

Santa Fe photographer captures daily life of isolated Mexican indigenous tribe

By Kathaleen Roberts / Journal Staff Writer

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Flute music harkens the warriors of the village to begin their mock battles on Holy Thursday in Santa Teresa, Nayarit, Mexico. (Courtesy of Peyton Wright Gallery)

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. — The cacophony of flutes and drums hypnotizes as the Cora people do battle dotted and striped in the black and white of Holy Week. The spice of incense smokes the church while the women dress the altar in palm fronds and yucca leaves.

Santa Fe's William Frej photographed this isolated Mexican indigenous tribe in Santa Teresa del Nayarit, a remote Cora village in the rugged Sierra del Nayar. To get there, he traveled nine hours on a dirt road from Tepic and 12 hours from Guadalajara in west-central Mexico.

Frej's black-and-white frames capture a four-day ceremony. Its roots weave Christian iconography with rituals predating the Spanish conquest of Mexico. Thirty of Frej's prints will hang in Santa Fe's Peyton Wright Gallery through Aug. 31.

Frej committed himself to the camera after retiring from the U.S. Agency for International Development 10 years ago. His job took him across the globe, from Poland to Indonesia, Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan.

"I always had my camera with me," he said.



Decorating the altar on Holy Wednesday in Santa Teresa, Nayarit, Mexico. (Courtesy of Peyton Wright Gallery)

Frej learned of the Cora people during past Mexican photographic expeditions with anthropologist-archaeologist Marina Aguirre. She spent six months preparing for the trip and gleaning permission from the tribe's mayordomo.

"They wanted donations of honey, eggs and tequila," Frej said.

The Coras' rugged and hard-to-reach location, coupled with their fierce response to Spanish conquerors, explains why they retain so much of their pre-Hispanic belief system within a loose Catholic framework.

"The Jesuits came in 1722 and enslaved the Cora to help them build their church," Frej said.

The tribe expelled the Jesuits in 1767. Just 10 percent of this village of 1,200 speak Spanish; the rest use the Cora dialect.

Cellphones don't exist there. Any phone calls came through a traditional dial phone in a general store blasted over an intercom.

"I've been photographing indigenous people in Mexico for the last five years," Frej said. "There's very little photographic documentation in this area."



A Borrados (an Erased One) on Holy Thursday in Santa Teresa, Nayarit, Mexico.

While there is a Catholic priest who says Mass from his home, no clerics participate in Holy Week. The activities orbit around the 1874 church the villagers built for themselves.

The rituals depict the life and death of Christ within a larger context of a battle of good versus evil.

“That’s why every man and young man in the village paints himself black, white or black and white,” Frej said.

The “borrados” or “erased ones” represent the evil people who killed Christ. Ritual battles occur with the men wielding large wooden sabers.



Jesus of Nazareth takes part in a ritual battle on Holy Saturday in Santa Teresa, Nayarit, Mexico.
(Courtesy of Peyton Wright Gallery)

“It’s real fighting,” Frej said. “They are whacking each other very significantly. It’s unlike anything I’ve ever experienced before.”

Women in brightly embroidered skirts circle the mayhem, screaming and yelling as they try to protect their husbands and sons.

On Holy Wednesday, the people build a massive altar with a stairway climbing to the top of the church. Candles and greenery line the sides. The people hoist wooden saints high above the crowd. On Good Friday, they strip the altar and destroy the staircase, symbolizing the crucifixion of Christ.

“On Holy Saturday they carry the Christ figure in a casket to all the stations of the cross,” Frej said.

The Coras are an endangered people. Many leave to find jobs in more urban areas.

“The numbers are dwindling; their land is being encroached upon,” Frej said. “It’s all subsistence living. It is the poorest area of Mexico.”

If you go

WHAT: “Rituals of the Cora: Holy Week in the Sierra del Nayarit, Mexico” by William Frej

WHEN: Runs through Aug. 31