

Mólema: A Death-Celebration-End Process by the *Ralámuli* Indigenous Group

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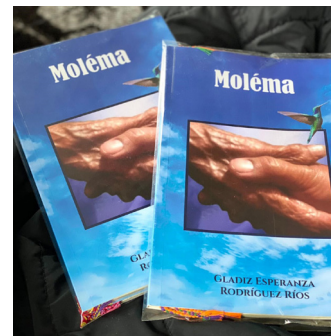
Mólema—the namesake of Gladiz Esperanza Rodríguez Ríos' book—is a *Ralámuli* custom in which, during the fourth day after a person has died, he or she is guided towards their new life, which the author describes as a death-celebration-end process.

Ríos was born in the municipality of Guachochi, Chihuahua, located in the north of Mexico. She has been a teacher in indigenous communities for more than 20 years, creating and implementing projects to foster literacy acquisition in the native tongue of *Ralámuli* students, as well as documenting the traditions and customs of this indigenous group. The book was written in 2021 and, though she had technically finished it in just a few months, she chose to wait before publishing in order to carry out all of the celebrations that are part of the deceased ritual, and therefore be able to depict these experiences in detail within the book. It is for this reason that the text is considered autobiographical in addition to its important ethnographic notes about this specific indigenous community.

This book is edited by the Mexican editorial Laripse, of which only 1000 copies were printed. Unfortunately, it was one of the last projects of this publishing house. The book can be acquired through the State Reading Program of Chihuahua, and is not yet available through other distribution channels, but it is hoped that this situation that will soon change, due to the importance of the work.

Throughout this text, the author narrates both in *Ralámuli* and in Spanish, outlining the details that characterise this ritual by discussing the farewell of her grandmother María as an example, and at the same time revealing her valuable family history. In her historical account, she showcases the richness of the local practices of her community, highlighting the need to make them known so that they can be appreciated and, thus, preserved.

Gladiz begins by giving a brief introduction about her indigenous group, the *Ralámuli*—also known in Spanish as *Tarahumara*—using data from both those that identify with cultural identity and the speakers of the language of the same name. She emphasises the key concept of *self-classification* in regards of the ethnic origin, which is supported by laws such as the Political Constitution of the United States of Mexico (2021). These laws establish in their second article that each individual has the freedom to identify themselves as a member of an indigenous group, based on a



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cultural, historical or linguistic connection, among others, which must be recognised by the Mexican Estate.

Then, she enlists the municipalities of the Sierra Madre Mountains, best known as the Tarahumara Mountains, where the majority of the *Ralámuli* population lives. It must be noted, however, that many of them have migrated to the most populated cities of the state of Chihuahua and nearby states, mainly due to socioeconomic aspects. This situation further shows the ability of the *Ralámuli* to adapt to different cultural contexts, while they strive to maintain their traditions and customs.

During the introduction, the writer aptly establishes a parallel between the death rituals of different cultural groups—analysing the costumes that the oldest members of their population recreate—and the meaning that is assigned to dying. Specifically in reference to the *Ralámuli* culture, she describes the origins of the religion present before the Spanish conquest, recapturing the written records and oral narrations. She explains a series of key concepts, including their two deities: *Mechá* (the moon) and *Rayénali* (the sun). The *Ralámuli* people give thanks to these deities for the life of the deceased, and also ask them for guidance in the paths that they will embark upon during this new phase. Following the enforcement of Catholicism since the arrival of the Spanish conquerors, the worshipped deities changed to a Catholic God.

In addition, the author distinguishes between the concepts of *Repoká* (the body as a physical entity) and the *Alewá* (the soul). Though dying means that matter ceases to exist, the *Alewá* stays, so it must be taken care of and accompanied towards the path of a different existence. Hence, a series of celebrations are conducted which include—as can be expected—certain elements from Catholicism and, at the same time, components of the *Ralámuli* culture. This is where the importance of this testimony in its written form resides: it shows only a small part of the ample worldview of this culture which, as the author herself regretfully admits, is in danger of disappearing.

Grief in *Ralámuli* life, Gladiz explains, does not mean dressing in black, incontrollable crying or cancelling certain daily life activities. Evidently, those that were close to the deceased feel the loss intensely: it pains them and they are hurt by their absence and grieve the loss of the deceased. Yet, the mourning process is centred on the remembering of the life of the deceased by the family and members of the community, who take care of their *Alewá*, and walk with him or her towards the next phase. This happens in a series of encounters that involve the preparation of specific dishes and drinks, the use of song and dance, as well as the employment of key elements, each with their own individual meaning.

The description of the death-celebration-end process begins with the passing of grandmother María, a *Ralámuli* woman from the municipality of Urique, which is part of the region known as lower *Tarahumara*. There are five dialectal variants of the *Ralámuli* language: West, North, Peak,

Center and South, although the most common classification divides it in higher and lower *Tarahumara*.¹

María moved to the community of Tonachi, in the municipality of Guachochi, because of her husband's work in the Cultural Missions.² These programs began after the Mexican Revolution, as a part of the educational reform that aimed to bring cultural integration into the country. María's husband became an important leader of the community, actively participating in the Supreme Tarahumara Council, while she focused on raising their children, taking care of the sheep and cultivating local products, such as corn and beans. She was also recognised as an *Owirame*—a person that knows and collects the local medicinal plants—so her services were frequently required by the people in her community.

The book is full of heartfelt memories of María: her hospitality and warmth towards every visitor, the love for her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, her robust health and the attention she showed towards the animals she raised with abundant care. It is easy for the reader to mentally create an image of the protagonist that closely resembles the one that grandparents represent for grandchildren and, in the absence of that figure, makes him/her long for one with those attributes. Despite the author warning us from the preface that the book is about saying goodbye to a loved one, the death of the endearing character that María still comes as a surprise to the reader, and her departure is an extremely moving moment.

We are left with the consolation of joining the author, together with her relatives, in the preparation and completion of the different rituals to bid farewell to the family matriarch. Each aspect is described in great detail, therefore involving the reader in these traditions and the reason behind each one of them. It is truly fascinating to delve into something that can feel unknown and alien at the beginning, because it allows us to access in-depth knowledge about the diverse tasks that this farewell entails, and become familiarised with essential elements of *Ralámuli* culture.

Final thoughts

Cultural expressions and knowledge related to traditions and customs of indigenous communities are an essential part of their social, historical and linguistic identity. Unfortunately, over time, phenomena such as globalisation, acculturation and discrimination have endangered its permanence and continuity. Efforts such as those displayed by the text reviewed in this article highlight the richness of the worldview of indigenous groups, as well as the urgent need to appreciate it and preserve it for future generations.

¹ Abel Rodríguez, 'The irruption of the Ralámuli language and population in Chihuahua, interdisciplinary conjectures', *Chihuahua Hoy*, 17(2019), 17-34 (22).

² Alfredo Rubio, 'The Cultural Missions Programme: An early attempt at Community Development in Mexico', *Community Development Journal*, 13(1990), 164-169 (164).

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