



# Indigenous Nayarit: Resistance in the Sierra Madre

Nayarit

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The Sovereign State of Nayarit, located in northwestern Mexico, is surrounded by Jalisco on the south and east, Zacatecas and Durango on the northeast and Sinaloa on the northwest. On its west is the Pacific Ocean. With an area of 27,857 square kilometers, Nayarit takes up 1.4% of the national territory of Mexico and is the 23rd largest state. In fact, Nayarit is one of Mexico's smallest states; only Aguascalientes, Colima, Morelos, Tlaxcala and the Federal District are smaller.

Nayarit's 1,181,050 inhabitants occupy Nayarit's twenty municipios but ranks 29th among the 31 states and the Distrito Federal in terms of population. The capital of Nayarit is Tepic, which had a population of 332,863 inhabitants in 2010, representing 28.2% of the state's total population.

The State of Nayarit was named after a great Cora warrior that founded the **Kingdom of Xécora** in the high country of the Sierra Madre Mountains. He was revered by his subjects and elevated to the status of a deity. Up to 1867, Nayarit was a part of the State of Jalisco, frequently referred to as the "Seventh Canton of Jalisco." In August 1867, the present-day area of Nayarit became the "Military District of Tepic." It was elevated to the status of a territory separate from Jalisco in 1884, achieving full statehood in 1917.

## Physical Description

The State of Nayarit consists mainly of a large coastal plain in the northwest and extensive mountainous regions that covers much of southern and eastern Nayarit. The state consists of four physiographic provinces, which are described below and illustrated in the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI) map on the following page:

- The **Sierra Madre Occidental Mountain Range** covers 57.25% of the state territory, taking up almost the entire eastern portion of the state. In Nayarit, this range is more often called "Sierra del Nayar."
- The **Pacific Coastal Plain (Llanura Costera del Pacífico)** covers 15.11% of the state territory, mostly in the

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• **Eje Neovolcánico (The Neovolcanic Axis)** covers 20.03% of the state to the southeast border. The entire Neovolcanic Axis — also known as the Trans-Mexican Volcanic Belt — crosses central Mexico from Nayarit and Jalisco in the west to central Veracruz in the east.



## Indigenous Groups at Contact

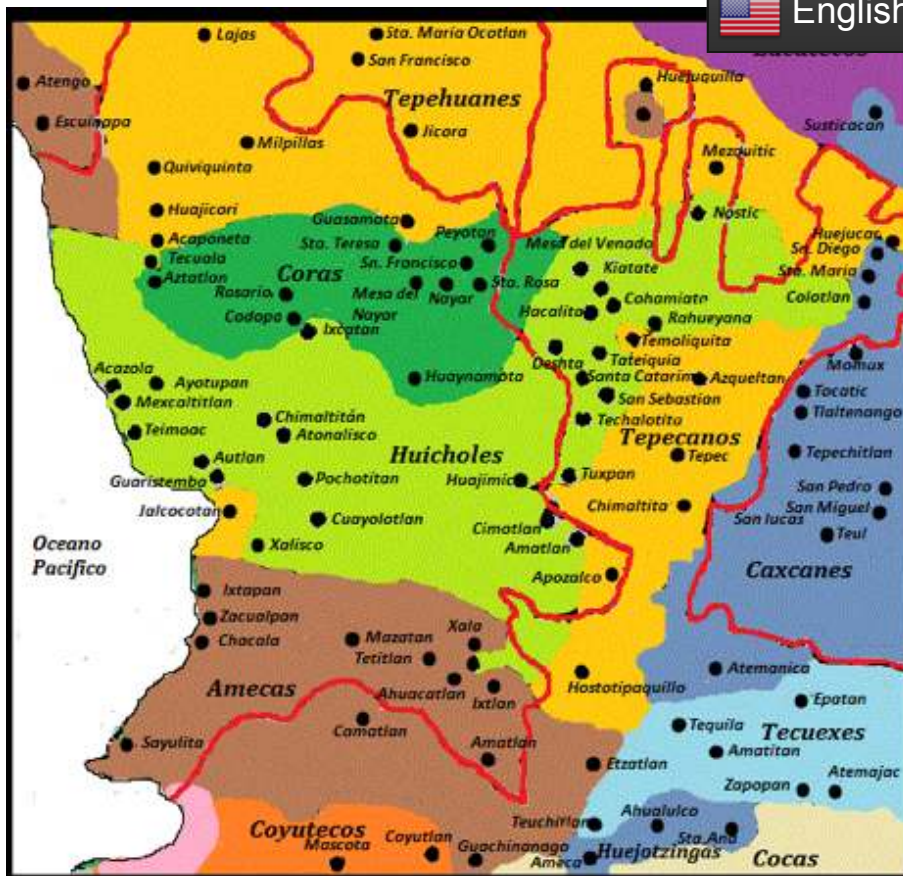
The map below illustrates the primary indigenous peoples inhabiting Nayarit just before the Spanish exploration and conquest [Andres XXV, “Mapa de Nayarit antes de la Conquista Española” (June 17, 2013) at Wikipedia, “Nayarit Precolombino.” Online:

[https://es.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archivo:Nayarit\\_precolombino.gif](https://es.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archivo:Nayarit_precolombino.gif)].

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### Tepehuanes

The Tepehuán Indians inhabited the most extensive region of all the sierra groups, occupying the eastern slopes of the Sierra Madre Occidental through much of Durango, as well as some portions of present-day southern Chihuahua, northern Nayarit, western Zacatecas and northern Jalisco. The territory of the Tepehuanes is believed to have stretched as far north as Parral in Chihuahua and as far south as Río Grande de Santiago in Jalisco. As noted in the map, they also occupied some of the mountainous regions of northern Nayarit. The Tepehuán, according to Buelna (1891), received their name from the Náhuatl term, **“tepetl” (mountain) and “huan” (at the junction of).** The earliest descriptions of the Tepehuanes have come from Francisco de Ibarra’s 1563-1656 expedition.

Linguistically, the Tepehuanes belong to the Pima Division of the Uto-Aztecan linguistic stock and are usually associated with Durango and with their massive revolt from 1616 to 1619. Anthropologists have divided the Tepehuanes into southern and northern groups who speak different dialects of the Tepehuán language. The southern Tepehuán language varies considerably from that of the Northern Tepehuán

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off from the Tepehuán because of Huichol expansion eastward or because of their place in the early colonial period.



## Totorame

The Totorame Indians — also known as the Memurte and Ponome — occupied the coast of Sinaloa from Mazatlán and the Piaxtla River southward. Their territory extended inward into Nayarit and included the primary settlements of Aztatlán, Sentispac and Chametla, the latter on the Baluarte River and the first two in northwestern Nayarit. The Totorame were closely related to the Cora Indians of Nayarit and belonged to the Aztecoidan linguistic group.

The sedentary Totorames were farmers, cultivating corn, beans, squash, chili and cotton. They consumed sea products and collected salt from natural deposits for their own consumption and for trade with other groups. The Totorames were not aggressive people, but had to defend themselves frequently against the Xiximes and Acaxees who came down from the sierras to take away their crops on a regular basis. They are now extinct as a cultural entity.

## Huichol Indians

Some historians believe that the Huichol Indians (also known as Wirraritari or Wirráríka) are descended from the nomadic Guachichiles of Zacatecas, having moved westward and settled down to an agrarian lifestyle, inhabited a small area in northwestern Jalisco, adjacent to the border with Nayarit. The Huicholes, seeking to avoid confrontation with the Spaniards, became very isolated and thus were able to survive as both a people and a culture.

The isolation of the Huicholes — now occupying parts of northwestern Jalisco and Nayarit — has served them well for their aboriginal culture has survived with relatively few major modifications since the period of first contact with Western culture. Even today, the Huichol Indians of Jalisco and Nayarit currently inhabit an isolated region of the Sierra Madre Occidental.

The survival of the Huichol has intrigued historians and archaeologists alike. The art, history, culture, language and religion of the Huichol have been the subject of at least a dozen books. Carl Lumholtz, in *“Symbolism of the Huichol Indians: A Nation of Shamans”* (Oakland, California, 1988), made observations about the religion of the Huichol. Stacy B. Schaefer and Peter T. Furst edited *“People of the Peyote:*

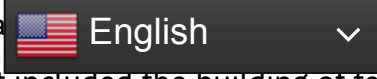
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The Cora call themselves Nayarit or Nayariti, a tribe belonging to the Ta  to- Aztec linguistic family. The Cora developed agricultural methods that included the building of terraces to control erosion. According to Salvador Gutiérrez Contreras, in *“Los Coras y el Rey Nayarit,”* the Cora’s success with agriculture caused some of them to move into surrounding areas that are now in the neighboring states of Colima and Sinaloa.

Linguistic studies by Grimes (1964) have indicated that there are significant linguistic similarities among the Pima, Tepehuán, Tarahumara, Yaqui, Cora, Huichol and Náhuatl speaking peoples living in the Nayarit Sierra Madre and the coastal regions of Sinaloa and Sonora. In fact, Grimes’ studies noted that the similarities between the neighboring Huichol and Cora peoples were most pronounced, indicating that they are a linguistic subfamily sharing a common ancestry.

### The Aztlán Theory

Aztlán (Azatlán) is the legendary place from which the Náhuatl peoples came from. In fact, the word “Azteca” is the Náhuatl word for “people from Aztlán.” Náhuatl legends relate that seven tribes lived in Chicomoztoc, or “the place of the seven caves.” Each cave represented a different Nahua group: the Xochimilca, Tlahuica, Acolhua, Tlaxcalan, Tepaneca, Chalca, and Mexica. Because of a common linguistic origin, those groups also are called “Nahuatlaca” (Nahua people).

Sometime around 1168 A.D., the Aztecs left Aztlán, eventually settling in a new place called Tenochtitlán (now Mexico City). Scholars have speculated on the location of the legendary Aztlán. In 1887, the Mexican anthropologist Alfredo Chavero claimed that Aztlán was located on the Pacific coast in the state of Nayarit. In the early 1980s, Mexican President José López Portillo suggested that Mexcaltitán, located in the municipio of Santiago Ixcuintla in west central coastal Nayarit, was the true location of Aztlán. Many modern scholars have disputed these theories. Nevertheless, the state of Nayarit incorporated the symbol of Aztlán in its coat of arms with the legend *“Nayarit, cradle of Mexicans.”*

### First Contact with the Spaniards (1524)

In 1524 Captain Francisco Cortés de San Buenaventura, a nephew of the Conquistador Hernán Cortés, arrived at the site of present-day Tepic, Nayarit. He was confronted by at least two thousand Tactoani Indian warriors who turned out in force to give him a peaceful reception. He was presented with a gifts consisting of a cup of gold nuggets and with silver pieces by the Tactoani Indians.

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Feuding with Hernan Cortez, Nuño de Guzmán left Mexico City in December 1529 on a journey of destruction, marching through Michoacán and Jalisco, and striking into what is now Nayarit after Easter 1530. During the next year, Guzmán arrived in the area of Tepic. On July 25, 1532, Nuño de Guzmán established Santiago de Compostela, the first capital of the province of Nueva Galicia. [On May 10, 1560, the capital was moved to Guadalajara.]



Compostela was founded on the site of Tepic, an indigenous town which received its name from the Náhuatl words, “tetl” (stone) and “pic” (hard). Later, Compostela was moved south, and Tepic returned to its original name and eventually became the capital of the modern state of Nayarit.

According to Gutiérrez Contreras, Nuño de Guzmán and his henchmen committed many atrocities against the indigenous peoples of this area. The atrocities included the burning at the stake of the Cora governor by Guzmán’s lieutenant, Gonzalo López, and the murder of many Cora children. It is believed that these atrocities and others led to the Mixtón Rebellion that started in December 1540. The rebellion engulfed many areas of Jalisco, southwestern Zacatecas and southern Nayarit and lasted until February 1542 with Spanish victory.

### **The Conquest of Nayarit (1592-1723)**

The relentless march of Guzmán caused many tribes to relocate, many of them joining and becoming assimilated into the Cora and Huichol peoples in the Sierra. The difficulty of the Sierra Madre terrain prevented the Spaniards from making any serious attempts at conquest of Nayarit until 1592, when Captain Miguel Caldera entered the Sierra and started communications with the Cora. But in the century to follow, the Spaniards were plagued with frequent rebellions in many northern locations of their colonial empire. From 1616 to 1618, the Coras joined the Tarahumaras and Tepehuanes in a rebellion against the Spaniards that included parts of Nayarit, Durango and Chihuahua.

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