

THE HUICHOL: *WIXARIKA*

The Huichol (wee-CHOLE), known as huicholes in Spanish, and as *Wixaritari* in their own language, are recognized as one of the Mexican native cultures most resilient to outside influences.

Unlike most other Indians, they did not allow Catholic priests to perform mass within the three main communities in the Huichol mountains, except sometimes on Huichol terms just before Easter, and in one community, at a couple of boarding schools. Recently, the



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Huichol expelled the Catholic priests and nuns from these communities with the exception of the mission at Santa Clara in the community of *Tatei Kié*. The presence of missionaries has been very restricted due to opposition from the Huichol and the Catholic establishment in the surrounding states. In the heart of their territory, visitors are not welcome, especially if they are foreigners and do not have a connection to prominent members of the community. People are literally placed in medieval stocks as a punishment for bringing cameras or using tape recorders without permission.

It took the Franciscan missionaries until 1737¹ to lay the foundations of their first “convent” within the traditional Huichol community center of *Wautiia*, San Sebastián Teponahuastlán; they were consistently frustrated in their proselytizing efforts, both there and in the other core communities, which retain to this day their pre-Hispanic beliefs and activities. As recently as 2003, when several Huichol families became converted to Protestantism, they expelled these members, called ‘aleluyas’, from the communities of *Tuapuri*, Santa Catarina Cuexcomatlán and *Tatei Kié*, San Andrés Cohamiata.

Some scholars, relying on the Norwegian naturalist Carl Sofus Lumholtz, have assumed that the native name for Huichol—*Wixárika*, singular form—means “healer,” as Lumholtz was told by some of their Mexican neighbors when he did the first serious studies of these people between 1895 and 1898. The Huichol are still respected among their neighbors as healers, and their knowledge of medicinal plants is exceptional. However, not all Huichol are shamans or healers, as this translation would presume. Indeed their knowledge of plants is highly prized, as a few recent investigators have verified.² A few years after Lumholtz’s studies, the French ethnographer, Léon Diguët concluded that the same word actually derived from a Guachichil

¹ Johannes Neurath, *Las fiestas de la Casa Grande*, Guadalajara: Coedición: Conaculta (Coordinación Nacional de Antropología y el Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología); Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Universidad de Guadalajara, 2002. p. 75

² See Dr. Silvano Camberos Sánchez and Dr. Jorge Casillas Romo.

word, which means “cultivator of the fields.” Contemporary Huichol do not agree that their name reflects either of the above connotations from an etymological or a descriptive point of view.

According to *Yauxali*, a chanting shaman, their native name *Wixárika* (or *Wixálika* in the lisping pronunciation of a child) means “those who dress in honor of Our Ancestors.” *Yauxali* explained that his name related to the “garment,” *xali*, of “the father,” *yau*, i.e., Our Father Sun. Other informants have told me that *xali* denotes the paint that is used to decorate the shaft of votive arrows that are prepared before sacred deer hunts to invoke the deer’s immolation.



**Hikuri Neixa · The Tekuamana Blesses the Temple of Dawn
Photograph © 1977 Juan Negrín**

During celebrations, rituals and pilgrimages the *Wixaritari* (plural) paint sacred icons on their faces and cover their heads, staffs, and hats with arrows and feathers. Their muslin and woolen clothes are woven and embroidered with symbolic designs to invoke the presence of the Ancestors, *Kakauma*. Community-dwelling *Wixaritari* spend much of the year in a process of devotions, by giving thanks for past sacrifices that continue to bear fruits, in

order to ensure future abundance and harmony. The middle phoneme, *xari*, stands for a clay pot traditionally made by the native women. It is evoked in the myth of Our Father Young Sun, *Tatata Nuitsíkame*, smoldering on the coals of Our Grandfather Fire, *Tatewari*, before ascending to become Our Father.

The *Wixaritari* often gather at the end of spring, when the dry season is at its peak, to celebrate the return of the ceremonial-center pilgrims, *Hikuri Teaxá*. Later in June, they celebrate the change of seasons by thanking Our Mother Corn, *Tatéi Niwetsika*, for keeping her kernels ready to germinate, as Our Mothers of Rain, *Tateteima*, prepare to fertilize the soil again in harmony with Our Grandfather Fire. He will initiate the burning process, with Our Father Sun supervising behind the summer’s clouds coming from the West. The dry-season chanter, *urú-kuakame*, leads the ceremonies until the height of *Hikuri Neixa*, (the Peyote Dance), when the rain chanter, *tukari mahana*, takes over.

When the corncoobs are maturing on their stalks, the Huichol hold *Tatéi Neixa*, the Dance of Our Mother, in order to thank her and Our Mothers of Rain and Fertility, including Our Father Sun, who is invoked to ripen the harvest and disperse the rains.

After the harvest is completed, a new cycle of yearly pilgrimages is undertaken to various sacred springs, caves, and peaks within Huichol territory and well beyond in the four directions. The pilgrimages are accompanied and followed by gathering ceremonies and hunting or fishing expeditions, as well as family or communal activities. Indeed, as the term *wi* indicates, “every year” the *Wixaritari* reenact in a collective manner the activities of their exemplary ancestors by undertaking pilgrimages and completing the cycle of annual ceremonies. Members of approximately twenty ceremonial centers in their traditional communities are chosen to perform these services.

Officers of the ceremonial center, *tuki*, are selected for five-year terms. The five-year cycle is a period of collective service to a region within each community to which the members are affiliated by both parentage and proximity. During this cycle, the average officer of a ceremonial center will be responsible for the care of a sacred gourd-bowl, *xucuri*, and an arrow, *urú*, representing an ancestor whose cave or peak can be located among the sacred pilgrimage spots. The *xucuritame* or officer in question deposits offerings at the place consecrated to the ancestor she or he represents.

The members of ceremonial centers go on distant pilgrimages together under the guidance of the dry-season chanter, the one who bears the arrows, *urú-kuakame*. Just before the rains are expected to occur, the members of a larger ceremonial center, *tukipa*, will go to a designated place in the fields that will be consecrated as a sacred plot. It is designated as an *itari*, or prayer mat, for the ancestors. Johannes Neurath also notes this ritual in his cited book, and I have



Renewing the Roof of the Tuki • Photograph © 1981 Juan Negrín

noticed it taking place on the extended family-ranch “shrine” level, *xiriki*, as well. A roughly hewn, flat square or rectangular piece of wood is covered with designs made with yarn glued to its surface of native beeswax and smeared with blood, to be deposited in the plot.

Every year, these people put themselves on display so that their ancestors may recognize how they actively manifest their faith. By the end of the fifth year, the officers of the five-year cycle,

whose number varies depending on the size of the *tukipa* (large ceremonial centers include twenty-odd pilgrims, their spouses and the shaman who stays with those who wait for their return), rebuild the main circular building’s roof and its posts. This building, *tuki*, dominates the west of the ceremonial center’s patio. Its shrines to different ancestors, *xirikite*, are also thatched and renewed.

In a *tukipa*, or in an extended ranch, where ceremonies are also organized around a family shrine, *xiriki*, the participating *Wixaritari* become a prayer mat for the ancestors (*itari*), as they recreate

their actions in rituals and pilgrimages. Every *Wixárka* pilgrim takes the name of an ancestor, *Kakauyari*, which she or he embodies while participating in collective tasks and religious duties. Life's purpose is to transcend the ephemeral human status by acquiring a connection to Our Ancestors and our heart/memory, *taiyari*, i.e., the collective memory.

The yellow face pigment that is acquired by the mystic pilgrims in their votive journeys to the East is designed by Our Father Sun; they paint their faces as they approach the "land where the Ancestors paint yellow designs on our faces," *Wírikutá*, where they will hunt peyote. The more dedicated *Wixárika* pilgrim or ceremonial-center officer will want to participate in another five-year cycle as a peyote pilgrim, to ensure that this sacred spot is reached at least six times. It is an approximately 350-mile journey, which should be accomplished on foot in the eastern desert for as many days as possible to be meaningful, along with many ordeals such as long fasts from salt, water, and sex.

Other journeys are carried out to the West, the realm of Our Mother Ocean, *Tatéi Haramara*, where the gates of the underworld swallow Our Great Grandfather the Setting Sun, *Tatutsi Sakaimuka*, in the state of Nayarit. As Gordon Brotherston notes, "The logic of the east-west axis, confirmed in the Quiché and Cakchiquel texts by explicit reference to the rising of both sun and Venus, has often been overlooked in our scholarship, though it was clearly enough perceived by the first European arrivals in Mesoamerica, who placed the seas of those latitudes (Atlantic and Pacific) north and south, above and below, as in the heaven and hell binary of the Cakchiquel."³ Among the *Wixaritari*, Venus is called Our Elder Brother Young Star, *Xurawe Temai*, the nocturnal proclaimer of a new life founded on the rebirth of the sun.

The North is another important place: major springs form a lagoon topped by a sacred tree of wind, *kieri*. Here at *Hauxamanaka* is the source of the waters that feed the streams to the north of the Huichol Sierra, in the states of Durango and Zacatecas. The *Wixaritari* also make pilgrimages to the south, *Xapawiyemetá*, the lagoon where there is a wild fig tree. This place is consecrated to the memory of the end of the great flood and to Our Great Grandmother of Germination, *Takutsi Nakawé*, who has been identified semantically by the rain chanter of one of the ceremonial centers of the community of *Tatéi Kié* as *naka*, ear, and *wé*, from *wekí*, hollow: Our Great Grandmother who hears all, for she was the one who foretold the coming flood in the previous underworld. She is the androgynous mother of the ancestors who turns into the primordial fire, *Naurú*, when she puts on a male mask to become a chanting shaman.



Offerings to the Kieri • Photograph © 1977 Juan Negrin

³ Gordon Brotherston, *Book of the Fourth World* : Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 16

She is the oracle whose powers are contained in the revered psychotropic plant known to the *Wixaritari* as *kieri* and first identified botanically as a “copa de oro,” or a type of *Solandra*, by Colette Lilly in the 1970s. There have been several sacred spots for Our Great Grandmother and the *kieri* over time and according to different groups. Dr. Phil Weigand notes that Lake Magdalena in Nayarit, which was once a historically important trading route between North America and Mesoamerica, was undoubtedly important for many earlier *Wixaritari*. Many now take their offerings to Lake Chapala, in the state of Jalisco or Lake Pátzcuaro, in Michoacán; some travel as far as Mexico City.

Most of the traditional ritual sites are concentrated in the central mountain highlands, where the *Wixaritari* live. This region called the center, *Ixrüapa*, is the dwelling spot of Our Grandfather in his cave, surmounted by the first ceremonial center of Our Ancestors, *Teakata*. It is also the location of the central canyons and the sacred springs that are visited to seek fertility and rain. Tradition is symbolized as a sacred tree, *Waiteuri*, which links this level of life to a subterranean matrix and is connected to the celestial sphere by the pollen of its flowers. Conception occurs in a womblike underground space symbolized by the calabash gourd, which becomes flooded with water after the seed of fire germinates in its matrix. On our physical level, *Heriepa*, with its cardinal points, Our Elder Brother Wind Neighbor disperses Our Mothers of Rain, while Our Father Sun rises to transform the waves of Our Mother Ocean into dew and words. All beings become individualized and separate from each other. The third celestial realm, *Taheimá*, appears when the sun rises, and Our Mother Eagle Girl, *Tatéi Werika Wimari*, symbolizes the heavens supervising the ascent of Our Father Sun with one head and his descent with her other head.



Tatei Neixa · Photograph © 1981 Juan Negrín

The journey through life of a wise elder, *kawitero*, is compared to that of a caterpillar, *kawi*, which crawls out of the ocean in the West to begin a long slow journey that takes it to all the sacred cardinal spots, until it reaches the East, where it rises with the sun to become a butterfly. This belief reinforces the importance in ancient Mesoamerica of the butterfly and the plumed-serpent icons,⁴ which are fully developed in *Wixárika* pictography and chants.

There are around five *kawiterutsixi* (plural) in each traditional community; they are considered the elder shamans who have mastered chants, *kawito*, that can last longer than a day. Initially they were like the youngest *Wixaritari* participants in the sowing and harvesting ceremonies; shaking their rattles

⁴ Brotherston, *Fourth World*, p. 21.

all day in front of the drum, while the shaman chanted about their travel with the clouds to the cardinal points, emphasizing the journey from the West to the East. Eventually, a small number of these children grow up to become selected members of the council of elders for life. They have served the community as traditional officers, elected for one to three years' unpaid service in the position of governor, *tatuani*, or as president of communal goods, among other political offices. In addition, they have made numerous journeys to the sacred places and served as rain chanter, *tukari mahana*, and dry-season chanter, *urú-kuakame*, at various ceremonial centers. In their dreams they consensually designate the new political authorities.

From childhood the *Wixaritari* are taught to follow the path that leads to the East and transcendental insight, *nierika*, by undergoing fasts and disciplines to avoid distractions. The new kernels of corn are not consumed until the Dance to Our Mother has been performed in her honor and the blood of the sacrificed bull or deer has been offered. Later in his training, the deer hunter must engage in vigils and salt and sexual fasts before he sacrifices this sacred animal that offers its blood freely. Our Elder Brother Blue Deer, in his many guises, is the intermediary between the *Wixaritari* and their ancestors. In the East, he transforms into the psychotropic cactus (*Lophophora williamsii*), Our Mother Peyote, *Tatéi Hikuri*, which is shot by pilgrims with bows and arrows at dawn.



**Hikuri After Being Shot by the Pilgrims
Photograph © 1977 Juan Negrín**

The lifetime purpose of these journeys is to achieve a connection to, and the goodwill of Our Ancestors as well as the ability to perceive them, which the Huichol describe as *nierika*: to gain insight into the sacred and enter the realm of its perception. The ultimate end is to achieve a spiritual presence as an example to one's descendants in this realm, and to become an ancestor after death. This is followed by torments and frenzied dances in the Underworld, from which some return as crystals from Our Creator (the Sun), *Taweviéekame*, because they survived according to traditional ways of conduct, while others disintegrate into dust.

After a shaman or *kawitero* goes through the stages of the caterpillar and the butterfly, he returns to the underworld and endeavors to locate a quartz crystal that will symbolize "spiritual heart" during a funeral ceremony. The crystal wrapped in cloth and tied to a votive arrow becomes an *urukame* that is kept in a shrine.

For the Huichol, Our Mother Fertile Earth, *Tatéi Yurianaka*, who nurtures the seeds of corn, amaranth, squash, and a few other vegetables, returns after the harvest to the streams. From there she finds her way to her dwelling peak off the coast, returning full of renewed energy to the mountain peaks, among the splendid *Pinus lumholtzii* pines that live up to 500 years in the highest elevations, and to the great variety of oak forests at lower altitudes, and the agaves in the deep canyons. According to a close *Wixárika* informant, who is a *kawitero* from the community of *Tuapuri*, *Yurianaka* means semantically "I feed off my own veins," *yuri*, "to breathe," *anaka*. In other words, *Tatéi Yurianaka* is a self-sufficient being.

NOTES ON COMMUNITIES

The Huichol communities are in the northern part of the present states of Jalisco and eastern Nayarit, flanked by high volcanic ranges and intersected by deep canyons of the western Sierra Madre, with the states of Zacatecas and San Luis Potosí to the east and the state of Durango to the north. Their communal land holdings are estimated to be a little over 4,000 square kilometers, with some in the process of being disputed.⁵ The three main communities belong to the municipality of Mezquitic, Jalisco, and they were nominally conquered around 1650.⁶ They are called San Sebastián Teponoahuastlán (*Wautüa*), Santa Catarina Cuexcomatlán (*Tuapuri*), and San Andrés Cohamiata (*Tatei Kié*). Guadalupe Ocotán (*Ratsisarie*) is a subcommunity, or annex, of San Andrés that was politically subdivided when Nayarit claimed it as part of its state instead of Jalisco in 1873. Similarly, Tuxpan de Bolaños (*Tutxipa*) is called an annex of the community of San Sebastián but has belonged to the municipality of Bolaños, Jalisco, since it was recognized in 1885. Today, both annexes are more acculturated to Mexican society than the core communities.

The *Wixaritari* who still live in their homeland were estimated to number between 7,000 to 8,000 inhabitants by Dr. Phil Weigand, who noticed a pattern of emigration in 1979 that we and others have since confirmed. The *Wixaritari* also form a significant percentage of the population of the Cora or *Náyari* communities, and many are dispersed in noncommunal land grants (Spanish: ejidos) around this territory, especially in the states of Nayarit, Jalisco, Zacatecas, and Durango, while more are becoming urbanized. Recent statistics point to an overall population of well over 20,000.

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⁵ c.f. A.J.A.G.I. Asociación Jalisciense de Apoyo a los Grupos Indígenas; Guadalajara, Jalisco, México

⁶ Beatriz Rojas, *Los Huicholes en la Historia*, México, D.F.: Centro de Estudios Mexicanos Y Centroamericanos; Colegio de Michoacán; Instituto Nacional Indigenista, 1993, p. 71

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