

Huichi, A Worthy Ambassador for the Huichol People?

By Antonio Hayuaneme García Mijarez from the Huichol indigenous group, Jalisco, Mexico

Wixárika: synonym of Huichol; *wixaritari/huicholes* – plural

Huicholes: A Mexican indigenous group, living in the Gran Nayar, encompassing Nayarit, Jalisco, Zacatecas and Durango states.

Peyote: cactus with alkaloid substances such as mescaline. *Hikuri*: peyote cactus, which for the Huichol people defines the legacy of the ancestors for the successors: the knowledge to care for the world they created, and means of communication between them.

Deer: a ruminant mammal, and *Tamatsi Kauyumarie*: our older brother.

Maize: a grain, and *Tatei Niwetsika*: our mother.

Tamatsi Kauyumari, *Hikuri* and *Niwetsika Tatei* are one and the same. For the Huichol people the world is inconceivable without them.

Huichi, the “worthy ambassador”

The 2011 Pan American Games, to be held in October in Guadalajara, Mexico, have three mascots. One of them is Huichi, a caricature of the sacred Huichol deer, and according to Emilio González, Jalisco state Governor, and the Games Organising Committee, a “worthy ambassador of the Huichol”. However, far from being a “worthy ambassador”, for the Huicholes Huichi represents a sacrilegious misuse of sacred Huichol symbology. If the government had bothered asking beforehand – which it didn’t – it would have found that out. In another sleight, the Huicholes, whose artisanry is famous worldwide, formally proposed having a fixed space to sell their artisanry during the games, but this was rejected, all of this by which time Huichi had already been made public.

Meanwhile, in another even more controversial topic, billions of dollars’ worth of sacred land – *Wirikuta*, the equivalent of Mecca or Jerusalem for Huichol people – is being sold to international mining and tourism companies, juxtaposed against the ever-increasing poverty in which the Huichol people live. Economic difficulties regularly force many Huicholes to migrate to the cities where they commonly face the spectre of marginalisation and discrimination.

Mythology misunderstood

Ruminant or brother. Cactus or sacred source of wisdom. Foodstuff, or sustenance for our mother. On the one side, scientific concepts; on the other, a complex pre-Hispanic mythology explaining the origin of the world for the Huichol people. Such mythology is often seen as primitive, the continuation of such belief systems being nothing more than a result of backwardness, lack of education and an alienation from contemporary society. Believing this to be the fundamental reason for indigenous communities’ plight has long been a

motive to help indigenous groups take the leap in to the 21st Century and enjoy the “benefits” offered by modernity, whose uncertain economic viability is more prescient than ever; irregular is the pause to reflect and consider their conscious decision of a more simple way of being which doesn’t fall neatly in to current framework of rapid development and globalisation. The former perspective – that of indigenous groups being primitive and needy – continues to both dominate and justify government policies with regards to indigenous peoples' development.

The dying wisdom of survival

Yei-yari, ancient wisdom passed down from the Huichol founding fathers from generation to generation in the *Sierra Wixárika* (the mountain range where the Huichol people live) is the inalienable responsibility of each Huichol demanding the continuity of the Huichol way of life. This sacred vision of mother earth persists to this day due to the relative political and social autonomy of the group. It also explains the omnipotent respect for both the lands which they inhabit and the sacred sites, *Wirikuta* being just one of them, which so define their world view. However, the dominance of the never-ending economic progress doctrine in contemporary society has created new “necessities” for young Huicholes who are not satisfied with the traditional communal way of life. This, in a group that suffers from relative and in many cases absolute poverty, forces members of the said group to leave and seek education, work and healthcare in Mexico’s main cities, principally Guadalajara, and explains the sudden lack of interest that most young have in fulfilling the task of maintaining cultural heritage demanded by *Yei-yari*.

Poverty as an indigenous way of life

Poverty is commonly attributed to the very fact of being indigenous, without considering the wider perspective: the study Perception of the Indigenous Peoples in Mexico: A Qualitative and Quantitative assessment, conducted in 2006 by the Mexican National Commission for Indigenous Peoples, states that "the tendency to homogenise cultures and behaviour patterns rather than promote development has led to the exclusion of indigenous peoples (...) Specifically, common belief blames the culture and associated backwardness as the reasons for indigenous poverty rather than, firstly, dissimilar cultural ideals and, secondly, prevailing centralised economic and political interests. "

What are these “ideals” and how do we interpret their collision? 2011 has been a disastrous year for the harvest. For many in the *Sierra Wixárika* there will be no maize crop due to lack of rain. In the community of Tateikié it is estimated that only one quarter of the total planted maize will develop; the *mará'akate* (wise elders) in dialogues with *Tamaatsi Kauyumari* received the response that offerings for the ancestors at the Huichol sacred sites are needed from all Huichol communities. A phenomenon of similar severity occurred in Sinaloa , where more than 800 000 hectares of grain and vegetables were damaged by freezing temperatures in the first few months of the year. In Guasave, which affected approximately 160 000 hectares, the municipal president Ramón Barajas said: "We are unprepared for such a serious situation; this has not happened in 50 years." The state of Sinaloa is one of the main agricultural producers in Mexico. However, "Despite water shortage problems and frosts that have destroyed vast areas of agricultural crop," as

described by Carlos Ramirez, programs to alleviate the problem have been downsized due to budget cuts at the ministries.

The future of the Huichol People

Recognizing the magnitude and nature of the crisis that we face and explaining why alleviation strategies are unsuccessful requires a dialectic Western-indigenous perspective, since Mexican territory is inhabited by, managed by, and has meaning for indigenous peoples too. This grave crisis for the Huichol people is demonstrated by the failed Huicot Plan during the administration of ex-President Luís Echeverría, in the disastrous agricultural policy in recent decades, and plans to mine silver in *Wirikuta* with its devastating cultural, ecological and political consequences.

We therefore ask, what real meaning does the [Hauxamanaka Agreement](#), a 2008 accord between Emilio González, his counterparts in Durango, Zacatecas and San Luís Potosí states, and Mexican President Felipe Calderón, to "preserve and promote the sacred sites of the *Wixárika* people" have? It is with this backdrop of deep discord that we are outraged that the organizers of the Pan American Games vindicate the Huichol culture by including the sacred deer as a mascot, in complete contempt of what we, the Huichol people, have to say in response. Will our opinion once again be thrown out on to the cultural rubble heap when it comes to digging up the cemetery of our ancestors? When the birthplace of our spirituality, our people, is ransacked by neo-colonial treasure hunters?

What does it matter if *Tamatsi Kauyumarie* is the older brother of the *Wixaritari*? If he is the same as *Hikuri* and *Tatei Niwetsika*? If they all live in sacred sites or if these sites are in danger? Who cares if the Huichol people – nothing more than a pesky aboriginal group – have a dangerously uncertain future? These issues may be overlooked in the name of development; after all, the 2011 Pan American Games are for all Mexicans, as is the perceived economic benefit from mining.

Until we face our past and our present: the fact that myriad ethnic groups, with different cultures and knowledge **continue** to co-exist in Mexico; until we learn to "*talk with ourselves, with our own otherness*", (as said by the Mexican poet Octavio Paz) we will not achieve harmony, neither will we find the road that leads to a greater well-being for all.

Antonio, 22 years old, is a Huichol living in Guadalajara, Mexico. He has been the treasurer and secretary of the Huichol Organisation for the Artisans and Artists in Guadalajara, and recently changed his university degree at ITESO from Electronic Engineering to Political Sciences, specifically to defend the interests and rights of his people.

Wirikuta – the sacred ceremonial pilgrimage route of the Huichol people, located in the state of San Luís Potosí, encompasses more than 140,000 hectares and has numerous sacred sites and springs where they leave their offerings and pray for the life of all living

beings. Among these sacred sites is the peak of Cerro Quemado, located near Real de Catorce, where according to Huichol spirituality, the sun was born and rose for the first time and where their ancestors, now represented by plants and animals, including human beings, rest. It is thus the origin of the three elements that, combined as one, give life and omniscience to the Huichol people, these being: the sacred deer, maize and *Hikuri*.

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