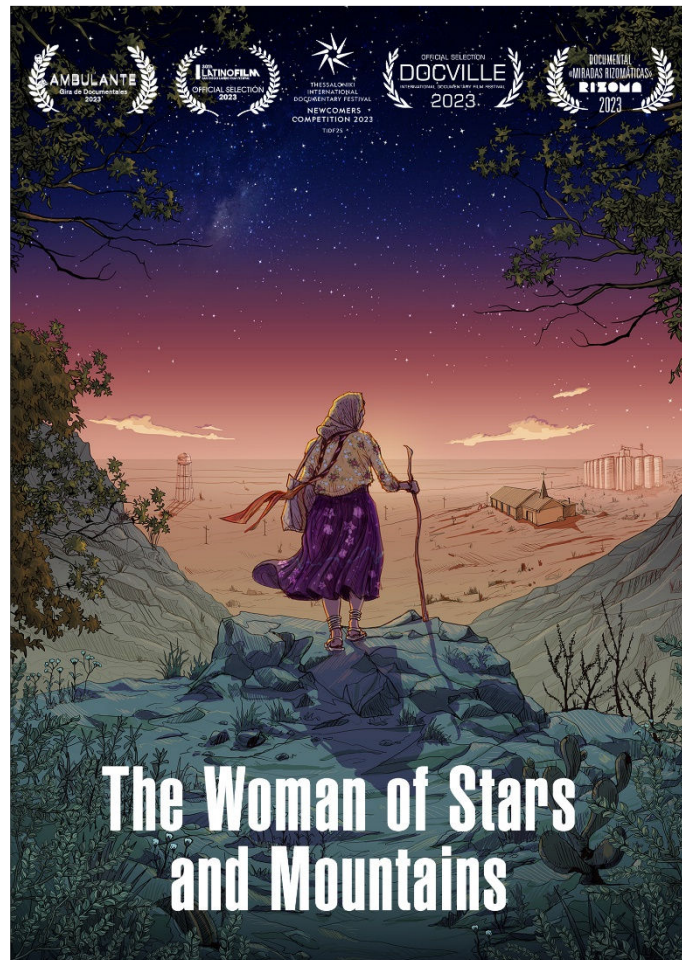




THE WOMAN OF STARS AND MOUNTAINS (LA MUJER DE ESTRELLAS Y MONTAÑAS)



STUDY GUIDE

www.epfmedia.com

The Woman of Stars and Mountains

Rita, an indigenous woman from Mexico, left her Tarahumara mountain community in northern Mexico and embarked on a journey to Kansas. There, she was involuntarily detained and confined in a psychiatric hospital for 12 years because the hospital authorities could not ascertain her identity, origins, or the language she spoke. Upon the discovery of the truth, Rita returned to her community and her niece, Juanita, who cared for her. *The Woman of Stars and Mountains* presents a moving portrait of Rita and explores the multiple forms of racism and discrimination that indigenous women face.

About the Tarahumara

The Tarahumara—also referred to as the Rarámuri—live mainly in the canyons of the Sierra Tarahumara. This is a mountain range that is part of the Sierra Madre Occidental, a large mountain system in the southwestern part of the Mexican state of Chihuahua. Chihuahua is the largest state in Mexico and is in the northwestern part of the country. It shares a border with the

U.S. states of New Mexico and Texas, and the Mexican states of Coahuila, Sinaloa, and Sonora. The canyon system where the Tarahumara live was formed by six rivers that drain the western side of the Sierra Tarahumara. One of these canyons is called Copper Canyon, and is named after the copper green color of the canyon walls. However, people often refer to the entire canyon system of the Sierra Tarahumara where the Tarahumara live as Copper Canyon.

The Tarahumara are believed to be the largest indigenous population in Chihuahua, and one of the largest traditional Native American societies in all of North America. They commonly live in small, scattered communities. Homes are typically small cabins constructed of wood, stone, and adobe. The Tarahumara are farmers, growing corn—which forms the majority of their diet— beans, potatoes, and fruit. Some raise sheep, goats, or cattle. They originally lived throughout the state of Chihuahua, however when Spanish missionaries and explorers arrived in the area in the sixteenth century, the Tarahumara retreated into the canyons. According to eHRAF World Cultures, a database of information about ethnic groups from all over the world, more than half of the Tarahumara people live in isolated homesteads in the mountains and canyons, and the rest live around urban centers outside the mountains. The database finds that there are three dialects of the Rarámuri language.¹

Running and Dance

Running is an important part of Tarahumara culture, and the Tarahumara are famous for being able to run for extremely long distances. The Milwaukee Public Museum explains, “Walking and running long distances are necessary parts of life for the Tarahumara. The terrain of their homeland is filled with many foothills, deserts, gorges, and rivers—all at a high altitude that make using pack animals very difficult. The Tarahumara find it more efficient to travel by foot (often barefoot), sometimes covering five miles just to reach the next neighboring farm.” The

¹ <https://ehrafworldcultures.yale.edu/cultures/nu33/summary>

organization says, “Excellent runners hold a higher social standing in Tarahumara communities, and this talent crosses gender boundaries. The concept of running is instilled in boys and girls from a very young age.”² Tarahumara runners have participated in numerous long-distance races all over the world.

Dancing is also important in Tarahumara culture. It often happens as part of social and religious gatherings. At these gatherings, people also commonly drink *tesgüino*, which is a fermented drink made from corn. One group of researchers notes that as with running, dancing in the Tarahumara culture often requires stamina. They state, “Unlike many kinds of Western dance traditions, Tarahumara dancing is best described as endurance dancing. The men we interviewed reported that they attend six to 12 dance fiestas per year, with each dance usually lasting 12 to 24 hours.”³

Larned State Hospital

Larned State Hospital is a psychiatric hospital located just outside the city of Larned, in Pawnee County, in the western part of Kansas. It opened in 1914. According to a government website, “Laid out on a 78-acre campus, Larned State Hospital (LSH) is the largest psychiatric facility in the state serving the western two-thirds of Kansas with nearly 1,000 employees and the capacity to treat more than 450 patients daily, 24-hours a day, seven days a week.”⁴

A government report explains that in the mid-19th century and early 20th century, across the United States there was a focus on putting people with mental health issues in large mental health institutions. As a result, many large mental health hospitals were built across the country, including Larned State Hospital. The authors state, “By 1948, at the peak of the institutional movement in mental health, 1 out of every 263 Americans lived in a state institution.”⁵

Film director Santiago Esteinou explains in an interview how Rita ended up being left in Larned for so long. He says, “At first, she manages to communicate with a nurse and tells her ‘I’m from Mexico, from Chihuahua’ and they contact the consulate, but they don’t answer and the investigation stops there. The information was lost in the bureaucracy and buried.” He says that it wasn’t until much later that someone looked deeper, stating, “Twelve years later, the representative of the human rights organization wonders why the woman is there and looks into the complete file.”⁶

Involuntary Detention

Rules related to psychiatric care in the United States vary by state. Current laws are the result of Kansas’s 1990 Mental Health Reform Act, which changed the way mental health patients were

² <https://www.mpm.edu/research-collections/anthropology/online-collections-research/tarahumara/culture-and-history>

³ <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/708810>

⁴ <https://kdads.ks.gov/state-hospitals-and-institutions/larned-state-hospital>

⁵ https://www.kslegresearch.org/KLRD-web/Publications/Resources/Documents/MH-Beds/KLRD_Memo_History-of-Mental-Health-Hospitals-in-KS.pdf

⁶ <https://elhype.com/en/the-woman-of-tars-and-mountains-interview-with-santiago-esteinou/>

treated in this state. That Act included changes in regulations about involuntary commitment. Involuntary civil detention is the practice of detaining a person against their will in a mental health facility. The Missouri Department of Mental Health defines it, stating: “For some persons, a mental disorder or a mental illness leaves them unable to make decisions about caring for their basic human needs such as food, shelter, and medical care. A few people who are experiencing a mental disorder or a mental illness may be in danger of hurting themselves or others. . . . Missouri Statutes, Chapter 632 RSMo, provide the statutory authority to allow involuntary treatment under certain conditions with appropriate due process. This process is called Civil Involuntary Detention.”⁷ The department says the initial period for involuntary detention is for up to 96 hours. After that, detention can be extended through a court hearing.

The Disability Rights Center of Kansas explains the process of involuntary detention. It says, “This law requires community mental health centers (CMHC) to conduct a ‘screening’ before someone can be admitted to a state psychiatric hospital (like Osawatomie or Larned State Hospitals) without their permission. Screening means that a person has to be talked to by a qualified mental health professional at a CMHC before they get treatment at a state psychiatric hospital. The professional must be qualified. The professional decides if the person needs treatment. The professional has to write down their permission for a person to get treatment at a state psychiatric hospital.”⁸

Involuntary detention can include the administration of medication. The Disability Rights Center of Kansas explains that if a person has been forced by a court to get mental health treatment, they cannot refuse medication. It says, “Patients can say they don’t want a medicine. If the patient still says they don’t want the medicine after staff explain why the medicine is necessary, they will still be made to take the medicine. Staff must note that the patient didn’t want the medicine in their record. The note must be quickly given to the medical director for review. The facility can keep giving the medicine if the medical director approves the medicine within 5 days of getting the note about the patient not wanting it. The 5 days does not include weekend days or holidays. A physician has to check in on the patient and take note of bad symptoms or side effects.”⁹

The Tarahumara and the Stars

According to Santiago Esteinou, the Tarahumara people believe they come from the stars, and then go back to the stars when they die. He says, “When they come into the world, men are given three souls and women four, because they need an extra one to endure the pain of childbirth. When someone dies, a feast is held to help each soul go up to the stars.” He explains, “Among other rites, a cross is placed at dawn, covered with a veil, and an arch is made which, in reality, has the function of being a portal to connect the two worlds, as my mother, who is an anthropologist, explained to me. In that portal, they place a small table with indigenous medicines, oil, seeds that they use for healing, and various animals are sacrificed.”¹⁰

⁷ <https://dmh.mo.gov/behavioral-health/help/civil>

⁸ <https://www.drckansas.org/resource-center/mental-health/the-rights-of-persons-with-mental-illness>

⁹ <https://www.drckansas.org/resource-center/mental-health/the-rights-of-persons-with-mental-illness>

¹⁰ <https://elhype.com/en/the-woman-of-tars-and-mountains-interview-with-santiago-esteinou/>

Additional Resources

Books

- Jeff Biggers, *In the Sierra Madre*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007.
- Bernard L. Fontana, *Tarahumara: Where Night is the Day of the Moon*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997.
- John G. Kennedy, *The Tarahumara*. New York: Chelsea House, 1990.

Online Sources

- Disability Rights Center of Kansas, “Learn the Law: The Rights of Kansans with Mental Illness in Treatment Facilities.”
<https://www.drckansas.org/resource-center/mental-health/the-rights-of-persons-with-mental-illness>
- Santiago Esteinou, interviewed by Eva Peydró, “‘The Woman of Stars and Mountains’, interview with Santiago Esteinou,” *el Hype*, March 13, 2023.
<https://elhype.com/en/the-woman-of-tars-and-mountains-interview-with-santiago-esteinou/>
- Kansas Legislative Research Department, “The History of the Kansas Mental Health System,” October 29, 2020.
https://www.kslegislature.org/li_2020/b2019_20/committees/ctte_spc_2020_ks_mental_health_modern_1/documents/testimony/20201030_18.pdf
- Daniel E. Lieberman et al., “Running in Tarahumara (Rarámuri) Culture: Persistence Hunting, Footracing, Dancing, Work, and the Fallacy of the Athletic Savage,” *Current Anthropology*, June 2020.
<https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/708810>

Contact

For inquiries, please contact:
EPF Media
(888) 570-5400; (323) 301-3663
info@epfmedia.com

Copyright. The Study Guide is owned by EPF Media Group, LLC. You may use the Study Guide solely for personal or educational, non-commercial use, and you may download or print any portion of the Study Guide solely for personal or educational, non-commercial use, provided you do not remove the copyright or other notice from such Content. No other use is permitted without prior written permission of EPF Media Group, LLC.