

An Appreciation of Huichol Culture

by Juan Negrín

The men who came to Mexico in search of gold and souls ripe for conversion, and stayed to beget the people of mixed race who inhabit the country today, were unable to integrate those indigenous people who chose to retreat into the fastnesses of their steep-flanked sierras.

The more than 10,000 Huichol Indians who today live on communal land in the south of the Sierra Madre Occidental, in the Mexican states of Jalisco and Nayarit, are survivors of one of those marginal groups. The area they occupy is impenetrable, except on foot, its precipitous landscape ranging from canyons 1,600 feet deep to peaks more than 8,200 feet high.

The Huichol are divided into three major tribes, the-

Wautiari, the *Tuapuritari* and the *Tateikitari*, each with its own linguistic and cultural variations. Their language, *Wixárika* (pronounced phonetically wish-ár-ika; or vir-rár-ika), belongs to the Uto-Nahuatl family, a linguistic bridge between North American Indians such as the Utes, and Mesoamerican Indians like the Mexicas ('Aztecs'). They apparently had settled in the Sierra long before the latter formed an empire in the Valley of Mexico. As a people, they call themselves *wixárika* (sing.) and *wixaritari* (pl.). During the Spanish conquest and colonization of Mexico, the remoteness of the Huichol and the vigor of their culture were such that they avoided being absorbed by the developments that affected the rest of the country. Today, as in

1. The Presence of Our Grandfather (Fire) By Yauxali (Suit of the Sun), a.k.a. Pablo Taizán de la Cruz. Date: 1981. Size: 40cm. x 40cm.

This is a shaman's depiction of Tatewarí, as the Huichol call the seminal and inspiring force of Our Grandfather Fire (at lower center). His antlered head—with a crown of flames and black cavernous orifices that symbolize his teeth/and nostrils—juts out of the top of a *nierika* (round symbol of metaphysical insight) below. The rattlesnakes that reach down to his ears are his messengers. On either side at the bottom, he is flanked by his previous incarnations.

Above is another *nierika* that transmits his words to Tatéi Nuariwame, Our Mother Rain Messenger (on the upper right),



and to Tatéi Hautsi Kúpuri, Our Mother Dew Soul (on the upper left). They listen, so that they can determine where to disperse the waters over Tatéi Yurianaka, Our Mother Fertile Earth.

Our Grandfather is the primordial shaman, or *mara'akame*, who opens the path from the western underworld of Watetüapa to Leunaxu, Burnt Peak in the eastern desert of Wirikuta, where Our Father Sun first rose by self-sacrifice in his flames. His sanctuary in the mountains is where he broke loose from the womb of Tacutsi Nakawé, Our Great-grandmother Growth, acquiring his currently known incarnation. His sanctuary called Tatewaritá is in Ixrüapa, the center. The star-like symbols are sparks and flowers representing life. The two serpents symbolize rainwater, with clouds attached to their tails above.

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the past, the Huichol people give renewed vigor to their collective memory by the intense celebration of complicated rites, through which they aspire to develop a strong and healthy *iyari*, or “spiritual heart” (heart/memory), in order to nurture their *küipuri*, or “soul,” and transcend the physical plane.

They live in conditions of great austerity and impose on themselves additional privations in the form of vows and sacrifices. In the words of the artist José Benítez: “This is how the *xutúrite* suffer [*xutúrite* are “paper flowers”; that is the name of the Huichol in the “language of Our Ancestors”; it is also the name given to budding flowers and for children in ceremonies]: they go without eating or sleeping, without possessions and without knowing where they are going. They are poor and innocent, but they are rich in their *küipuri* and *tukari* [spiritual life].”

There is nothing negative in the indifference of the Huichol to material deprivation. The *iyari* that grows out of their self-discipline imbues them with the dignity and integrity that are such striking characteristics of the people of the Sierra. The first study of the development potential of the Huichol region, carried out by the Mexican government in the 1960s,¹ was in agreement with the findings of Norwegian anthropologist Carl Lumholtz, who was there seventy years earlier, in concluding that the Huichol had scarcely altered their outlook on life over the centuries, if at all, and that they had upheld and preserved the traditions of their world, which they considered incomparably superior to the “civilized” world, even when the latter was presented to them as highly desirable.

In contrast to the “people of reason,” as some Huichol call the outsiders, the Huichol esteem life for its transcendental and immanent aspects. For example they believe that “our spiritual heart” (*waiyari*) is a precipitate of their collective memories from a creation initiated outside of time, yet nurtured in the present and perpetuated for eternity. Our Ancestors, such as Tatewarí (Our Grandfather Fire), Tatéi Haramara (Our Mother Sea),² the animals (the caterpillar, the sea-snail, the opossum, the turkey, the deer, the eagle, etc.) and the plants (peyote, amaranth, maize, squash, beans, cotton, etc.) sacrifice their physical hearts to give life to the Huichol. The Huichol try to follow the example set by the creators and to make themselves worthy of spiritual life through material sacrifices or spiritual devotions.

The least significant activities of the Indians are still linked to the creation of the world, which echoes in the microcosm of each individual life and in the essence of all

that surrounds us in the plant and mineral world. The immediate present is blended with the eternal, eliminating the need for “distraction” since, as the Romanian historian of religions Mircea Eliade has written: “In traditional societies (...) distractions hardly exist; every responsible occupation is in itself an ‘escape from Time’.”³ These tenets of the Huichol are at the very root of pre-Hispanic thought in Latin America and of universal religious feeling.

The culture of the Huichol is so different from our own that it is difficult to extend our comprehension beyond its superficial manifestations, and even these have been seen only from the outside, from the perspective of our dominant and overwhelming culture. Most people have had little interest in learning about the indigenous perspective on life, even though Mexico has tolerated the idiosyncrasies of its Indians with a respect that has not existed in other nations. Material contact with the Huichol has accelerated since 1965, yet has not touched their “true being,” their *iyari*, the source of their identity and the home of their personal genius. Coming from a sophisticated culture in which things and people are defined by their solid appearance, we fail to perceive that our indigenous subjects judge themselves and their circumstances by different axioms.

But some of the Huichol artists and shamans, whose works illustrate this article, were concerned that modern

2. The Metamorphosis of Our Petrified Ancestor (Right top) By Guadalupe González Ríos, a.k.a. Ketsetemahé Teukarieya (Godson of the Mounted Iguanas). Date: Winter 1974-75. Size: 4' X 4' (1.22m x 1.22 m).

“In the beginning, Our Ancestors walked through the waters that covered the world, wandering like travelers from an unknown place. As the land dried their path froze, and they were anchored along it in the shape of rocks and peaks. Every people have been given their destiny: some present vows and offerings to the ‘Virgin,’ but the Huichol take their votive offerings to the rocks that are their Ancestors.”

One of the first shamans is represented walking along the original path (at lower center, along the bottom margin from the left) through the flooded world (white square). He was transformed into a *Kakauyari*, a sacred mountain peak (central mass).

A shaman from our own times (at upper left) seeks special grace and powers by taking offerings to the peak and practicing vigils there. Since the shaman believes in the presence of Our Ancestor and performs the rituals correctly, the peak assumes the form of Tamatsi Maxayuawi, Our Elder Brother Blue Deer (deer at right of center) and of a rattlesnake (at left of center). When the shaman sees these animal manifestations of the peak’s spirit, he presents his offerings: a prayer-bowl for corn (at bottom left), an *itari*, a resting mat for the Ancestor, and a deer-tail (red and white figures respectively, at bottom right). The deer in turn offers him his breath and his words (connected to the back of the deer), a *tsikuri*, ‘god’s-eye’ (be-



hind it), a flower-shaped mirror (beneath it), and a small gourd-bowl (below the god's-eye). A double-headed snake (below the deer), a tarantula (to the right of the rattlesnake) and various insects (at upper right margin) are associated with the Kakauyari as allies and guardians.

In the hours after midnight, *Kieri*, or 'the Tree of the Wind' (as the Huichol call a solanaceous plant that is respected and feared for its toxicity, upper right of center) appears to the shaman; he has placed a votive arrow and a candle beside it (at left of *Kieri*). The *Kieri* becomes a *nierika*, a mirror of its own essence (white circle with pink center); it flowers and scatters its *tükiyari*, pollen, over the shaman, who places his plumed-arrows on his hat so as to absorb the *Kieri*'s messages. He carries his own votive arrow, to which a *nierika* offering is attached (round symbol for spiritual insight), and he makes vows to the plant, thanking it for help.

At dawn a bee, attracted by the aroma of the blooming *Kieri*, falls unconscious from the intoxicating power of the pollen; therefore the shaman places it (top left of center) as an offering to the plant. Other offerings of blood, chocolate and corn gruel are shown throughout the picture, as well as lines and dots representing winds and pollen.

3. The Four Aspects of the Spirit

By José Benítez Sánchez a.k.a. Yucauye Cucame.
(Silent Walker) Year: 1974. Size: 23.50 cm. x 24.25 cm.

"The thoughts we have in our body as we walk on our way, practicing our devotion, must find rest when we sleep. While our bones and our flesh sleep, our spiritual being is released to travel outside the body."

The four circular symbols represent the four aspects of our spiritual self. *Takiüpuri*, our soul (at upper center), has the substance of a drop of dew, and its seat is above the forehead. *Tatukari*, our life (at right), is our vital energy and our spiritual strength. *Tanierika*, our spiritual insight (at lower center), is like a mirror that reflects Our Ancestors and vision that penetrates matter. It is active in our dreams and visions.

Taiyari, our "heart" (at left), besides being a physical organ, also has an immaterial aspect equated with thoughts and memory (essentially, awareness of "the custom," or the traditional way). Each of these aspects is supported above the body and united by four arrows, which are stuck in the four corners of the earth. Our soul, life, insight and heart are nurtured and regenerated by the arrows of Our Ancestors.

The arrow below right bears the green of Our Mother Sea, Tatéi Haramara, in the west. The arrow (above right) belongs to Wírikuta, the place where the designs of Our Ancestors are etched on the faces of the peyote hunters, in the east.

The arrow (above left) is the Hatuxame River that divides the Huichol territory, issuing from the northern springs of Fat Peak. The arrow below left is of Xapawiyemetá (Where there is a wild fig tree), in a lake of the south, where Watákame, the survivor of the Great Flood and the father of humankind, landed in his canoe. When we die (or go into a coma), these invisible aspects of our being also leave our body, and our iyari is released with our breath (*iyaya*).

Note: The green arrows join at their shafts to form the symbolic barrier of water and matter, and are crossed by the red arrows representing the path of Our Grandfather Fire/Our Father Sun. The circular symbol at right, representing *Tatukari*, is connected to dawn. *Takiüpuri*, the symbol at top, is connected to the daytime, while the symbol below, *Tanierika*, is connected to the night and the underworld (transcendental vision). *Taiyari*, the circular symbol at left, is connected to dusk and to the past. At the center of the arrow shafts is the multidimensional level through which the four points connect.



western culture could erase the heritage that they have cultivated over so many centuries. The time has come for their culture, until now hermetically protected by its connoisseurs and carefully concealed from the consumption of outsiders, to come out in its own defense. By the late 1970s, the first dirt roads opened the plateaus to timber exploitation disputes. At the dawn of this century, the Huichol had set up more barriers against tourism and clandestine exploitation in the conservative communities within the mountains. Today they are as opposed as ever to sharing their way of life with us, because they realize outsiders cannot be integrated into their practices, which are not geared to modern productivity.

One way for the outside observer to respect Huichol culture is through the beauty and the depth of its symbolic expression. Our purpose here is to present some aspects of Huichol art and the intricate meaning with which it is permeated. This is just a small sample of the work of the five most important artists who began sharing their visions with me in 1971, using a medium called “yarn-painting”.⁴ These collages of yarn on boards are filled with meanings that complement the text, allowing us to understand their different ways of seeing and feeling on both sensory and intellectual levels. It is important to note that each great artist has a particular style that, although uniquely Huichol, is also as original and personal as the experiences we shared together. We hope that the Huichol’s spiritual insights and artistic accomplishments will resonate with outsiders, opening the way to greater mutual understanding and a greater respect for their culture.

Time and the Sacred Dimension

Huichol art takes a number of forms. Its foundations are sacred, mystical, transpersonal and collective. Because this religious art is esoteric, even for most of the Huichol, who do not have the preparation and the required initiation to appreciate it, it is not better known among outsiders now than when Carl Lumholtz carried out the first field research among the Huichol ca. 1895.⁵ It is “dedicated to worship” and “capable of provoking, not only of describing, spiritual experiences.”⁶ Only some of the shamans or “chanters,” known as *mara'acate* (sing.: *mara'acame*), understand the exact forms and precise significance of this art, which may be considered the manifestation of a collective effort that they orchestrate and summon up on ritual occasions. At that time, hundreds of Huichol may walk to a ceremonial center, like the *tukipa* or the *teyupani*, often located more than a day’s hard traveling from their scat-

tered homesteads, to take part in a supernatural drama that recreates the propitious atmosphere needed to regenerate the life of the world. [Note: the *tukipa* is a ceremonial center with a *tuki*, a large relatively circular building facing a central patio, which is surrounded by smaller shrines dedicated to different Ancestors. Some of the *xirikite* (shrines) face the *tuki* that is the only large structure for gatherings of the clan members and it is dedicated primarily to Our Grandfather, although it contains symbols to other Ancestors as well. The *teyupani* is a tribal headquarter centered around a church that was built by the Franciscan monks when they tried to form five Huichol towns and failed to establish permanent missions in the Huichol territory.]

The *mara'acate* do not live in a social vacuum; their extended family and the service that they give to the community are their reasons for being. The faith that is evident in the collective celebrations gives life to the ideographic symbolism of the art. Thus this religious art is a collective effort, directed and sustained by the shamans. Mimicking the ways of Our Ancestors, who were also once flesh and blood, the “actors” must convince these deities of their sincerity. They undertake yearly pilgrimage cycles to the distant Pacific coast in the West, and to other sacred spots in their cosmography.

They must renew the harmony between the water and the fire, bringing Tatéi Haramara (Our Mother of the Sea) and Tateteima, Taheimá and Tatéi Yurianaka (Our Mothers of Rain, of the Sky and of the Fertile Earth) into agreement with Tatewarí (Our Grandfather Fire), Taweviécame (Our Father Creator Sun), and Tamatsi Eakateiwari and Tamatsi Kauyumari (Our Elder Brother Wind Neighbor and Our Elder Brother Deer Spirit), all under the vigilant eyes of Tacutsi Nakawé (Our Great-grandmother of Growth and Destruction) and Tatutsí Xuweri Timaiwe'eme (Our Omniscient Self-Procreating Great-grandfather). For many days and nights the participants surrender to a ritual imitation of the Ancestors through dancing, fasting, and night-long vigils kept to the hypnotic beat of their music.

Our Ancestors are invoked by the chanting of the *mara'acate*, libations, incense, and animal sacrifices. The striving of their human descendants placates them and boosts their positive presence in situ, so they lend new strength to the heart (*iyari*) and refresh the soul (*küipuri*) with dew. Thus the immanent spirit of Our Ancestors and the latent spirit of the Huichol people are connected in a mutually sustaining communication between the macrocosm and the microcosm, in which the eternal brings fertility to the present and vice versa. In order to continue transmitting *tayeiyari*,

4. Our Elder Brother Wind Neighbor and Our Mother Young Eagle Girl Change the Seasons By José Benítez Sánchez a.k.a. Yucauye Cucame (Silent Walker).

Date: Feb. 2, 1984. Size: 70 cm. x 90 cm.

“Here we see Eakateiwari, Our Elder Brother Wind Neighbor [the upper central figure] when he appeared in Watekwari (The Gates of This World), where the Past Earth is divided (it is submerged forever in the Great Flood, becoming part of the Underworld and the Past). He relates to Tatéi Werika Wimari, Our Mother Young Eagle Girl (a deity of the skies [winged figure, at lower right, with antlers on her head and a face on each end of her tail]), whom he refers to as *Irumari* (a transformation of Our Great Grandmother Growth). They agree with each other on how to bring the change of the rain



cycles in this world. Eakateiwari asks *Irumari* to be the guide of *Tamatsi Kauyumari*, Our Elder Brother Fawn of the Sun [the face on the right side of her tail] and of *Tatewari*, Our Grandfather Fire [the face on the left side of her tail]. Thus *Irumari* brings the children of the rain [appearing as butterflies at upper right], but Eakateiwari knows how he draws them and she changes the sacred votive offerings.”

Eakateiwari is the axial figure in this image, with his body curled like a snail and snakes extending from his head. The red canal that curves through the bottom center is a connection to *Tetiüapa*, the Underworld, from which he draws Our Mothers of Rain, in the form of children: The first to surface is *Tatéi Nuariwame*, Our Mother Messenger of Rains, with antlers, and behind her, barely rising, is her mother, *Tatéi Utüanaka*, Ancestor of the Rivers.

They will change the drought in the *iyari*, the heart of *Tatéi Yurianaka*, Our Mother Fertile Earth, in the rainy season. *Yurianaka* is depicted as an *aikutsi*, a votive bowl, in Eakateiwari’s guts. The candles are her ribs, as a sign that when her chest opens the rains pour out of her heart. She transforms into a *nierika* (the central round symbol of her insight into the places where vows have been offered to her and where the rains shall properly fall), when the serpent of the dry season (in the yellow canal

leading from *Irumari* to Eakateiwari’s neck) is born to stir the first rains in the hills, and when she communicates with *Irumari*.

The whole figure of *Irumari* emanates from the shaft of an arrow in *tsutiüá*, the west, and she settles with *Yurianaka* that it should be dry during part of the year, so that it can rain during the other season. *Irumari*’s multifaceted nature is depicted in her tail, which contains the face of *Tatewari*, Our Grandfather Fire (below left with two antlers) and the face of Our Elder Brother Fawn of the Sun (above right). As a manifestation of Our Mother Young Eagle Girl, she oversees the rising and the setting of Our Father Sun (symbolized by hearts dangling in opposite directions from the shaft of the arrow).

There are cloud serpents swaying from Eakateiwari’s head, and soft sprinkling rains emerge from his right side. On the left, with

strong rain, he forms a stellar-shaped whirlpool of waves (light form linked to an arm extending from his face). *Xikuákame*, the Ancestor of Lightning (anthropomorphic figure lying over the stellar shape) fells the trees (his mouth spouts a yellow lightning bolt, with flames affecting burning timber) and he is followed by *Mimiérika Tewiyari*, Thunder-in-Person (personified as the being who leaves one of his hands, returning towards Eakateiwari’s head). *Tatéi Witari*, Our Mother of the Gathered Rain (bird figure, with a profile outlined by her tail, at left side) rejoices when the thunderstorms hit the mountains and the hills are filled with water-holes (the symbol of her heart pours out of her beak over the hills). A serpent emanating from one of her hands represents intense rising rains.

Our Great-Grandfather Deer-Tail, *Tatutsí Maxakuaxí* (standing figure with two sets of antlers, at lower center), watches from *Tetiüapa*, the Underworld, to ensure that the rains come to an end in *Heriepa*, this World. When the rainy season is over, *Tatéi Witari*, Our Mother of the Gathered Rain (on the right side of the painting) is depicted as a woman dancing with her skirt upside down. She hides between the hills and waits to dance with joy when the first *nuariwamete*, messengers of the rains, return like butterflies that announce the first rains. We can see the first clouds (two adjacent faces in upper right border) forming in the distance after the dry season and Eakateiwari (upside-down figure beneath them) visits them.

The yellow flower-blossom shapes throughout the painting symbolize renewed life; the dots generally symbolize words and raindrops.

5. Our Great-Grandmother Communicates With Our Principal Ancestors by Tutukila (from *tutú*, peyote flower, and *kixa*, beating corn stalks with sticks before the harvest to release pollen dust), a.k.a. Tiburcio Carrillo Sandoval.

Date: Dec. 1973. Size : 90cm. x 1.22m.

Our Great-grandmother manifested her power as the overwhelming Growth who held sway, through the Great Flood, as Tacutsi Nakawé. Now she appears in a second guise, as Tacutsi Kiekari Maakame, Our Great-grandmother Who Lays the Foundations of the Village of Our Ancestors, and she sits on her sacred seat (bottom center) in Teacata, surrounded by the houses built by the principal Ancestors. Their houses became sacred *xirikite*, or shrines, through which they could always be reached, although they may be on distant journeys or living elsewhere, as Tamatsi Kauyumari, Our Elder Brother Fawn of the Sun, and Tatéi Yurianaka, Our Mother Fertile Earth, are now.

Tacutsi, with her double-horned, beaked power staff stuck in the ground and her *muvierite*, or plumed-arrows, in hand, offers chants to convoke them to her side again. Tatewarí *xirikieya*, Our Grandfather (Fire)'s shrine is behind her. Like the other *xirikite*, it is surmounted by a *nierika*, in its roof, through which the Ancestors in question can be invoked and seen. Above are the *xirikite* of Tatéi Yurianaka, (Our Mother Fertile Earth), and of Tayau/Taweviékame, or *tau*, (Our Father/Our Creator), or the sun. In Tacutsi's *xiriki*, her presence cannot be seen because she is active at the center. Below is the *xiriki* of Tamatsi Kauyumari.

Our Great-grandmother was the most powerful of Our Ancestors and she directed their activities. She started chanting sacred songs celebrating Our Mothers, so the children of her people, the *Tatutuma*, "who are like us," would be able to go to Wirikuta, the sacred eastern land (Where Our Ancestors Etch their sacred Designs on the Faces of the pilgrims). Before her is *aikutsi*, the vo-

tive bowl Tamatsi Kauyumari brought back from Wirikuta, with its peyote and corn flower designs, and a large peyote pierced by his arrow.

Then she had a dream that Our Ancestors' feats were still incomplete, because they needed a sacred bowl and plumed-arrows, which were in the possession of a cannibalistic race of people, the *Hewiixi*. This bowl, which could call for rain, and the arrows were necessary to found the first major *tuki*, or temple. Tacutsi wanted the *Tatutuma* to be able to seek the knowledge of Our Ancestors in *Wirikuta*. For this, they had to build the *tuki* and surround it with shrines. Then, when the *Tatutuma* returned from pilgrimages, they could come to the *tuki* and to Teacata, where she chants. That is why she made plans to capture these instruments from the *Hewiixi*.

Tacutsi first started calling back Tamatsi Kauyumari. With her telepathic powers, she saw him in *Wirikuta* in the guise of a peyote cactus (upper right), with two deer emerging from the peyote's painted face, above which is a peyote flower. The flowers on the face and the painted symbols attached to the cactus are Tamatsi's words to Tacutsi. They indicated to her that he was already returning to Teacata from his second journey, in order to assist Tacutsi in her plan.

Tacutsi then contacted Tatéi Yurianaka, who appeared to her in a cloud over the sea as a siren-like being with sea serpents in front of her (upper left). Tatéi Yurianaka expressed her agreement with Tacutsi and sent Haikuyuave, the dual blue pair of rain serpents, to Teacata. In this manner, she would help Tacutsi with her 'words' expressed by the two-headed winged serpent (at top center) and with her *nierika*, her sacred insight (symbolized as a flower between the heads of the merged snakes).

Tatewarí is represented (at lower left) close to Tacutsi, seconding her chants. In his aspect as *tai*, or fire, he is present everywhere. His words emanate from his flames. As Tacutsi's ally he communicates with her, Tatéi Yurianaka, and Tamatsi Kauyumari.

By now Tamatsi Kauyumari has arrived in his human form in Teacata (bottom right). He performs peyote dances at Tatéi Neixa,

the Dance to Our Mother Corn, with his plumed arrow from *Wirikuta* in hand. He has brought a second votive bowl with five dots on it, signifying that if the *Tatutuma* go to *Wirikuta* to gain knowledge from him, they must go at least five times. The bowl is set on a woven mat called an *itari*, or a resting-mat for Our Ancestors. A flower design on Tamatsi's cheek is his *nierika*.

Tacutsi is now ready to befriend the *Hewiixi*, whose powerful instruments she desires, by chanting at their religious celebrations.

1. *Hewiixi*, were people who populated the earth at the edge of the sea. They are associated with unethical practices, unlike the *Tatutuma*.



“our custom,” the complex tradition of the tribal clans and its extended family members is followed, in accordance with a path first followed by Our Ancestors, when they brought ecological order to the world out of the chaos of flood and darkness.

Boys and girls, the young and the elders, all take an active part in this union of the human with the divine. Individuals combine their efforts and enthusiasm to support the extraordinary skills of the *maraacame*, who chants for the people as a whole, as an intercessor before Our Ancestors. The celebrations are feasts of the people, who approach their deities through dance, penance, and spontaneous theater. In this way, the families from widely dispersed ranches enter into tribal communion. Their blood, joined by centuries of spiritual union, flows from body to body as the river flows to the ocean, all circulated by a single heart.

The mythical past is reestablished to restore the heritage of Our Ancestors, so that history may continue to be made. The present is filled with the prosperity of a feast as a way of assuring future prosperity. The participants celebrate this abundance to come in a feast that belies the meager food reserves of the community. As if by a miracle, hundreds of eggs and thousands of tortillas are gathered; enormous jars are filled with beans; barrels of *nawá* (a fresh corn beer called *tejuino* in Spanish) and *tuchi* (a mescal brew called *sotol* in Spanish) appear. The poorest give prickly-pear fruit and plums, while others bring the sacrificial bull, the beer, and the tobacco. But all seem to share even with those they hardly know.

The creation of a magical time and space in the rites of the *tukipa* reflects and exemplifies the pattern lived out on the family homesteads. The feast is the dramatic culmination of a cycle of daily tasks centered on the cultivation of “Our Mother Corn” (Tatéi Niwetsika). She has her silo or her sacred house (*xiriki*) at each ranch, where she is dressed before the sowing of seeds.⁷ Then the essence of Our Great-grandmother (Tacutsi Nakawé), who makes everything grow and who procreated all Our Ancestors, is incorporated in her. The fire fertilizes the hillsides, and the seeds are implanted in the womb of the earth with the help of the planting stick. By July the weeds are removed and Tatéi Niwetsika is given rooster blood or fish blood to eat.⁸ The climactic ceremony is the “Dance of Our Mother” (*Tatéi Neixa*), in which she is asked by the people to pardon them for eating her and her daughters. She rests after the harvest,⁹ surrounded by flowers.

Here then is the ecological sense of the Huichol: “Ev-

erything sacrifices itself for us: Tatéi Niwetsika (Our Mother Corn) gives us her daughters, Tamatsi Kaenyumari (Our Elder Brother Fawn of the Sun) his offspring, Taweviécame (Our Father Creator Sun) his arrows, the rays of warmth and light, and Tatéi Haramara (Our Mother Sea) her plumed serpent daughters, the rain-filled clouds.” We must not stop recognizing their benevolence and treating with reverent appreciation these Elder Brothers, Sisters, Fathers, Mothers, Grandfathers, Grandmothers, Great-grandfathers, and Great-grandmothers. This is the basis of *tanuiwari*, the customs that Huichol families observe in self-abnegation from day to day. The members of the family live together in imitation of the divine order, and apportion their functions and responsibilities accordingly. Thus, four year old children, for example, take care of their younger siblings and share responsibility for them with their parents. In their turn, grandparents hand down the wisdom they have accumulated over the years.

Human existence is brought into the mythical-religious context even before conception: the child is requested from Our Mothers, Tateteima, whose power to engender life derives from the sea¹⁰ and from various springs and water holes scattered throughout the sacred lands of the Huichol (west and south, north and east; both inside and outside of their territory). Our Mothers of Water receive votive offerings, bowls and arrows decorated with ideographic symbols that disclose the petition for a boy or a girl. The life of the child that is born will thereafter be tied to these sacred waters, whose “mother” must be acknowledged by periodic pilgrimages to her sanctuary. Our Ancestors will name the child through the dreams of the grandparents, who, with their *iyari* (long experience/memory of the sacred world), are closer to the deities.

Huichol children are brought up with a religious sense of life, which gradually reveals the meaning of the mysteries surrounding them. They listen while the elders recount a miscellany of myths and personal experiences. They learn that everything in their environment links them to the transcendental reality concealed in every natural phenomenon. Plants, people, and animals change into one other, change their names, and lose their material form; as ice melts to water to nourish the sea (through the serpents of Our Mother Fertile Earth), and can transform itself from foam into dew, rising as winged rain-snakes, and traveling as clouds.

“Magical” cures frequently occur, and children witness all manner of “paranormal” events. In addition, they are taught how to represent sacred ideographs through embroidery and back-strap weaving. They learn carving and

use wax-coated boards (*itárite* and *nierikate*) or small split calabash gourds (*xucúrite*), as bases for images made out of glass beads and yarn, to make votive offerings.

The myths and symbols of the Huichol manifest aspects of the true life behind ephemeral appearances. The Huichol do not concede mythic value to any story whose personages, characters, and concepts they have not felt in life. They would agree with Eliade that, “When no longer assumed to be a revelation of the ‘mysteries’ the myth becomes ‘decadent,’ obscured; it turns into a tale or a legend.”¹¹ Huichol sacred stories range from jokes and tall tales, invented to trick inquisitive observers, to sacred chants that few people know in full, and most do not know even to what their lyrics refer.

Hermeticism and the Poetic Vision

The level of expression of Huichol artists depends on their grasp of myth and their personal vision, which requires them to enter into the spirit of the thing they perceive rather than see it as a separate object. A highly skilled *mara'acame* is said to be capable of perceiving the earth on which he stands as if it were a person, and of conversing with it as Tatéi Yurianaka (Our Mother Fertile Earth). The aim is to be able to see the interior of other beings from within our own being, to commune from heart to heart.

In order to acquire the spiritual heart, or *iyari*, that makes such vision possible, the Huichol have to learn to control their bodies by curbing their appetites and purging themselves of thoughts that sully their consciousness and distort their visionary powers. For the devout to see with the spirit, as Our Ancestors see, their human condition has to be shielded by *nierika*, which allows the devout to penetrate the spiritual plane, protected from the distractions and the traps of this world. In the words of José Benítez: “In order to reach *nierika*, we sacrifice ourselves, fasting, without sleeping with the wife, or thinking ill thoughts; only thinking of reaching *nierika* in order to know something about the *iyari* (heart), and the *kiipuri* (soul) of Tatéi Yurianaka (Our Mother Fertile Earth).”

There are several ways of attaining the penetrating vision of *nierika*, some according to the particularities of family tradition, some according to the traditional rites of one of the approximately twenty *tukipa* (ceremonial clan centers). The rituals of the *tukipa* are centered on the revelatory capacity of peyote, which is the communal sacrament most highly preferred. Some families, however, seek other forms of *nierika* through a much more potent entheogen, the “tree of Wind,” or *kieri*.¹²

In any case, *nierika* is attained through sacrifice in the spiritual search, following the laws and disciplines established by Our Ancestors, who were able to go beyond the human condition and transmit their creative energy to those who would follow them. Each pilgrim embodies, with varying success, one of the important Ancestors adored in the family’s *xiriki* (shrine), kept at its ranch, or at the clan’s *tukipa*. “The Ancestors have put sacrifice in the world and it is weighty.”¹³ How can we empathize with the mystery of creation, without this personal sacrifice? “Each of the Ancestors gave their veins to The Earth; for this reason we have veins in Our Earth.” “All Our Ancestors united to create Light.” “When they gave their lives, the splendor dawned and we appeared, and the face of Our Ancestors was buried with the darkness.”¹⁴

In brief, the rites of the Huichol are rites of initiation whose end is to communicate with Our Ancestors collectively and individually, until their faces appear, as in a *nierika* (often in the form of a round mirror¹⁵), and their secret words are heard through the antennae of the shamans, their *muviérite* (feathered arrows). But it should be understood that initiation is a very lengthy process for those who really want to acquire the power to see.

A woman who wants to embroider or weave with the genius of her ancestors, for instance, not only needs practical instruction from her parents, but also must establish an intimate relationship with Our Ancestors and with their animal messengers; she may encounter snakes in the process of her initiation, and their patterns are symbolic of the grace that unfolds as she gains proficiency. When this relationship has been achieved, after five or six years of appropriate sacrifices, the experienced weaver may not transmit her patterns, which derive from her ability to recover the keys to the collective memory of the remote past and thus to focus the attention of Our Ancestors on her continuing creation, to the less experienced.

The hermeticism of the artists of weaving is like that of the makers of violins and shaman’s chairs, and of the shamans themselves. It is not merely sufficient to copy the patterns of the weaver, the method of the carpenter, or the gestures of the shaman. However laborious the technique may be, the work only has spiritual power and the ability to communicate with Our Ancestors if it is done with heart and with vision. This hermeticism, like a professional secret, makes it impossible to be an impostor, pretending to know what only a few shamans—like the selected recognized *kawiterutsixi* (elders) in each Huichol tribe—know.

One of the many expressions of Huichol hermeticism is

mutism, which was also characteristic of the ancient Mexicans. The educational discourses gathered in 1540 by Father Andrés de Olmos from among the Aztecs offer a good example: “And if something dangerous and difficult is done or said in front of you, don’t repeat it, don’t show it, and don’t let others know it. And if someone perhaps asks you about what happened or was said in front of you, don’t say it, don’t declare it, unless somebody already knows it. Are you perhaps like a cob of corn, a tassel of wheat, so that you let loose that which is within you? Well tied, well kept, well hidden it is inside you, as in a coffer, in a box. Whatever people may say, however much they may urge you to declare it, don’t say it, don’t discover it. If you say what you should not, you will fill yourself with anxieties and worries, and you yourself will tear your lips by biting them.”¹⁶

For the Huichol, everything that touches on the inner spiritual life is by nature “dangerous and difficult.” The only way of receiving spiritual instruction is through direct participation, which itself requires the participant not to declare anything “unless somebody already knows it.”

The fundamental reason for mutism is that the sacred concepts cannot be understood unless one has first acquired the language of the sacred, in the same way that it is

futile to impart advanced knowledge to a first-year apprentice. Once the average Huichol visits a sacred spot, he or she vows to return on four or five pilgrimages, fulfilling intense shamanic disciplines, but not gaining a complete un-

derstanding of the religious language, nor of the ideographic symbols or *waniuki* (“the word of Our Ancestors”). They do not officiate at ceremonies with chants that last many days and carry out successful healings. For this reason there are shamans with different specialties. The religious specialist in general does not

announce himself with outside signs or airs. It is common for a master shaman to have a humble appearance and some nickname like “the ignorant one” to make one believe that he or she knows nothing, as they may pretend.

There are others, in contrast, with loose tongues, who assure us that they know everything. Their attitude also has its roots in tradition, since this style of behavior belongs to a central theatrical character, the *tsicuaki*, in the rites of the *hikuritámete* (peyote hunters). This is the clown who says and does much, but does everything in reverse, lecturing the credulous, and amusing everybody with scatological irreverence and pompous ineptitude. This behavior, a lie in action, is the perfect complement to mutism; he uses a new vocabulary the pilgrims invented for the occasion. In the same way, Our Ancestors tricked and trapped each other to reveal the true identities of their peers, test their capabilities, sometimes demonstrating their own perspicacity and, often, their own stupidity. As witnesses, the deities carried out these tricks on one another. This clown character has proven extremely useful in diverting the investigations of anthropologists and other curious profes-



6. The Head of Our Elder-Brother Blue Deer
by Juan Ríos Martínez, a.k.a. Taurri Mutuani (Painted Red). Date: 1973. Size: 2' X 2' (60cm. x 60cm.)

This head is a manifestation of Maxayuawi, Our Elder-Brother Blue Deer, who reveals himself to worthy pilgrims at the end of their journey to Wirikuta, where Our Ancestors Paint our Faces with their sacred Designs. It is in the east where Our Father rises at dawn.

Our Elder-Brother is primarily a deer that offers his flesh out of mercy for us, but he is also transformed into Tatéi Hikuri, Our Mother Peyote (the peyote cactus buds that are depicted above his antlers and grow in the holy land of the desert). He is the mediator between the shaman and Our Ancestors, teaching how to heal and to chant (as symbolized by the feathered arrow, at the right antler).

Our Elder-Brother also transforms into Tatéi Niwétsika, Our Mother Corn (corn-husk, at the left antler), thus revealing his triple nature as deer, peyote and corn. His words appear like dewdrops to those who make their vows to him and he cries with joy as he reaches the holy land of Wirikuta after much self-sacrifice.

As witnesses, the deities carried out these tricks on one another. This clown character has proven extremely useful in diverting the investigations of anthropologists and other curious profes-

sionals from the outside world, but the Huichol realize his language is part of his recent journey, and is only accessible to his fellow travelers.

Nierika and the Peyote Hunt

Our Ancestors appear to the devotee in many guises, as *nierikate* in his inspired visions. To attain *nierika*, the Huichol set out on journeys of up to 500 kilometers in search of *hikuri* (peyote). The *hikuritámete* have to develop two personalities in the course of this long pilgrimage. The first is the divine, inner personality, which grows as the traveler moves farther away from his everyday world. After many days spent traveling on foot without being able to quench their thirst until nightfall, and after the night-long vigils they often keep around the communal fire, the pilgrims' bodily needs become secondary, and the way is paved for the emergence of the spiritual sustenance that is needed to replace the energy of the body.

The inner strength of the *iyari* begins to dismantle the façade of the outer social being, and the pilgrim is reborn with a new name consonant with his or her newly purified and consecrated personality. Another personality, external and profane, is developed to mask the intense internal reality from the destructive public eye. A jocular frivolity is elaborated, so that people who are sacrificing all bodily pleasures do not betray any sign of the suffering they must undergo in their spiritual gestation.

All is silent passion, camouflaged by sporadic bursts of shared joy projecting mirages of abundance upon the immense space of the desert. Following the path marked by the imprints of Our Ancestors, the *hikuritámete* start to discover the true names of those Ancestors, and they come to feel the reality implied by the metaphors that designate them. Finally, the group of peyote hunters must gather to confess clearly so that Our Grandfather Fire may wit-

ness them; each mentions his or her carnal misdeeds in public. These are turned into knots on a string that is burned.

This is how *nierika* is reached, when Tatéi Hiikuri (Our Mother Peyote) accepts the *hikuritame* (righteous peyote hunter) with *iyari* (a regenerated heart) who comes to visit her. The *hikuritame* knows that peyote contains the spirit of Tamatsi Kauyumari (Our Elder Brother Fawn of the Sun), who immolated himself to give birth to *hikuri* and now offers himself up again to be consumed

by the happy pilgrim. *Hikuri* is the spirit of the immolated deer, who slips voluntarily into the righteous hunter's snare, or offers himself to his projectiles. Now the deer's heart is hunted with an arrow. It changes into a small spineless cactus, rare and hard to find even in Kauyumarítá (Our Elder Brother's Land).

This is a moment of authentic communion, when the ecstatic peyote hunter comes directly into contact with Our Ancestors, of whom Our Elder Brother is a representation and the spokesperson: he changes from Our Mother Peyote into Our Elder Brother Fawn of the Sun at dawn in the eastern holy land of Our Ancestors—and into Our Mother Corn, his ultimate transformation, if the pilgrimage is successful. Our Elder Brother speaks to the pilgrim from within. He is the messenger of Our Ancestors and, by helping to reveal their changing countenances, leaves some trace of their memory in the *iyari*. To renew these links to Our Ancestors, or the spiritual essence of being, a process that takes one's whole life, is the constant direction of the traditional Huichol.

In the course of the first pilgrimage, only the outermost veil of the mystery is drawn aside to reveal a luminous and cosmic vision, which cannot be immediately assimilated but becomes a tangible experience under the influence of peyote. The Huichol say that if the *matuwame* (first-time pilgrim) does not cover his eyes during parts of the trail, the luminosity of the sacred space upon which he walks for the



first time will blind him when *hikuri* is ingested. Only when he has eaten it will his eyes be able to discover Wirikuta, the holy land where the designs of Our Ancestors are etched on the faces of the pilgrims. The desert is then transformed into a field of flowers, surrounded by stelae (e.g. Burnt Peak, where Our Father rises) as landmarks of Our Ancestors, and the pilgrim finds himself literally in *Tamoanchan*, the earthly paradise, according to the Aztecs (“the Place of Brilliant Flowers,” where “the root itself is a flower”).¹⁷

After many weeks, the peyote hunters return to their homes, having carried out the mission of bringing back the precious cargo of *hikuri* to share in the sacred rituals. Throughout their journey, they have endeavored to re-create their language honed to their new vision. Some pilgrims have composed new songs. All of their activity corresponds to Eliade’s description of poetic invention, which tends “to abolish current language, that of every day, and to invent a new, private and personal speech, in the last analysis, secret.”¹⁸

If we do not grasp the mystical and poetic themes inspired by the complex Huichol ritual, we will only see the skin that covers this deep culture and will fail to understand the significance of its highly original art. Since the skin itself is a complex surface of color and drama, reports (sometimes based on mere weeks of “objective” observations) have given the general public, and even specialized students, a false and superficial image of a culture whose depth is otherwise unsuspected. We outsiders are somewhat like the conquistadors, who did not suspect the cultural richness of a world that had only material significance for them. Today we are capable of understanding something of the extremely advanced astronomic science of the Mayas, but how much of that has been lost forever?

Another quotation from Mircea Eliade will perhaps help to put Huichol hermeticism in its most immediate context:

“[Where] ancestral traditions are in danger of decay, to prevent their deterioration, the teachings are transmitted more and more under the veil of secrecy. This is the well known phenomenon of the ‘occultation’ of a doctrine when the society which has preserved it is in the course of radical transformation.”¹⁹

I am reminded of Uxayucaue (“The Walker,” [whose face is painted with a yellow dye found near Wirikuta, symbolizing sun rays]) who was probably the most distinguished *kawitero* (elder) in Tuapuri. Once, when we were talking about the help his people would soon be receiving from

outside sources (in the 1980s), he broke down in anguish as he noted that most pilgrims had ceased making the long foot journeys that are necessary to learn the ancestral culture. Ironically, the government program was intended to help more Huichol reach the desert of Wirikuta, by providing them trucks.

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NOTES

¹ Lic. Alfonso Manzanilla González, Director del Centro Coordinador para la Zona Huicot, Informe 1975, refers in detail to the ‘Plan Lerma’ (the Lerma river program of the mid-1960s) that established the infrastructure of the ‘Plan Huichol-Cora-Tepehuano.’ He became the director of the center in 1970.

² According to José Benítez Sánchez, there are five seas, but we only visit the edge of the first one, which is green.

³ Mircea Eliade, “Myths, Dreams and Mysteries” (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), p.37.

⁴ Huichol yarn-paintings are made by pressing thin strands of wool or acrylic thread on a board of wood coated traditionally with the wax of a native bee. They are usually decorative derivations of sacred Huichol art, like small votive offerings made in similar ways, and they became known in public after professor Alfonso Soto Soria exposed several in Guadalajara, Mexico in 1951.

⁵ Carl Lumlholtz, “Unknown Mexico,” vol. 2, (Glorieta, N.M.: The Rio Grande Press, Inc., 1973.)

⁶ Paul Westheim, “Ideas fundamentales del arte prehispánico en México” (Era: Ediciones Era, S.A., 1972), pp. 254, 183.

⁷ Namawita Neixa.

⁸ Guacana Cuaixá.

⁹ Fiesta de Tewixipixa.

¹⁰ *Tatéi Haramara* is a manifestation of *Tacutsi Nakawé* (“Our Great-grandmother of Oracular Insight”).

¹¹ Eliade, “Myths, Dreams and Mysteries” p. 16.

¹² Peyote is a species of cactus, from which the psychotropic substance mescaline is extracted. *Kieri*, the ‘tree of Wind’, is a solanaceous plant, sometimes confused with *datura*, which is less psychoactive.

¹³ José Benítez Sánchez, conversation with the author.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Nierika* signifies both penetrating insight and the ability to shield oneself from danger. It also refers to the many faces and names that Our Ancestors have, while only being one, according to a *kawitero*, one of the five elders of Tuapuri (José López Pinedo, personal communication). The actual name of this ultimate underlying Ancestor is both multiple and unpronounceable, yet it could be simply *Yus* or *Yusi*.

¹⁶ Ángel María Garibay Kintana, “La literatura de las aztecas” (México: Editorial Joaquín Mortiz, 1964.), pp. 108-109.

¹⁷ Westheim, “Ideas fundamentales del arte prehispánico en México,” p. 172. “Recordemos que el peyote, es sobretodo una raíz que asoma su cabeza verde al ras del suelo y que el peyote es llamado Tutu: “flor.” Translation: “We should remember that peyote is above all a root which shows its green head rising just above the ground surface, and that peyote is called “tutu,” which means “flower.”

¹⁸ Eliade, “Myths, Dreams and Mysteries,” pp. 35, 36.

¹⁹ Eliade, “Myths, Dreams and Mysteries,” p. 203.

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Wes Headley: “Our Elder Brother Wind and Our Mother Of Young Eagle Girl Change the Cycle of the Rains.”

Lloyd Patrick Baker: “The Head of Our Elder Brother Blue Deer” (by Juan Ríos Martínez); “Our Great Grandmother Growth gathers Our Principal Ancestors” (by Tutukila); “The Metamorphosis of Our Petrified Ancestor” (by Guadalupe González Ríos).

Juan Negrín Fetter: “The Four Aspects of the Spirit” (by José Benítez); “The Presence of Our Grandfather Fire” (by Yauxali); “A Vigil in Wirikuta, with the peyote hunters gathered around Our Grandfather (fire)” (field photograph, 1978).