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Magazine

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MEXICO'S WEST COAST MAGAZINE

VOL. 15 No. 1 JAN/FEB 1975

THE COVER: Huichol painting The Festival of Tatei Neirra. At the bottom, from left to right, a maraakame (a priest of the Huichol religion), a drum and a cornfield. Above these are a pot full of tejuino, an arrow, a god's eye, a rattle, and a squash against a green background. The cornfield and the squash indicates that the festival is for the first fruits of the harvest. The rattle and god's eye indicate that the festival is dedicated to children. The arrow is an offering to the gods on behalf of the children and the festival. The drum is the voice of the god who observes the festival from the far horizon. Tejuino is a fermented beverage, invented a long time ago by the gods.

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the huichol indians

a people in transition

BY J. M. CARRIER, Ph.D.

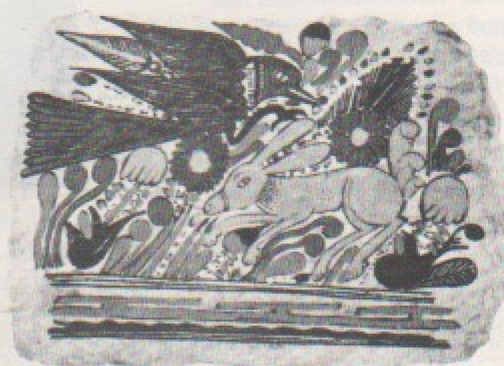
The Huichol Indians have maintained their cultural traditions at a level of integrity far above most pre-Columbian societies still existent in Mexico. Living in the rugged and remote highlands of Jalisco and Nayarit, they have not had to cope over time with the same kind of inroads on their belief systems and daily living as did the linguistically related Indian groups living in the less remote and rugged highlands and lowlands in the same general area. According to recent reports, however, over the next few years their culture may have to face the most serious challenge for change in its history to date. The Mexican central government, for example, has been teaching the young Huichol Indians Spanish and new agricultural practices; and their plan is to intensify this training. In addition, the timber resources in the mountains inhabited by the Huichol are also being targeted for removal by outsiders who value the potential charcoal and lumber. One reported plan (Collings, 1973) is to airlift out the semiprocessed products from all-weather airstrips. And at each airstrip there is to be a government store and a public health center. Unfortunately for the Huichol, associated with these inroads into their culture by outsiders, there have also been a number of incidents since 1972 that have affected their basic day to day living. Widespread crop failures brought on by unusual weather conditions and the loss of horses and mules as a result of encephalitis have caused considerable hardships; cutter ants which attack cultivated fields are said to be increasing in number; and the planned construction of a large dam on the lower Santiago River has lead to an incursion of outside planners who have brought in new diseases like pneumonia, influenza, and whooping cough, to which the Huichol have little immunity. How the Huichol Indians will be able to handle the pressures for change brought on by all these outside forces can only be surmised at the present time. One important input into a surmise about their future, however, should be the toughness of their culture as exhibited by its cohesiveness in the past. The following thumbnail sketch presents some of the major elements of their culture as it has been reported by the various students of Huichol behavior.

As any American tourist can still observe when visiting Tepic in the State of Nayarit or Guadalajara in the State of Jalisco--and occasionally even in Mexico City--the Huichol Indians continue to maintain an identity as a Huichol even when outside their own territory. It is not at all unusual to see the men dressed in their colorful outfits walking through the center of the provincial capital Tepic or in downtown Guadalajara or the adjoining town of Zapopan. To get some idea of the complexities of design and colorfullness of their dress one can visit the small Huichol folk art museum and store maintained at the Basilica of Zapopan (on the northern outskirts of Guadalajara) or the Huichol-Cora Center of the National Indian Institute (Instituto Nacional Indigenista) in Tepic. The Zapopan exhibit--to the right of the main entrance to the Basilica--also contains some excellent photomurals of the Huichol and their way of living taken by a Franciscan padre named Ernesto Loera Ochoa. (As of November 1974, a number of authentic Huichol handicrafts were still for sale at the Basilica store. The most complete exhibit of the Huichol is in the Mexico City Anthropological Museum).

At the core of Huichol identity is their strong belief that they are unique beings in direct communion with a spirit world which has molded their past and will continue to influence their future. Led by elder wise men called *mara' akames*, and influenced by visions produced by the hallucinogenic peyote plant, they have been able to maintain their native religion and system of justice apart from Catholicism and the Mexican federal and state laws. They have been able to do this in part from their strong sense of identity. For example, they have resisted intermarriage both with Spaniards and mestizos; an offense for which there is a belief that there is punishment after death. And Catholicism has been incorporated into their native religious beliefs rather than the other way around. Their present-day religion has a thin overlay of Catholicism; but it remains in essence true to their pre-Columbian religious beliefs, and their daily existence is still mostly controlled by beliefs carried over from the past. Of equal importance, however, is the inaccessibility of their territory and the fact that insofar as known they had no gold or silver artifacts for the Spaish invaders to pursue. Up to the present, there are no motorable roads into Huichol territory. Travelers must still go in either by airplane or muleback from Tepic during the dry season. During much of the rainy season from June to October all travel ceases.

In their daily existence the Huichol interlace the realities of the natural world and the needs produced by it with the forces exerted by the world of the spirits. The spirit world exerts its force through a large number of deities who act through the sun, rain, fire, deer, maize, and peyote. Referred to under such general kinship terms as Grandfathers, Grandmothers, Aunts, Elder Brothers, and Great- grandparents, these six observable

Above: Huichol dwelling.



Above: Huichol bark painting.
Below: Huichol yarnpainting.

ABOVE; Huichol exhibit at the Cathedral at Zapopan, near Guadalajara.
RIGHT: A Huichol village

objects of the natural world are thus held with particular reverence and are the focus of recurring ceremonies.

The major ceremonies are held annually as needed to bring rain, cure sickness, neutralize sorcery, and to celebrate the peyote pilgrimage. Ceremonies to implore the gods for rain and the peyote hunt require the Huichol to travel long distances. At least once a year the Huichol are supposed to travel down the mountains to the Pacific Ocean near San Blas, a small coastal town in the State of Nayarit, to take ritual baths. Their belief is that "...as water is life to corn so is it life to the human body". Religious rites are also held along such large bodies of fresh water like Lake Chapala south of Guadalajara.

The peyote hunt takes the form of a long pilgrimage to desert areas in the State of San Luis Potosi, some 300 miles or so northeast from where the Huichol live and farm. The "Elder Brothers", gods of maize, deer, and peyote- reside in this sacred area called *Wirikuta.* No specific date is established for the pilgrimage so individual groups may set out any time during the dry season between October and March. The *mara' akames* set the time of departure for pilgrimages, carry out the ceremonies required before departure, and act as leaders of the groups. The most important ceremony prior to departure requires each prospective pilgrim to publicly confess his or her sexual adventures from the beginning of adulthood onward. For each sexual adventure a knot is tied on a piece of string by the group's leader who provides some humor and chiding during the confession. Feelings of resentment or jealousy over the described adventures are supposedly not allowed since they might endanger both the offender and the group during the pilgrimage. The knotted strings are burnt and purified by the leader. The *mara' akame* then knots a second piece of string with one knot for each pilgrim. They thus will be "all one of heart"; and the string will be taken along on the journey. On their safe return each pilgrim will untie his or her knot.

The pilgrimage, with its preliminary ceremonies, ritualized journey to and from the sacred ares, and ritualized finding, collecting, and ingesting of peyote while there, provides the Huichol continuing knowledge about some of the most important aspects of their culture. On discovering the first peyote cactus during the hunt, the plant is symbolically thought of as a deer and ritually shot and killed with arrows. The peyote is then talked to and forgiveness asked for and offerings of food and water made. Each pilgrim makes his own collection of peyote to take back to the Sierras. During the collection period, about three days, the cactus is consumed and there is singing and dancing in order to commune with the deities. Peyoute provides food for the spirit according to the Huichol. Eaten in sufficient

quantity, this hallucinogenic cactus allows visions of the spirit world otherwise unobtainable. Before starting on their journey home, the pilgrims take a ritual bath in the sacred waters and collect some of it to take back to the Sierras.

The elder wise men, *mara' akames,* who lead the pilgrimages, perform a number of functions in the Huichol culture (Furst, 1969). They act as curers and priests and as guardians of "...the sacred chants and traditions of the people." They thus provide the basic foundation on which the Huichol's belief systems rest and it is through them that the oral traditions are passed from one generation to another. As curers, they maintain important knowledge about medicinal plants and how they may be used to treat various illnesses. As priests, in addition to leading pilgrimages, they make prophecies under the influence of peyote; neutralize malevolent spirits that may be causing individuals harm; and make prayers for all kinds of events which may be affecting the well-being of the community.

The Huichol live in clusters of dwellings which contain from one to 12 related households. Called ranches, these loose clusters of dwellings are widely dispersed--rarely closer than 15 minutes walk from each other--since the Huichol prefer not to live close together. As one Huichol man put it: "Because when people live close together the children fight and then the older people get annoyed, get angry." Their dwellings are simply made with adobe or stone walls and roofs thatched with palm leaves or grass. They may be either rectangular or round and usually consist of one room equipped with the most rudimentary furnishings like a stool or two for sitting and a pallet made of reeds, branches or saplings for sleeping. The cooking is usually done out of doors or in a simple enclosure away from the house. A crib on stilts with thatched roof is used for the storage of maize and occasionally for sleeping.

Huichol agriculture is essentially involved with the production of maize which provides their basic food. They also grow such vegetables as squash, beans, and cucumbers; and keep one or more cows for milk and cheese. In addition, they hunt deer, peccary, and iguana; and catch fish and crustaceans. Wild greens, agave hearts, and a variety of fruits and tubers are gathered to supplement their diet. From the above it can be seen that the Huichol live in a land which in the past at least has provided a bountiful supply of food. The maize is eaten in the form of tortillas, tamales, or as a gruel, parched, or roasted. The vegetables are boiled or dried in the sun or in an earth oven before being eaten. Salt is usually used with food except at special ceremonies. Some of the maize is fermented into an alcoholic drink of varying strength called tejuino. A strong alcoholic beverage called tuchi is made from small agave bulbs which are roasted, cut up and mashed and fermented for a week with water, and then distilled. The distilling process is believed to date back to pre-Columbian times.

Although they live in simple dwellings with the most rudimentary furnishings, the Huichol have maintained their artistry through the centuries since the Spanish conquest. The clothes they wear provide an excellent example,. Considered as prayers for such material things as "rain, a good harvest, long life and health", the designs and juxtaposition of colors either woven into or embroidered on their shirts, trousers, skirts, belts and shoulder bags are sophisticated and a delight to the eyes. Their earrings, necklaces, and bracelets made of beads are also beautifully designed and colorful. Perhaps the most widely known Huichol art form, however, is represented by their yarn paintings. Colored wool yarn was first used by the Huichol to decorate their traditional round or square religious offerings made of wood, bamboo, or stone. The designs and color combinations made possible by the use of the yarn,

pressed onto a base of beeswax, led to the creation of the contemporary rectangular folk art yarn paintings. Torres (1972) reports they were first exhibited in Guadalajara about 18 years avo. The religious offerings decorated with yarn are made by Huichol in their own territory; the rectangular folk art yarn paintings are generally made only outside, usually in Tepic or Zapopan.

Huichol artists work with the same set of culturally determined images. The ones most often used are maize, peyote cactus, deer, serpent, eagle, *mara' akames,* divining plumes and arrows, the sun, the moon, and fire. Each of these have symbolic meaning so the yarn paintings usually present a visual interpretation of a particular religious event, like the hunt for peyote, meaningful to the artist. The putting together of the images and use of color, however, varies considerably from one Huichol artist to another. Their sense of color and composition are said to be the result of dreams while under the influence of peyote.

Not all Huichol Indians have sufficient skill to make folk art yarn paintings; and not all who make them are artists. Many of the paintings being passed off as originals are at best good copies. And some of the paintings and yarn work seen in Mexican and American shops or art galleries were not even made by Huichol Indians. To get some idea of the range of original Huichol yarn paintings, the interested reader should refer to Furst (1969) and Torres (1972). Both references provide good color reproductions and descriptions of Huichol paintings. The *Artes de Mexico* magazine can be bought in any large book store in Mexico and copies of the issues cited were for sale at the Basilica in Zapopan.

One can hope that with their artistry, independence, and cultural pride, the Huichol Indians will be able to make some kind of accommodation with the outside forces exerting pressure on them to change and yet be able to maintain their identity. The next few years will be crucial ones.

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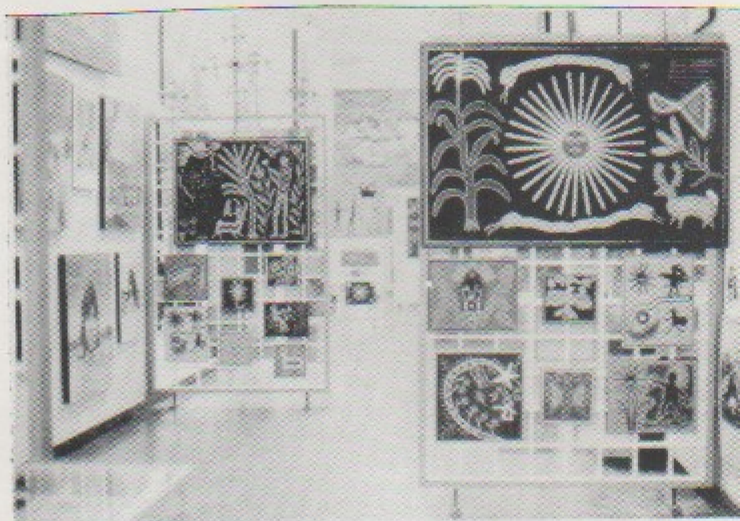

Huichol folk art museum and store.

Huichol embroidered shirt.