

Tarahumara Gentiles

Summary:

The resource under consideration here is arable land. Arable land is a common pool resource in this case. On the dimensions of subtractability and excludability defined by Ostrom (2005), land is highly subtractable, but it is difficult to exclude resource users from land that is not continuously cultivated. In essence, cultivating a parcel of land means that there is less available land in the system; however, it is very difficult to exclude people from obtaining sufficient land for their subsistence needs. First, ethics demand that nuclear families have enough land to support themselves. Second, land fragmentation means that distance sharply increases the costs of continuously cultivating some fields. These fields become the subject of land claims from people who live nearer to the fields in question and can continuously cultivate the land. Though land rights are held by individuals, arable land is not a private resource because it is very difficult to exclude competing resource users from obtaining land sufficient for their needs.

Location:

North America, Mexico

Primary fieldwork was done by Kennedy (1978) at the settlement of Inapuchi. Specific field dates are not given, but preliminary fieldwork was done in 1957.

Sources:

Kennedy, J., 1978. Tarahumara of the Sierra Madre: Beer, Ecology, and Social Organization. AHM Publishing, Arlington Heights, IL.

Description Context:

Inapuchi: the field work was carried out in the “community” of Inapuchi. Inapuchi is not actually a settlement but one rancho that is tied through social relationships to surrounding rancheros. A rancho is a homestead.

Farmers live in widely spaced rancheros. Members of rancheros that frequently visit each other are considered part of the same community.

The people of this community are considered gentiles which differentiates them from Christian Tarahumara. This is a name imposed by towns people are the rural residents of “Inapuchi”.

Environmental Context:

The Tarahumara live in a rugged canyon environment at elevations ranging from 4000 to 7000 feet.

The area is dominated by moist temperate and warm temperate forest cover.

The population studied was approximately 142 people who regularly used an area of roughly 1-2 square kilometers.

The diet consists largely of cultivated crops, gathered plants, and small stock. Maize is the staple food product and is particularly important for brewing beer. Beer is a key form of social capital that allows people to mobilize labor and gain recognition. Goats are herded by boys and woman. People often move during the winter with their livestock to rockshelters or caves. Wage labor is occasional and used to buy important implements, such as axes.

Resource: Arable Land:

People have the right to cultivate land as long as they obtain the land through a traditional method and keep the land under “continuous” cultivation. Continuous is a relative term. Land left fallow for a reasonable period is actually considered land being cultivated, though crops are not currently planted on the land. Six years is the generally accepted length of time that land can be left idle before it becomes available to any member of the community.

The six year rule is not hard and fast. There are frequent land disputes. (Note that it is very difficult to determine an empirical meaning for the term frequent in this case.)

Rule #1: members of the community can clear and fence any unused land. Land use rights are obtained in this way only for land that is not continuously cultivated. Disputes generally arise over whether land in fallow has reverted to open access land or if cultivation rights still apply to the family who previously cultivated the land. Any unused land is treated as a public good. Land that has not been cleared is very scarce.

Land is most frequently obtained through inheritance.

Rule #2: All children are entitled to equal inheritance from both their mother and father. Land use rights inherited in this way are permanent, as long as one keeps a field cultivated.

Land disputes arise when the quality of parents land is variable and children are numerous. Where there are more children than parcels of high quality land to inherit, someone gets the short end of the stick.

Theoretically, individuals can sell or trade land. However, the author did not witness any of these transactions. Kennedy notes a strong moral ethic against trading and selling land.

Public Infrastructure:

There is a public ethic that everyone should have enough land to support their subsistence needs. Everyone in this case refers to nuclear families. Unmarried individuals belong to a nuclear family. At marriage, children often receive an advance on their inheritance. This means that at marriage, parents give their children a portion of the land the children expect to inherit. Land inheritance is bilateral, meaning both woman and men inherit use rights to land in cultivation.

The kinship system that emphasizes bilateral inheritance is the primary infrastructure for distributing land. Bilateral incest rules mean that marriage often means marrying someone from a great distance, as most people living near each other are relatives.

Where advanced inheritance creates unequal land distributions among siblings, the youngest with the

least amount of land, marriage facilitates the transfer of land. In general, men with little land must attempt to marry a wife with a lot of land. This is the only recourse for obtaining enough land to start a family.

Women maintain full rights to their land, even though men generally work the fields. In the case of divorce women keep their land. The family structure equalizes resource distribution within the nuclear family. All family residents share field products, yet rights to cultivate land are invested in individuals.

The bilateral incest rules also serve to militate against the accumulation of land. Families that begin to accumulate land through inheritance, accumulate parcels that are separated by great distances. Distance affects the family's ability to mobilize labor and continuously cultivate all of their fields. Where fields are separated by great distance, maintaining continuous cultivation is difficult. Thus, land parcels not cultivated as often become the subject of new land claims brought by people who live closer to the parcels in question.

Public Infrastructure Providers:

Public infrastructure providers are synonymous with resource users. People who use arable land also compose the kinships networks that distribute and regulate access to parcels of arable land.

Robustness

The robustness of this system of inheritance is difficult to assess. The system buffers against some potential problems, but creates other problems. For instance, bilateral inheritance creates land fragmentation, which equalizes land distribution. This buffers against the accumulation of land by a few groups of people. On the other hand, land disputes are relatively frequent due to great distances between farm plots and the difficulties this creates for mobilizing labor to continuously cultivate a plot. The bilateral inheritance system simultaneously redistributes land and facilitates land disputes.

Bibliography

Ostrom, E. 2005. Understanding Institutional Diversity. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, USA.