



Nierika Offering at Sacred Site
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NIERIKA

The *nierika* is represented among the Huichol Indians of Northwestern Mexico as a focal point on which powerful beings concentrate their energy. This may be as primordial as well-crafted deer snare that induces the sacred animal to its willing self-immolation. It can be symbolized as a spider's web or threads attached to a wooden loop. *Nierika* is also a hole penetrating the caves of the heart of darkness in the deep canyon and the crater of Burnt Peak, where Our Father rises from the underworld at dawn. It is depicted as a cavity in the

center of stone disks, *teparite*, that permit the rays of the sun to receive and emit the visual messages of Our Ancestors from their shrines to all the places beyond, in a seven tiered space: the four corners and the center on this plane, and the world above and below. There is a *tepari* porthole in the back of the shrine and one over its doorway, as well as others that may be inside, either covering or serving as altars to images of corresponding standing ancestors, *memuute*. The insight that *nierika* gives healing shamans enables them to diagnose the cause of an illness and locate its source within the ailing person's body.

Nierika is also a mirror that reflects images of Our Ancestors for the pilgrims at the gates of the Land where Our Ancestors paint designs on their faces, *Wirikuta*. First the pilgrims deposit gourd-bowl offerings, *xukúrite*, symbols of the womb, and take sacred water from the oasis of Our Mother of Birth and the source of eastern waters, *Tatéi Matinieri*. Later, they paint their faces with a yellow root near another oasis that must have served as a mirror since immemorial times.

Today pilgrims and shamans carry a mirror in their baskets to turn their cheeks into a reflecting surface of the divine energy embodied in the pilgrim who bears the name of an ancestor. Icons that symbolize different ancestors are applied in the shapes of radiant prototypal beings, from seeds to rays or clouds. Their yellow painted face is a *nierika* or a reflection of the ancestor whose path is followed, because they have been blessed by the rays of Our Father who rises in the east at dawn. The mirrors that are used by shamans and pilgrims are also called *nierikate* (plural form).

One of the fundamental meanings of *nierika* is a metaphysical vision, an aspect of a god or a collective ancestor, which is the term they use. The other one is to serve as a front-shield,¹ but we interpret this as a shield against temptations or distractions along the ritual path. No doubt in pre-colonial history, shields represented a significant defense against intruding armed forces, but they are now symbolic objects attached to votive arrows with bamboo and yarn, or wood and wax embedded objects.

¹ Carl S. Lumholtz, *Symbolism of the Huichol Indians*, Volume III, 1900-1907

As Lumholtz stated, for the Huichol a *nierika* means a picture, an appearance or a sacred representation. It evokes an ancestor, thanks it with blood offerings and invokes its favors. Its root is in the verb to see: *nieriya*.² When the over all image is not round it may be considered a resting mat for the ancestor, or a prayer mat: *itari*. Nowadays we do not see the elaborate interwoven back-shields that Lumholtz called *namma*, which also bring to mind the origin of yarn paintings. These are generally rectangular or square, but wax was not used to inlay the yarn.

Our Great-Grandmother Hollow-Ear, Takutsi Nakawé, whom the Huichol identify as the oracle and the primordial mother of Our Ancestors, is characterized by her *nierika* mask that reveals her masculine alter-ego as *Naurú*, the chanting shamanic ancestor of seminal fire. Lumholtz identified the general meaning of Takutsi Nakawé as Our Grandmother Growth that is metaphorically correct, but does not correspond to her semantic roots: *naká*, for ear, and *wekí*, for hollow. As he reported, she was the ancestor who was able to predict the great deluge that flooded the previous underworld.

On the other hand is the mask of the buffoon, whose facial traits mimic the thick black moustache of a mixed-blood Mexican. This pilgrim, *tsikuaki*, who wears a rubber mask for the return ceremony, is most loquacious about the secrets encountered on the ritual trail and the ones disclosed in public confessions before using the peyote cactus. His tales are not considered anymore reliable than a Mexican's understanding of Huichol faith and language. He states things in their opposite order and he changes their names, but he is the only one who is explicit about the journey to those who have not been involved in it.

In conclusion, the Huichol have been making garments for themselves, including their bags and embroidered clothes, besides all the above mentioned *nierikate* and other sacred symbols, as prayers to attract mercy from their ancestors, or for the harmonious balance of female and male vital energy. Their name really means 'those who wear garments as prayers to the ancestors': *Wixaritari*, or *Wixárika* (singular form).



Offering to Our Mother Ocean
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Returning to their *nierikate*, these are now frequently made out of carved, flat, semi-circular wood as a base on which they apply a coat of native sticky, wild beeswax to one side. This is used to inlay threads of yarn that form patterns representative of the ancestor to whose sacred spot it is dedicated after it is smeared with the blood of a sacrificed animal. Square angled *itárite* are made in a similar fashion.

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² Vocabulario Huichol-castellano Castellano-huichol por Juan B. McIntosh y José Grimes-Instituto Lingüístico de Verano, Mexico, D.F. 1954