



Journey to Mexico

February 18 to March 25, 2009

Thanks to the generous contributions of Mr. George H. and Mrs. Laurie Howell and of Mr. David Tussman, I was able to return to Mexico, my native roots, where Huicholes of the community of Santa Catarina Cuexcomatitlán agreed to hold a trimestral general assembly in a frontier area of their land, near the community of San Andrés Cohamiata. It was carried out from the 19th to the 23rd of February 2009, in Los Cajones, where the government installed a communal school. I arrived with the help of Carlos Chávez, from the Association of Jalisco for the Assistance of Indigenous Groups, a.c. (AJAGI), and huichol members of his non-profit organization, as well as the Institute of Superior Technological Studies of the West (ITESO), like Claudio de la Rosa Valdez. On Saturday, February 21, they gave Carlos some time to speak about his visits to Mexico City, where he visited members of the ministry of Agrarian Reform, who made it clear the community would not lose rights to the roads that might be built on its land. Later, other internal matters were discussed, along with the value of setting up a high-school within the community, so their young students could gain access to that level of education without leaving their native grounds; a list of their possible educators was mentioned and a place for the school near Nueva Colonia was tentatively brought up.

The following day, the municipal president of Mezquitic, arrived to hear multiple requests from the community members, who mentioned solar energy lights that functioned like ‘Christmas decoration lights’ and requested more serious attention to that field, which he ignored completely. On the other hand, he made it clear that his budget would cover all matters to provide the area of Nueva Colonia with electricity through cables before the rainy season of late May for the implementation of high powered computers and equipment in the local secondary school and clinic (which have so far functioned wirelessly). He did not feel there should be any ecological reason to prevent this from occurring and urged that a dirt road be built to the school zone of Los Cajones without any ecological studies, since it was in a non-forested area of the ravines. He suggested waste sewage systems that could be nefarious to the region. No mention was made of taking advantage of the mistletoe plagued oaks or old pine trees to create jobs by turning trees into dried boards of wood for a small work force of local carpenters, and I was not given an opportunity to talk under the circumstances. Many of the principal elders, who did not expect matters of major importance to be discussed, were not present, but they will not want the assembly to contradict their previous opinions. During the assembly, one of the teachers from the school in Nueva Colonia, *Xaureme*, who had previously stood out as one of the main opponents to the illegal road, brought up much of the community’s dissent with the Municipal president of Mezquitic’s plans about getting things done as fast as possible, without enough political consensus or ecological studies. He mentioned the petition to speed up the electrification process with cables was fraudulent: it would benefit members of the community who were willing to sell their values out in order to benefit materially from eco-tourism that the government promotes, while the rest would suffer the cost of paying for electricity. He was ‘expelled’ from the community for typing out his dissent. This opposition was also held clearly by another

teacher, Jesús Cosío, who held the position of secretary of cultural affairs, which was then removed from him by the president of communal goods, although no other major communal authorities, such as the *tatuani*, or traditional governor, co-signed the agreement.

Agustín Carrillo, who is studying his last year of accounting at the Technological University of Guadalajara, returned to the Sierra with me on March 13, and we found *Xaureme* in Huejuquilla, where he was able to give us a ride in the very direction he was headed. So my compadre and established authority, Andrés Valdez, received me at his ranch near Nueva Colonia, for the first days. Many people gathered there on Sunday, when they held a meeting of family mothers from the school area given by the doctor who has attended their clinic for the last 7 years. Afterwards, they gathered for a special pozole (corn, meat and chili soup) that was offered in the public yard before the office buildings. It was easier to establish a good rapport with more communal huichol, or *Tuapuritari*, than seemed to be at the general assembly. The son my wife Yvonne and I raised as a young man, Cirilo Carrillo, who is currently the commissary of the region of Nueva Colonia, and whose wife is the ambulatory doctor in charge of the community, were present for a new round of talks. On the next day, to continue checking what the people in general and the major elders felt about the general assembly, I descended to the ceremonial center and its adjoining ranch of the principal communal elder, whose wife, our comadre, welcomed me in. The next day, *Uxayucauye* arrived from performing a several night long chant at a distant ranch, and he was able to relate to me for a couple of days, before he took off to see *Xaureme*, at whose ranch a meeting was to be held; there he would disagree with decisions taken at the general assembly that would be reviewed.

Last year, modern technology fared poorly in the Wixárika Sierra. In the high regions, the areas sowed with tractors, ploughs and abundant fertilizers, received such abundant water precipitations that they washed away most of the fertilizer and maize did not sprout. Whereas in the lower regions, cultivated in the traditional ‘coamil’ style, the maize harvest was very abundant, thanks to the rains.

We hope the *Wixaritari* do not trade off the benefits of solar energy for those of light by cable by seeing that the current government only wants to promote energy connected to hydroelectric dams that are implanted like giants around their Sierra Madre. The patterns of urbanization become denser when electrification is carried out by cable and it gets concentrated in areas, which then suffer water scarcity and contamination problems. Of course, the Federal Commission of Electricity may decide to charge all the communal members higher rates for their electric bills at any given moment, whether they are interested in using their lights or not, while their solar lights are free of federal or state costs.

Many *Tuapuritari* had the opportunity to inspect the agenda I carried with me, made by the *Wixaritari* of the Autonomous University of Nayarit (UAN), which had beautiful samples of their embroidered two-point stitched bags that can only be made with fine muslin, which only they can produce at their community weaving workshop. This made them think again about the importance of having Cirilo move it back into motion, but as he told me, he has to be free of his current communal cargo to try getting the weaving workshop back on track with new apprentices. This would allow the *Wixaritari* to make

first quality muslin to embroider traditional cloth of relevance to their custom and to their current world patrimony.

In the metropolitan area of Guadalajara, I had the opportunity to make contact with people who share our perspective, like Patricia Díaz Romo, of Pesticides and Huicholes (Huicholes y Plaguicidas), and her good friend Ofelia Medina, who is a famous Mexican actress and leader of native Indian causes. Agustín Carrillo is using some of his accounting practices to help AJAGI, the non-profit organization that is working among his people to help assure their territorial rights. We have backed him minimally with some expenses and seek more help. I had a pleasant exchange with María Elena de la Cruz, in Zacatecas, at the beginning of my first return from the general assembly. She had just run into my compadre Dionisio de las Rosas, or *Uxayucauye*, the main elder of the community of *Tuapurie*, at the Museo Zacatecano, seeing some old photographs of himself on display. She is pursuing an original doctoral thesis in anthropology at the University of Texas, in Austin, dealing with the commodification of Wixárika arts and crafts. Unfortunately, I was not able to find the time to see our *Wixaritari* friends in Tepic, at the Autonomous University of Nayarit (Universidad Autónoma de Nayarit), like Tutupika Carrillo de la Cruz, to relate about our common concerns, and let him know how the agendas spoke so forcefully to their siblings in the mountains of *Tuapurie* today.

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