

EARLY HISTORY

As archaeologist Phil Weigand puts it, the Huichol and their Cora neighbors had deep roots in the area where they are now settled in a sequence that had begun by the Mesoamerican Classic period (ca. A.C. 200-700). The Corachol branch of this Uto-Aztecan language family leads linguists like Valiñas, cited by Weigand to consider the relative antiquity of this language group in the area. “This branch of Uto-Aztecan is far more closely related to the Taracahitan and Tepiman branches spoken to the north and west than to the Nahuatl languages spoken farther east and south.”¹ Furthermore, “In prehistoric times the Huicholes, the Coras and the Tepehuanos formed a single nation with the Opatas, the Tarahumaras and the Pimas” writes historian Salvador Gutiérrez Contreras², confirming the opinions of earlier historians Ignacio Dávila Garibi and Alberto Santoscoy.



Western Sierra Madre ~ ©Juan Negrín, 1978

Around the sixth century A.C. the Toltecs subjugated most of the plains in the current states of Jalisco and Nayarit, where they founded the colony of Chimalúacan. The kingdom of Chalchihuites was founded to the east of the Sierra Madre, around the archaeological site of La Quemada, in Zacatecas. The ancestors of the Cora and the Huichol were probably able to escape this dominion in the recesses of the Western Sierra Madre, although they were

influenced by their civilization, as they were by other early civilizations in the region, until the Toltec empire fell in 1116.

The Mexican historian, J. Ignacio Dávila Garibi, wrote in “Los Aborígenes de Jalisco”, 1933 that the Huichol, the Cora and other related groups like the Tepehuan previously lived in an extensive territory called *Hikuripa*, agreeing with reports that the French investigator Diguët gathered 30 years earlier³. *Hikuripa*, meaning the periphery of the peyote, includes today’s states of Nayarit, Jalisco, Sinaloa, Durango, Chihuahua, Coahuila, San Luis Potosí (its headquarters), Aguascalientes and Zacatecas. Their leader, called Deer-Tail, *Maxakuaxí*, introduced the cult to a supreme god *Tewewikame* (like Our Creator Sun, *Tawewiékame*, in Huichol) that he claimed to represent, saying he had been sent from heaven to earth to instruct men and prevent them from eating each other. When the Toltecs overtook the area, *Maxakuaxí* united the Huichol, the Cora and the Tepehuan to find refuge in the Sierras where they still have their strongholds. This also corresponds to early versions of their verbal history that the first Spanish missionaries gathered among the Cora natives in the seventeenth century.

¹ Phil Weigand, *Journal of the Southwest*, Volume 42, p19

² *Los Coras y el rey Nayarit*, p.50

³ Salvador Gutiérrez Contreras, *Los coras y el rey Nayarit*, Tepic, Nayarit, México. 2001, p.50

They were influenced by the changes along their borders. It is likely that the round temple structure, *tuki*, and their ceremonial centers reflect the patterns of the ancient culture of Teuchitlán from the Classic period. This is a thesis that has been long maintained by Dr. Weigand, and similar centers have been located along the Bolaños River canyon to the southeast of the current Huichol territory. As anthropologist Dr. Johannes Neurath comments: “The famed post-Classic site Ixtlán del Río is located in a geographical point of highly strategic value, since it was the most viable commercial route between two of the most populated zones of Mexico, its western coast and the central region.”⁴

Although the Huichol have not allowed archaeological excavations to be carried out on their current communal territory, archaeologist Marie-Areti Hers is noted for having worked most extensively in the periphery of what was their land when the Spaniards conquered the area. One of her most remarkable discoveries to date was that of a prototypical stone chac-mool. This androgynous figurine seems to recline on its back with its eyes wide open to the firmament in a flexed posture⁵ and it appears to be from the Classic period, predating the characteristic chac-mool sculptures of the post-Classic period that were developed by Toltecs. She suggests that the round recipient on the central cavity of the traditional chac-mool might have evolved from a recipient like the gourd-bowl used by the Huichol to place offerings of blood, ground peyote and corn-gruel. She also surmises that this deity might have represented an oracular entity, which reminds us of the *Wixárika* interpretation of Our Great Grandmother Hollow Ear, who foretold the deluge.

Another culture that left its mark on the development of Huichol culture was that of La Quemada, a major fortified urban center that was built between 600 and 700 A.C. to the northeast of the current Huichol territory. As Phil Weigand recorded, the Huichol recall in their chants how they were once prevented for a long time from making the sacred trip to the eastern desert in San Luis Potosí by a perverted shaman who was allied with the jaguars and lived several valleys to the east on a walled rock, surrounded by buildings. Since they stopped bringing back peyote from the east, because the jaguars ate all of it, the corn began to wilt. There was no salt, seashells or feathers until the Huichol leaders gathered in *Teakata*, the central ceremonial center, and determined to defeat the sorcerer of La Quemada⁶.



Ruins of La Quemada ~ ©Juan Negrín 1979

⁴ Johannes Neurath, *Las fiestas de La Casa Grande*, CONACULTA - Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia / Universidad de Guadalajara, 2002, p.62

⁵ Marie-Areti Hers, *Los toltecas en tierras chichimecas*, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1989, p.65

⁶ Phil C. Weigand, *Ensayos sobre el Gran Nayar entre coras, huicholes y tepehuanos*, pp.106 to 109

The Chichimecs immigrated around 1115, beginning to cross Nayarit in the seventh century from the north. After 1160, the Aztecs crossed Jalisco and Nayarit to found the empire of Tenochtitlán in 1325. The people whom the Toltecs had subdued in today's states of Jalisco, Nayarit, Zacatecas and Durango remained independent from the Aztecs and the tribal groups in the mountains retained their own freedom behind the shield of the Tlatoanazgos or four kingdoms of that area, known as Chimalhuacán. As the Spanish conquerors noted they were known for their ability to defend themselves with round shields or *chimales*⁷.

The *Wixaritari* consider themselves descendants of a black female dog, which links them metaphorically to the Chichimecs in general, whose name means 'dog people'. To echo Dr. Brotherston's words, they form part of 'Unknown Mexico', linked to Mesoamerica's farthest-flung former frontiers, "following a Nahuan toponymy as far as Arizona and New Mexico" "and encountering further linguistic kin of the Mexica, like the Tarahumara, Yaqui, and Pima-Papago, who are linked in turn with the Hopi, Ute (whence Utah), and Shoshoneans of the Great Basin far to the north."⁸

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NOTES:

We use the x in Huichol words to indicate a sound that varies between an English sh

⁷ Salvador Gutiérrez Contreras, pp. 35, 36

⁸ Gordon Brotherston, Book of the Fourth World: Reading the native Americas through their literature, Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp.21 and 22. Dr. Brotherston also notes important parallels between sacred Huichol art and Anasazi art.

sound, as in 'she' or a French j sound as in 'je', and a Spanish rolled r sound, as in 'rey'. Western Huichol uses it more as an r sound, whereas in the eastern section uses the softer 'sh' sound. It is used in the term Mexica.

We use the ü symbol in Huichol words to indicate a sound that is close to the German equivalent or to the French u sound. It has often been recently transcribed as a + symbol.

The other sounds are English equivalents for vowels and consonants that are generically Latin. The accentuation is used according to Spanish rules.

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