

## RECENT HISTORY

The government has found it very difficult to ‘civilize’ the Huichol and integrate them as a dependent productive working class in the mountains. When independence was achieved from Spain, the laws of the reform under Benito Juárez stopped recognizing Indian communal lands and they were assaulted again by their mixed blood neighbors. The Huichol and their Cora neighbors united to join the French invading forces, under Manuel Lozada, until they were stopped at Guadalajara, Jalisco in 1873. Many of their land holdings were sacked thereafter. When the first secular ethnographers were coming in contact with the Huichol, between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, these Indians were in the process of losing all their land holdings.

The initial impact of the Mexican revolution on the Huichol was not greatly significant until the conservative Catholic population of the state of Jalisco began a counter revolution that escalated into ‘la guerra de la cristiada’. Most Huichol were anti-cristeros, but some were convinced by the Catholics that they would regain their lands like they had under the colonial regime if they favored them. There were internecine battles between communities, notably San Sebastián pro-cristeros vs. Santa Catarina that took opposite sides. The government had halted the conflict by the mid 1930’s, when Robert Mowry Zingg was the first outsider to reenter Huichol territory in Tuxpan de Bolaños.

The revolution was a major improvement for the Indians in general after the government effectively began to recognize their ancient communal land rights, under President Lázaro Cárdenas, from 1934 to 1940. Founded on this principle the Huichol retained a core part of their territory relatively intact until 1964, when the government built the first



**Clandestine Sawmill on the Outskirts of the Huichol Sierra**  
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landing strip in the headquarters of the community of *Tatéi Kié*, the House of Our Mother, as they call San Andrés Cohamiata in their native language. The Huicot plan was meant to develop the resources of the Huichol, Cora and Tepehuan Indians with the backing of UNESCO funds.<sup>1</sup>

Government bilingual schools have been introduced since the

1960’s and some work has been done to improve their health care. The dirt roads, which began penetrating the periphery of their communities after the mid 1970’s, have served to enrich the neighboring lumber companies. Much of their high plateau area was then

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<sup>1</sup> Beatriz Rojas, op.cit. p195

placed under territorial dispute, while the old trees along the shoulders of the roads were plundered without any benefit to the Huichol. Cattle-grazing is also beginning to take its toll, further eroding the soil and diseases like tuberculosis are spreading.

Over the past millennia the *Wixaritari* have endured change by concentrating on their values, always exploring the rest of the world with dignity. They have been ingenious to escape acculturation and retain an alternative culture by relying on their traditional leaders and backed by an intelligentsia of more literate members. Three new leaders were elected by consensus for three year terms at each community headquarter to correspond with the National Institute of Indian affairs once it started functioning in 1951. They formed a body called the ‘presidencia de bienes comunales’ headed by the president of communal goods, who worked in agreement with the traditional authorities.

Land was rescued with the government’s backing, although the Indians were not always happy with the intermediaries the government chose. The most famous among them is Pedro de Haro, about whom Fernando Benítez writes.<sup>2</sup> He served in the unique position of president of the supreme council of the Huichol, until he was replaced by the government in 1976. His successor was hand picked by outside forces and served poorly for 9 years while the forests were plundered and renting grazing lands to Mexican neighbors was encouraged. The position of supreme council disappeared after we had legal confrontations and I was backed by the community leaders, who came to my defense in Guadalajara. Nonetheless, the traditional authorities and the council of elders have been ignored by Mexican authorities since the beginning of the 1990’s.



**Pedro de Haro, November 1980  
Photograph ©Juan Negrín**

Outsiders ignore the *Wixaritari* today as much as ever. So-called ethnographers quote them talking about a pantheon of gods and goddesses, when these terms do not really correspond to native language. They simplistically repeat what honest naturalists and explorers, like Lumholtz or the first ethnographers, like Diguét and Preuss, had researched between 1895 and 1907, then Zingg in 1934.

The *Wixaritari* are amused, when they are not irritated, by the vast array of people who only associate them with the peyote cult of their purportedly folkloristic culture. Serious researchers never gave them credit for even having a notion of how to use verbs in their language, to the extent that Diguét decided to try to teach them how to conjugate an equivalent of the verb ‘to be’, so they could better express themselves. Thanks to McInctosh and Grimes, in the late 1950’s, westerners recognized these people had a

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<sup>2</sup> Los Indios de México II

sophisticated grammar, although their labor was done for evangelistic purposes and they never pretended to study *Wixárika* religious terminology in depth.

As Jay Fikes points out in his book<sup>3</sup>, other anthropologists have acquired fame without even exploring the *Wixárika* within their territory. Finally new research is being carried out on their language that is likely to yield interesting fruits at the University of Guadalajara, under José Luis Iturrioz Leza. The Mexican government has made it clear to the Huichol that any outside visitor to their communities may be denied entry, particularly foreigners. Thus in some way, the government reinforced the powers of the traditional authorities to maintain a nation within a nation.

Today, powerful outside forces are surrounding them with great scourges like drug plantations of poppies, marihuana and coca. Others are bringing pesticides and herbicides without any precautions, causing a great rise in the rate of cancer among this previously healthy population.<sup>4</sup> Most distressing are reports we hear that a great dam might be built near the mouth of the river into which the Huichol canyon flows. That would represent an overwhelming ecological, cultural and archaeological devastation.

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<sup>3</sup> Academic opportunism and the psychedelic sixties

<sup>4</sup> Plaguicidas, tabaco y salud, Patricia Díaz Romo y Samuel Salinas Álvarez

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#### NOTES:

We use the x in Huichol words to indicate a sound that varies between an English sh sound, as in 'she' or a French j sound as in 'je', and a Spanish rolled r sound, as in 'rey'. Western Huichol use 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.