late 1800s. By the early 1900s nearly all Seri had resumed a foraging existence on Tiburón Island and the adjacent coast. Commercial fishing, beginning in the 1930s, introduced cash, which the Seri began to use to buy commercial food imported by Mexican entrepreneurs. Some commercial fishing continues. In the 1960s the focus of economic life shifted to craft production for sale to tourists. Most food consumed by the Seri is now purchased in Mexican-owned stores. Although the new staples include wheat flour, canned meat, rice, beans, canned fruits, coffee, and soft drinks, some fishing and even gathering occasionally supplement the packaged diet. Dogs, cats, chickens, and some goats are kept as pets. They are not eaten.

Industrial Arts. The most important indigenous crafts were pottery making and basketry. Aboriginal pottery was seldom decorated but its thinness, hardness, and symmetry attest to consummate skill. Its quality declined as metal containers became common in the late 1800s. Today an occasional piece is made for the tourist market. Baskets, made by close coiling on a bundle foundation, were regarded as a woman's most important domestic item. Although baskets had been replaced by commercial containers, the recent tourist market has stimulated a renaissance of basket making. New forms and designs, along with refinements in technique, have won Seri baskets major prizes at North American tribal fairs. An entirely new craft, ironwood carving, appeared around 1960. The carved figurines, made strictly for sale, are representations of animals familiar to the Seri. The sale of these superb items has proved so lucrative that ironwood carving has become a near-universal cottage industry and the foundation of the modern Seri economy.

Trade. Some Seri may have traded salt and hides for maize. European goods were obtained by Seri who roamed inland, but the island people may have had almost no contact with the outside world.

Division of Labor. Hunting and fishing is exclusively men's work, whereas basket making, pottery making, and sewing are the prerogative of women. Otherwise the division of labor is not rigid. A man might sometimes gather plant foods, fetch water, and cook, but these are normally women's tasks. Ironwood carving is undertaken by both sexes, although men usually rough out the basic form. The

few positions of temporary leadership recognized in the past went to men, but either men or women could become shamans.

Land Tenure. Seri oral tradition associates each of the former bands and their subunits (*ihizitim*) with a specific geographic region. Although sometimes construed as "territories," they probably did not confer exclusive rights of passage or use, for there was much movement and shifting residence throughout the entire region. More likely, band and *ihizitim* territories served as theoretical reference points that helped objectify the social identity of individuals. By the mid-nineteenth century the Mexican government had declared the Seri coast to be public land, and the Seri increasingly found themselves hemmed in by Mexican ranching and fishing operations. In 1965 they were evicted from Tiburón Island, which had been declared a wildlife preserve. In 1975, however, a 56-kilometer strip of mainland coast was designated a Seri *ejido*. The Seri were also given formal title to Tiburón Island, although their use of it is still restricted.

Kinship

Kin Groups and Descent. Today, Seri descent is reckoned bilaterally, and residence is neolocal with a slight patrilineal preference. The nuclear family is the core residential and economic unit. The "tribe" is recognized as a valid concept, although it functions mainly as a unit of ethnic identity. There are no formal groupings between the level of nuclear family and tribe. In the past, the Seri were divided into several geographically separate, politically independent units (bands), which differed in dialect and culture. Spanish recognition of "nations" only partly coincides with bands as recalled in Seri oral history. The Seri maintain that bands were further subdivided into geographical groupings called *ihizitim*, which they believe were well-integrated patrilineal, patrilocal, and exogamous units of everyday life. To what extent Seri social structure differed in the past has been a subject of intense debate. Different sources—Seri oral history, colonial documents, ecological considerations, and anthropological theory—have led investigators to an astonishing array of reconstructions. These include matrilineal, patrilineal, and bilateral descent; clans; subclans; patrilocal bands; composite bands; and *rancherías* (groups of huts). The data on which reconstructions must be based are so ambiguous that it is doubtful that aboriginal Seri sociopolitical structure and descent will ever be well understood.

Kinship Terminology. Kinship terminology is bifurcate collateral, with sibling terms extended to both parallel and cross cousins. Numerous terminological distinctions are made. One quasi-kinship system that still operates is the *hamac* relationship of reciprocal obligations for sponsorship of burials and the girls' puberty fiesta.

Marriage and Family

Marriage. Marriages are usually negotiated by parents. A boy may initiate the process, after which his parents take over if they approve his choice. If the girl's parents also approve they begin negotiating bride-price, which since the 1960s has become considerable. When bride-price transac-

tions are completed, the bride moves in with the husband without ceremony. Ideally, some bride-service obligations continue indefinitely. All close kin are excluded as potential marriage partners, including parallel and cross cousins who are terminologically equated with siblings. Some polygyny existed in the past, but all present marriages are monogamous. European-style weddings, encouraged by the local evangelical church, have become common. Since the 1960s, intermarriage with Mexican fishermen who are willing to live in El Desemboque and Punta Chueca has been increasing. Divorce is not common. It may be initiated by either partner, usually amid accusations of laziness or ill-tempered behavior. The bride-price is not returned.

Residence. Residence is neolocal, although the couple may reside briefly with the boy's parents.

Domestic Unit. The normal household is a simple nuclear family.

Inheritance. A few personal items were traditionally interred with the body. Nearly all the remaining property of the deceased and his household were exchanged for equivalent possessions of the *hamac* that performed the burial. This system is breaking down as the Seri acquire large amounts of consumer goods.

Socialization. Children, including twins, are welcomed. Girls are preferred for the bride-price they will bring. Children are raised in a permissive atmosphere with little or no physical punishment.

Sociopolitical Organization

Social Organization. Seri society is fundamentally egalitarian. Husbands have limited status as heads of households. In the past, older males may have held some authority. A war leader was accorded temporary status during military action. Especially powerful shamans have commanded both respect and fear. The authority of twentieth-century tribal "chiefs" has been restricted to external matters.

Political Organization. The Seri say that band and *ihizitim* structure collapsed when their population was decimated in the mid-nineteenth century. The resulting "tribe" emerged as a *de facto* grouping consisting of all surviving Seri; today it has little formal structure and few political functions. An informal council of elder men occasionally deliberates on matters involving external relations. The current "chief," however, has been an effective advocate for Seri interests with both the state and federal governments.

Social Control. The Seri value individualism. They are willing to tolerate considerable latitude in behavior, but are equally willing to express themselves if behavior exceeds acceptable bounds. Minor excesses are sometimes controlled by gossip, but angry diatribes directed squarely at the offender are not uncommon.

Conflict. Conflict is generated mostly at the interpersonal rather than the group or tribal level. Most disputes are resolved with little more than loud quarreling. Occasional fights have erupted, and rare instances of homicide are recalled. It is said that shamans were formerly capable of killing by witchcraft. Today a constable is charged with keeping the peace.

Religion and Expressive Culture

Religious Beliefs. Seri religion entailed belief in a large number of malevolent spirits who were placated by appropriate ritual. Most ritual is individual and often private. Seri religion as an integrated system no longer functions, although many rituals are followed out of custom. Spanish missionary efforts had no lasting effect on the Seri. Mexican evangelical Protestants, who arrived in 1953, have had some influence on most Seri and have won a number of genuine converts.

Religious Practitioners. Shamans controlled forces of both good and evil. Although they could place curses, their primary role was healing and the prevention of sickness and misfortune. Healing was accomplished solely through their influence over the spirits; any medicinal cures were administered by ordinary individuals. Anthropomorphic figurines were carved by shamans and rented to clients as fetishes. Some influence over the spirits was thought to come naturally with age. Individuals aspiring to shamanism, however, sought direct contact with the spirits during a four-day vision quest. Shamans were paid for their services.

Supernaturals. In addition to individual spirits, the Seri recognize certain more general supernatural forces. One, called Icor, controls the spirit of each plant, and its power can be tapped by shamans. Another is Hant caai, responsible for creating much of the world. He is thought to be male and is vaguely associated with the sun. Although Hant caai seems to be indigenous, the Seri say he is the same deity the Mexicans call Dios.

Ceremonies. The festive tone of Seri group ceremonies is intended to placate potentially malevolent spirits. Today the only regularly performed ceremony is the four-day girls' puberty fiesta. While the girl is secluded and subject to several taboos, the community engages in festive singing, Pascola dancing on a foot drum, betting games, and feasting. A puberty fiesta for boys was last held about 1923. The rare capture of a leatherback turtle prompts a similar ceremony. Completion of a giant basket also necessitated a fiesta to pacify the basket's spirit. The scalp dance has not been performed since warfare with the Europeans ended.

Arts. Face painting, especially of females, was a major art form but is rarely evident today. Much visual art now takes the form of basketry design and ironwood carving. The only dancing that survives today is the solo Pascola. Neither men's nor women's circle dances have been performed since the early 1900s. Music, especially singing, is still important. Despite exposure to Mexican popular music, many people prefer traditional Seri music; it is commonplace to record and listen to traditional songs on battery-powered tape recorders.

Medicine. Shamans cured serious illness supernaturally, but ordinary Seri treated lesser maladies with medicinal preparations. These were often simple teas, but the pharmacopoeia included more than 100 species of plants and animals. Clinics and commercial medicines have largely replaced traditional remedies.

Death and Afterlife. Traditional burials were performed by a hamac of the deceased, without public ceremony.

Today, funerals are increasingly common. The name of the deceased is not spoken. Ideally, the person is forgotten fairly quickly, although female relatives may wail for as long as a year. The afterlife, which transpires in the sky near the setting sun, is a replica of the present world but contains only good things. Virtuous Seri arrive there after four days, whereas evildoers are permanently stranded in one of several hells along the way.

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