

Peyote and the Mystic Vision

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The Peyote Hunt¹

The Huichol Indians realize the climax of their religious life in Wirikuta, a high desert plateau several hundred miles from their mountain homeland, conceived of as their sacred land of origin.² Wirikuta may well represent a historical as well as mythical site of Huichol beginnings. In Wirikuta, the First People, quasi-deified ancient ancestors, once dwelled in harmony and freedom as nomadic hunters. According to their legends, they were driven out, into mortality, into a life of sedentary agriculture in the Sierra Madre Occidental. Every year, small groups of Huichols, men and women, young and old, are led by a shaman-priest, the *marakame*, in a return to Wirikuta to hunt peyote (*Lophophora williamsii*; Huichol, *hikuri*), a hallucinogenic cactus growing in the high central plateau of northern Mexico between the Sierra Madre Oriental and Sierra Madre Occidental. Although peyote hunts

differ, depending on a variety of factors, such as the composition of the hunt party, *marakame* leadership, and the like, it is nonetheless a very stable event.

To reenter this sacred land these pilgrims, or *peyoteros*, must be transformed into the deities. The complex cluster of ceremonies and rituals which prepares them for this return includes a rite wherein the *marakame* dreams their names and the names of the Ancient Ones and thus determines their godly identities. The peyote-hunt pilgrimage is a return to paradise, for Wirikuta is the place where, as they say, "All is one, it is a unity, it is ourselves." There they "find their lives" and dwell in primordial unity until the *marakame* leads them back to ordinary time and life. The climax of the pilgrimage is the hunting of peyote.

For the Huichols, peyote as a sacred symbol is inseparable from deer and maize. Together, deer, maize, and peyote account for the totality of Huichol life and history. The deer is associated with the Huichols' idealized historical past as nomadic hunters; the maize stands for the life of the present—mundane, sedentary, good and beautiful, utilitarian, difficult, and demanding; and peyote evokes the timeless, private, purposeless, aesthetic dimension of the spiritual life, mediating between former and present realities and providing a sense of being one people, despite dramatic changes in their recent history, society and culture.

The actual pilgrimage lasts several weeks. Each step along the way is highly ritualized, and in retracing the steps of the Ancient Ones, the pilgrims perform numerous actions attributed to the First People at specific locations, reenacting the feelings and attitudes as well as the behavior of the deities. They rejoice, grieve, celebrate, and mourn appropriately as the journey progresses. They do so as a profoundly integrated community. For the hunt to succeed, they must pledge their entire loyalty and affection to each other and to their *marakame*. Unless they are in complete accord, their venture will fail and they will not find the peyote. The journey is a very dangerous under-

1. A shorter version of this paper was prepared for and presented to a conference on Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Cannabis, convened in Chicago, August, 1973, during the IXth International Congress of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, coordinated by Dr. Vera Rubin. It appeared in the volume issuing from that conference, *Cannabis and Culture* (ed. Vera Rubin; The Hague: Mouton, 1975). Grateful acknowledgment is made to the publisher for permission to use it in this context.

2. Field work on which this article is based was conducted during 1965 and 1966, and was partially funded by a Ford International and Comparative Studies Grant administered through Professor Johannes Wilbert of the University of California at Los Angeles, Latin American Center. My colleague Professor Peter T. Furst worked with me in Mexico and collaborated in subsequent interpretations of the data. Many of the Huichol texts were translated by Professors Joseph E. Grimes and Barbara Grimes. I acknowledge gratefully this assistance, and especially that of the late Ramón Medina Silva, Huichol *marakame*, his wife, Guadalupe, and the Huichols who shared so much of their time, their knowledge, and their lives. Ramón led the peyote hunt in which Furst and I participated in 1966; to my knowledge this was the first time anthropologists had an opportunity for firsthand observation of this event.

taking. The pilgrims may lose their souls, conceptualized as fuzzy threads (*kupuri*) that connect each *peyotero* to the deity who gave him or her life. If the *mara'akame* is to protect them from the danger of soul loss, the pilgrims must unconditionally give their hearts to him and to the others. Such trust and intensity of affection cannot be sustained in the everyday world, and once the peyote hunt has ended, it is dissolved. The unity and its disbandment are symbolized by a ritual in which each pilgrim makes a knot in a cord which the *mara'akame* keeps during the journey. When the pilgrimage has been completed, the cord is unknotted and the unity terminated. In a statement of great sociological acumen, Ramón Medina Silva said, "It is true that I receive my power from Tatewari, our Grandfather Fire, but I could not use it without the complete trust of my peyote comrades."

As deities, the pilgrims endure many privations. They forgo or minimize physiological needs: sleep, sexual relations, excretion, eating, and drinking are actually or ritually foresworn during this period, for these are activities of humans, not gods. In becoming gods, the pilgrims are cleansed of their mortality, symbolized by sexual relations. Ritually they confess to all illicit adventures; even children must participate, and the *mara'akame* as well. After this confession, they are reborn and renamed, and the godly character so received is maintained throughout the pilgrimage.

Sometime before reaching the sacred land, everything is equated with its opposite and reversed. The known world is backward and upside down: the old man becomes the little child; that which is sad and ugly is spoken of as beautiful and gay; one thanks another by saying "You are welcome"; one greets a friend by turning one's back and bidding him or her good-bye. The sun is the moon, the moon the sun. It is said:

When the world ends, it will be like when the names of things are changed, during the peyote hunt. All will be

different, the opposite of what it is now. Now there are two eyes in the heavens, *Dios Sol* and *Dios Fuego*. Then, the moon will open his eye and become brighter. The sun will become dimmer. There will be no more difference. No more man and woman. No child and no adult. All will change places. Even the *mara'akame* will no longer be separate. That is why there is always a *nunutsi* [Huichol, little baby] when we go to Wirikuta. Because the old man, the tiny baby, they are the same.

These oppositions, like the godly identities and like the hunt of the peyote, are not merely stated; they are acted out. For example, an old man, now having become a *nunutsi*—a little baby—does not gather firewood in Wirikuta, for such work is not fitting for an infant.

Primeros, those making their first peyote pilgrimage, have their eyes covered on arriving at the periphery of Wirikuta so as not to be blinded by the glory and brilliant light of the sacred land. Their blindfolds may be safely removed only after proper preparation, which involves a kind of baptism with sacred water by the *mara'akame* and a description of what they may expect to see when their eyes are bared to the sight of Wirikuta.

Once arrived, the party camps and begins to search for the peyote, which is tracked by following its deer tracks. When the tracks are sighted, the *mara'akame* stalks the peyote-deer, and cautiously, silently drawing near, slays it with bow and arrow. Blood gushes upward from it in the form of an arc of rays. (Blinding light, flashing colors, and the general intensification of visual imagery are, of course, constants in psychedelic experiences, and indeed the presence of the divine is most commonly signified by dazzling luminosity.) With his sacred plumes, the *mara'akame* gently strokes the rays back into the body. The *peyoter*os weep with joy at having attained their goal and with grief at having slain their brother; his "bones," the roots of the peyote plant, will be cut away and saved, to be buried in the brush so that he may be reborn. The peyote is removed



Peyoteros during 1966 pilgrimage. Photo: Barbara G. Myerhoff

from the earth, and the resultant cavity surrounded with offerings. The cactus is then sliced by the *mara'akame*, who gives a segment to each of the peyote companions. Then, a pilgrim acting as the *mara'akame*'s assistant in turn administers a segment of the peyote to the leader.

This moment marks the fulfillment of the highest goal in Huichol religious life. Unity has been achieved on every level; social distinctions have been obliterated: male and female, old and young, have been treated and have behaved as though they were alike. The otherwise profound distinctions between the *mara'akame* and the followers are deliberately eradicated when the former becomes one of them by receiving the peyote from their hands. The separation of the natural and the supernatural order has been overcome, for the *peyoterios* are the deities. The plant and animal realms have likewise merged, for the deer and the peyote are one. And the past and present are fused in the equation of deer-maize with the peyote. All paradoxes, separations, and contradictions have been transcended. Opposites have become identical. Time itself has been obliterated, for Wirikuta is not only the world as it existed before Creation, but it is also the world that will reappear at the end of Time, after this epoch has ended. Ramón stated this explicitly in saying, "One day all will be as you have seen it there in Wirikuta. The First People will come back. The fields will be pure and crystalline. . . . One day the world will end and that beauty will be here again." The past and future are the same, and the present is but a human interlude, atypical and transitory, a mere deviation from the enduring reality represented by Wirikuta. This moment of unity is a foretaste of paradise and eternity.

The rest of the day is spent in gathering more peyote, to be eaten later. On the evening following the ritual slaying and token consumption of the first peyote, the pilgrims seat themselves before the fire surrounded by their companions and eat several segments of their best peyote. This generally quiet affair is the first release they have had from the earlier intense camaraderie and demanding conformity to ritual. Each one is now alone in his or her inner world,

for it is not the custom, as the Huichols say, to talk of one's visions. Ramón explained:

One eats peyote and sees many things, remembers many things. One remembers everything which one has seen and heard. But one must not talk about it. You keep it in your heart. Only one's self knows it. It is a perfect thing. A personal thing, a very private thing. It is like a secret because others have not heard the same thing, others have not seen the same thing. That is why it is not a good thing to tell it to others.

All that is said is that ordinary people see beautiful lights, lovely vivid shooting colors, little animals, and peculiar creatures. These visions have no purpose, no message: they are themselves.

The year before the peyote hunt in which I participated, before I understood the need for secrecy, Ramón had given me some peyote and watched over me while I had my vision. Afterwards, I attempted to elicit from Ramón an explanation or interpretation of what I had seen. It took me some time to understand his reluctance as he attempted tactfully to steer me away from questions about its meaning to observations about its beauty. We continued in this fashion for a while, until at last he said, "It means itself—no more!" Each experience is personal, and only the vaguest references are made to this part of the ceremony. The visions are always good. If one has followed the *mara'akame* and done all with a pure heart, the experience can only be happy, even joyous. Neither nausea nor terror is experienced, with one exception: When peyote is eaten by one who has not properly prepared himself, not truly confessed, or not gathered "good peyote" under the direction of a *mara'akame*, conventional bad visions are said to occur.

Only the *mara'akame* has routinized visions. They are concerned with lessons and messages from Tatewari. He or she sees Tatewari in the fire and communicates directly with him. Thus the *mara'akame* brings back information



Peyoteros venerate the first peyote. Photo: Barbara G. Myerhoff

from other worlds, information of value and meaning to the people. In classical shamanic fashion, the Huichol *mara'akame* undertakes a magic flight to help the people understand the regions of the unknown. But ordinary pilgrims need not be concerned with such cares; for them peyote brings only extravagant, purposeless beauty and release into the realm of pure aesthetic and spiritual delight. The peyote experience constitutes that part of a person's life which is private, beautiful, and unique. As such, it constitutes that part of religion which has nothing to do with shared sentiments, morals, ethics, or dogma. It is within the religious experience but separate from it. In

some philosophical systems such experiences are considered the most elevated and most intensely spiritual known to humankind, providing liberation from structure within a structure, allowing for a voyage into subjectivity, into the unknowable, within a fixed framework.

Peyote may be viewed as the Huichol provision for that dimension of religious experience which can never be routinized and made altogether public—that sense of awe and wonder, the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, without which religion is mere ritual and form. It provides the ecstatic and enormous moment when the soul departs, flies upward, and loses itself in the other reality. The dark-

ness explodes into dancing colors. The Huichol pilgrims have nothing to fear; knowing that their flight will not last, they can fling themselves into it with impunity. They are protected by the wealth of Huichol tradition, ritual, symbol, and mythology, and by the certain knowledge that the *mara'akame* is guarding them, that they are pure in their hearts. They are at one with their comrades. The religious culture of peyote can be thought of as a strong resilient net that allows for ever higher ascent and greater and greater freedom.

What does the *peyotero* actually see? The *mara'akame* described an ordinary vision and his own contrasting didactic vision of Tatewari:

And then, when one takes peyote, one looks upward and what does one see? One sees darkness. Only darkness. It is very dark, very black. And one feels drunk with the peyote. And when one looks up again it is total darkness except for a little bit of light, a tiny bit of light, brilliant yellow. It comes there, a brilliant yellow. And one looks into the fire. One sits there, looking into the fire which is Tatewari. One sees the fire in colors, very many colors, five colors, different colors. The flames divide—it is all brilliant, very brilliant and very beautiful. The beauty is very great, very great. The flames come up, they shoot up, and each flame divides into those colors and each is multicolored—blue, green, yellow, all those colors. The yellow appears on the tip of the flames as the flame shoots upward. And on the tips you can see little sparks in many colors coming out. And the smoke which rises from the fire, it also looks more and more yellow, more and more brilliant.

Then one sees the fire, very bright, one sees the offerings there, many arrows with feathers, and they are full of color, shimmering, shimmering. That is what one sees.

But the *mara'akame*, what does he see? He sees Tatewari, if he is chief of those who go to hunt the peyote. And he sees the Sun. He sees the *mara'akame* venerating the fire and he hears those prayers, like music. He hears praying and singing.

All this is necessary to understand, to comprehend, to have one's life. This we must do so that we can see what Tatewari lets go from his heart for us. One goes understanding all that which Tatewari has given one. That is when we understand all that, when we find life over there.

Wirikuta is no less magnificent than the pilgrims had been led to expect in the stories they had heard all their lives. Yet after gathering sufficient peyote to take home and plant in house gardens and for use throughout the year, they leave Wirikuta precipitously. It is said, "It is dangerous to remain." Not a moment of lingering is permitted, and the pilgrims literally run away, following the *mara'akame* beyond the boundaries of the sacred area as speedily as their bundles and baskets of peyote permit. They leave behind their offerings, their deity names, the reversals, their intense companionship, and all physical traces and reminders of Wirikuta. Cactus spines, bits of earth, dust, matchsticks, cigarette stubs, pieces of food—everything that was part of or was consumed or used in Wirikuta—is discarded and scraped and shaken into the fire. The things of the everyday world and the things of the sacred are kept rigidly apart.

Returning to ordinary reality, the pilgrims are left grief-stricken, exhausted, and exhilarated by the experience. An enormous undertaking has been accomplished. They have traveled to paradise, dwelled there as deities for a moment, and returned to mortal life. In their lifetime they achieved the most complete intention of religion: the experience of total meaning and coherence in the universe. If, as Bertrand Russell has suggested, a minimal definition of religion consists of the relatively modest assertion that God is not mad, the maximum definition of religion might be said to be the insight and knowledge of utter harmony and meaning, the participation in the alleged coherence of the cosmos. The distinction between appearance and reality is not merely blurred; the two are the same. It is impossible to put it any better than the Huichols' own

description of the peyote hunt and the pilgrimage: "It is one, it is a unity, it is ourselves." Through the *mara'akame* and peyote, the pilgrim has found his or her place in the divine scheme of things: the *peyotero* is of the divine and the divine is in the *peyotero*.

The Structure of the Mystic Vision as Revealed in Wirikuta

Scholars and writers generally agree on the nature of the mystical experience, whether the phenomenon is called transcendence, peak experience, poetic vision, ecstasy, or mysticism; whether it is described in religious or secular terms; whether it is induced by drugs, occurs spontaneously, or is facilitated by techniques that produce bodily changes—altered respiration, fasting, special diets, flagellation, sensory deprivation, rhythmic behaviors such as drumming, chanting, dancing, and physical exercise. Several writers, among them Dobkin de Rios, Walter Pahnke, Alan Watts (1971), Bernard Aronson, and Humphrey Osmond, intrigued by the obvious relationship between religion and psychedelic drugs, have suggested typologies for common constituents of the mystical and the psychedelic experience. I have drawn upon these schemes selectively in analyzing the Huichol peyote hunt as an excellent example of the mystical experience elaborated into a world view.

The most significant theme in the peyote hunt is the achievement of total unification on every level. This sense of unity is the most important characteristic of the mystical experience according to Pahnke, who distinguishes between internal and external unity. Internal unity refers to the loss of the ego or self without the loss of consciousness and to the fading of the sense of the multiplicity of sensory impressions. External unity consists of the disappearance of the barriers between self and object.

Mircea Eliade, in *The Myth of the External Return*, terms this most fundamental experience of unity "the pan-

human yearning for paradise." Paradise is the archetype for the primordial bliss which preceded Creation. The feeling accompanying this condition is variously characterized as beatitude, peacefulness, bliss, blessedness, a sense of melting, and an oceanic flowing into the totality. Images of flowing and blending are a common part of mystic experiences, according to Marghanita Laski's *Ecstasy*, a content analysis of ecstatic imagery. Many explanations have been offered for this yearning toward paradise. Freudian interpretations conceptualize it as a desire to return to the womb or as the wish never to have been separated from prenatal dependence. Jungians see it as a form of incest, a reluctance to individuate and take on the demands of adulthood, for after Creation the human being must be born, die, suffer, feel pain and confusion. The human being works, struggles, is vulnerable and ultimately alone; in short, he or she is mortal. The dangers of attempting to reenter Eden are couched in many idioms. The Huichols say that one's soul may be lost in Wirikuta, that the *kupuri* may be severed. It may be called the loss of ego, rationality, volition, or sanity. The awareness of danger and transience is regularly cited as part of the mystic vision, most dramatically portrayed in the *peyoteros'* flight from Wirikuta—an explicit recognition that ecstasy cannot be a permanent way of life.

Also regularly mentioned are feelings of brotherly love and camaraderie more intense than everyday feelings of friendship and affection. Victor Turner (1969) has suggested that these feelings may be called *communitas*; Martin Buber referred to them as *Zwischenmenschlichkeit*, the I-Thou intimacy that knows no boundaries, when people stand alongside one another, naked, shorn of the guidelines and expectations of role and persona, a seamless, skinless continuity which is the most intense kind of community conceivable. Watts, in *The Joyous Cosmology*, calls the feelings between those who together undertake the mystical voyage "a love which is distinctly eucharistic, an acceptance of each other's natures from the heights to depths" (51). Among the Huichols this acceptance is concep-

The hunt for peyote in Wirikuta. Yarn painting by Ramón Medina Silva.
The Museum for Cultural History, University of California at Los Angeles



tualized, symbolized, and ritualized. The knotted cord binds the *peyoteros* together, but the bonds cannot and should not be carried back to everyday life. Just as the things of the sacred land and the home are separated by leaving behind that which belongs to Wirikuta, so are the human connections undone after the peyote hunt. The *mar'a kame* aids the Huichols in relinquishing ecstasy and shows them that they must leave it behind for another year. *Communitas*, like internal and external unity, is also an experience of wholeness, a form of flowing together, the all is One manifested in social relationships.

Transcendence of time and space is cited by Pahnke and others as a universal constituent of the mystical experience. Space does not appear to be treated with special significance by *peyoteros*, except that the usual spatial categories clearly do not obtain. The entrance to Wirikuta through crashing rocks is known as the Vagina. Transit through these portals is perilous, and shamans must typically pass through such dangerous doorways in the course of their magical flights. Clearly, Wirikuta is not in everyday space.

More significant is the notion of time during the peyote hunt. Mythic time prevails. The single moment contains all that was and will yet be, history is obliterated and the present elongated to imply the beginning and the end of the world. The seamless flow into which the peyote pilgrim slips is eternity, a stable feature in mystical visions.

Also significant is the manner in which individuals dwell, behave, and recognize themselves in the sacred realm. Knowledge of this is provided by the ritualization of reversals on the peyote hunt, which serves several distinct purposes. To know how to act in paradise is not a simple matter; being designated a god is one thing, acting like one is more difficult. How does one remain in character for an entire day or evening or even weeks? How does one treat one's fellow deities? Surely not by following ordinary norms. The upside-down quality of life in Wirikuta serves as a kind of mnemonics, providing a basic metaphor by which the pilgrims can coordinate their

behaviors and attitudes and understand exactly what is transpiring. If the sacred realm is just the opposite of the real world, one can picture it in detail and relate to it very concretely and precisely, but not just any metaphor will serve. The recourse to the reversals is a way of stating that despite appearances, all indeed is One. Not only are differences and multiplicities of form illusory, but things which appear to be the very opposite of each other are shown to be identical, to be completely interdependent, to be part of each other. Subject-object, left-right, male-female, old-young, figure-ground, saint-sinner, police-criminal—all these are definable only in terms of each other. Paradoxes are resolved in this experience; formulations that tax the rational mind to its limits are managed comfortably and lucidly. The deer, peyote, and maize are one. A logic prevails, though not the Aristotelian logic which holds that A cannot be B. Eliade (1962) has called this the *coincidentia oppositorum* and regards it as the eschatological image par excellence. Indeed, it occurs in countless societies, in folklore, and in the worlds of dream and imagination, always suggesting the mystery of totality.

Ineffability is consistently cited as part of this vision. The experience is essentially nonverbal. In spite of attempts to relate or write about the mystical experience, mystics insist either that words fail to describe it adequately or that the experience is beyond words. "Perhaps," Pahnke suggests, "the reason is an embarrassment with language because of the paradoxical nature of the essential phenomenon." Another interpretation for the ineffable nature of the mystic vision may be added to that of paradoxicality. As poets have always known, in order to evoke an intense emotional response, effective symbols must be ambiguous to a degree. This notion has been called the multireferential feature of symbols by Turner. The broad spectrum of references embraced by symbols permits one to find in them particulars sufficiently personal to elicit a subjective response. A detailed discussion of individual ecstatic experiences would make it clear to

those within a mystical community that each person's vision is distinctive. It is more important for each person to have an intense and private experience and at the same time a sense of sharing it with others. Specific language would diminish the sense of *communitas* among the Huichol pilgrims; this is implied in these words of the *mara'akame*: "It is like a secret, because others have not heard the same thing, seen the same thing."

Finally, one of the recurring explanations of the power of drugs is their ability to loosen cognitive social categories. Conceptualizations are socially provided and given in language. One of the sources of wonder and ecstasy in the mystic experience is the direct perception of the world, without the intervention and precedence of language and interpretation. The mystic experience is nonverbal precisely because it takes one back behind the word, or more accurately, before the word, to the stunning immediacy of sense data. The Huichols are surely correct when they say that to talk about one's visions is not good.

Peyote Outside of Wirikuta

To discuss peyote only in connection with Wirikuta would be misleading, for it is also part of ordinary Huichol life, and is used on many occasions. One of the most significant features of peyote use among the Huichol is its integration within the society and culture. This notion is especially relevant from the perspective of contemporary American youth culture, in which drug use by comparison is haphazard and promiscuous; with few exceptions, psychedelic drugs, although possibly producing similar visions, are not integrated into a system of meaning which may be regarded as a world view.

Among the Huichols, peyote itself is called "very delicate" and generally regarded as sacred. But to be sacred it has to have been gathered in the proper fashion, that is, under the leadership of a *mara'akame* in Wirikuta. Peyote purchased in Mexican markets is not sacred, according to Ramón, who comments: "That other peyote, that which

one buys, it did not reveal itself in the Huichol manner. One did not hunt it properly, one did not make offerings to it over there [in Wirikuta]. That is why it is not good for us." In order to be sure that they always have a supply of peyote from Wirikuta, the Huichols bring some back from the peyote hunt to plant in their gardens.

The references to "that other peyote," the one that can be purchased, is explained by Huichol ethnobotanical classification, which specifies the existence of two kinds of peyote, "good and bad." (Peter Furst, in *Flesh of the Gods*, identified bad peyote as *Arioscarpus retusus*, a member of the same cactus subgroup as *Lophophoro williamsii*.) They are very similar in appearance, and only someone experienced, usually a *mara'akame*, can be certain of collecting the good kind. One may accidentally purchase the bad kind, called *tsuwiri*. The results of eating *tsuwiri* are indeed terrible: "If one eats one of those, one goes mad, one goes running into the *barrancas*, one sees scorpions, serpents, dangerous animals. One is unable to walk, one falls, one often kills oneself in those *barrancas*, falling off the rocks"—effects are similar to those attributed to *Datura*. The hallucinations described due to eating *tsuwiri* are conventional; a common one is the experience of encountering a huge agave cactus in the desert, thinking it is a woman, and making love to it.

Eating *tsuwiri* may occur not only as a result of mistaking it for peyote; it may be a supernatural sanction, punishment for going to Wirikuta without prior confession. "It is said that if one comes there not having spoken of one's life, if one comes not having been cleansed of everything, then this false *hikuri* will discover it. It is going to bring out that which is evil in one, that which frightens one. It knows all one's bad thoughts." Not only will the *tsuwiri* read one's thoughts, but those who have not confessed honestly or completely will probably behave oddly. The pilgrim who knows that he has lied to his companions will eat his peyote in secret "because he does not have good thoughts, he knows he has not spoken honestly with his companions." When such a person hunts for peyote, he

Yarn painting by Ramón Medina Silva of Barbara Myerhoff receiving the name of a deity on the 1966 pilgrimage. Collection of Barbara G. Myerhoff



Yarn painting by Guadalupe, Ramón's widow, of Peter Furst receiving the name of a deity before the 1966 pilgrimage. The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. Gift of Peter F. Young



will find the *tsuwiri*, which "only has the appearance of peyote," and when he returns to his companions after his harrowing visions, the *mara'akame* knows at once what has occurred. The man must confess, and then he will be cleansed by the *mara'akame*.

Peyote, like maize, can "read one's thoughts" and punish one for being false or evil. The peyote rewards or punishes a person according to his or her inner state and moral standing. The sanction is immediate, just, and certain, a most effective regulator of behavior in a small, well-integrated society.

Peyote is eaten or drunk ritually only during dry-season ceremonies, but may be eaten casually at any time of the year. It is used medicinally in a multitude of situations—to relieve pain, as a poultice applied to wounds. It may also be taken for energy, endurance, or courage. In fact, it is a panacea. The quantity taken ritually is usually insufficient to obtain visions and must in this context be regarded as having the specific symbolic purpose of achieving communion with the deities.

Peyote-eating for the purpose of experiencing a vision thus constitutes but one relatively narrow part of a larger set of purposes. It is nonetheless quite an important part, though more for the *mara'akame* than for ordinary folk. When peyote is eaten for visions, nonritually, it is taken in a relaxed and convivial atmosphere, much in the manner of the Westerner's use of liquor. Concerning one's first experiences with peyote early in life, Ramón had this to say:

The first time one puts the peyote into one's mouth, one feels it going down into the stomach. It feels very cold, like ice. And the inside of one's mouth becomes dry, very dry. And then it becomes wet, very wet. One has much saliva then. And then a while later, one feels as if one were fainting. And one begins to yawn, to feel very tired. And after a while one feels very light. One feels sleepy, but one must not go to sleep. One must stay awake to have the visions.

In at least one context peyote may be used in prophecy. If a very young child, upon being given a small amount of peyote, finds it pleasant-tasting, this may be construed as a sign that he or she would make a good *mara'akame*. The interpretation of the taste of peyote is itself an interesting matter; the Huichols insist that peyote is "sweet." "Chew it well," they tell each other, "it is sweet, like tortillas." This may be a reversal brought back from Wirikuta; clearly, though no one vomits after eating peyote, neither is it savored. Huichols eating it look like anyone else with a mouthful of peyote: they grimace, sucking in their cheeks and moving their eyebrows up and down in a most uncharacteristic manner—a reaction to the shockingly sour taste of the cactus.

Cleaning the peyote is not an elaborate process: the roots are usually cut off and the dust and earth brushed away. The little tufts of hair on the top, called *tsinurawe* (the eyebrows of the peyote), are especially delicate and are always eaten. Different peyotes are said to differ in flavor, texture, and color, and one of the pleasurable pastimes in Wirikuta is comparing peyotes and their aesthetic attributes. The most highly valued are those with five segments, five being the Huichol sacred number. These five-segment peyotes are often strung together as a necklace and may be used to adorn the antlers of Tatewari. Peyote is often referred to affectionately as "*ti peyote*" (our peyote) and even spoken to in baby talk. Often its attributes are likened to stages in the growth of maize. "It is new, it is soft like the ripening maize, how fine, how lovely."

Before being consumed, the first peyote eaten in Wirikuta is touched to the forehead, eyes, breast, voice box, and cheeks. The gesture is not repeated after this first ceremonial eating. Peyote brought out of Wirikuta is carefully packed into baskets in concentric circles from the bottom up to prevent its being jostled en route, for, as is said, it is delicate and the trip is long.

Peyote may be eaten fresh or it may be dried and ground and drunk. It may be taken along on trips and given as a

gift to a host, to eat or plant. It is sometimes traded for various items with other Indians, especially the Cora and Tarahumara, who regard Huichol peyote as very desirable. It is always in demand and must be available throughout the year, since all major religious ceremonies require the presence of peyote, maize, and deer meat or blood. The ceremonies form an interlocking cycle. The peyote hunt is preceded by the drum-and-calabash ceremony and followed by the deer hunt; substitutes for deer meat and blood are acceptable, but nothing can take the place of properly gathered peyote.

Peyote is no less important as an artistic motif. As Carl Lumholtz (1900) has shown, peyote is a theme with numerous variations in embroidery and weaving, a key source of inspiration.

The Huichol World View

The Huichol world view in several important features represents a cultural inflection of what appears to be a highly regular human production: the mystic vision. If dreams and myths are structured, as Freud and Lévi-Strauss have persuasively demonstrated, it should come as no surprise to find that one of the most private, subtle, ineffable, mysterious, and elusive human experiences—the mystic vision—is also structured. Still, it is easier by far to deal with cultural regularities in matters of an instrumental nature, pertaining to subsistence and survival, environmental requirements, and similar events where utility and efficiency dictate a fixed number of possible alternatives. In the realms of the imagination, metaphysics, the arts, religion, areas which are not identifiably rational undertakings, we expect variation rather than uniformity. Our explanatory concepts are taxed when we find specific similarities in very different cultural settings where history and diffusion cannot be evoked. We may then fall back on old concepts—memory traces, collective unconscious, instinct, racial memories, and the like—or on the as yet

incomplete formulations about universal characteristics of the human mind and human nature. Most anthropologists have had to content themselves with mere descriptions of social processes, falling short of earlier hopes for the discovery of genuinely lawful regularities. Nowadays, only the intrepid take up problems of psychic unity and common human experience, though these issues, if hazardous, are among the most important and interesting.

From this perspective, recent studies on the relationship between hallucinogenic drugs and religion may be regarded as a significant development in the attempt to enlarge our understanding of universals in human social phenomena. Osmund, Schultes, and Wasson have demonstrated that the origins and history of religion are inseparable from the use of psychedelic plants. More recently, Aaronson and Osmund, Pahnke, Watts (1971), and Dobkin de Rios have developed typologies which draw our attention to the highly regular factors in psychedelic drug experiences. Watts, Pahnke, and R. P. Marsh have been concerned specifically with isolating the effects of a drug experience which appear to be the same as those associated with the mystical vision—the “Fourth Way,” as it is called in the *Mandukya Upanishad*, the way that is neither waking dreaming nor dreaming sleep, but “pure unitary consciousness, wherein awareness of the world and of multiplicity is completely obliterated. . . . It is One without a second.”

The Huichols offer a fine example of this experience; more than that, they provide a case in which the mystic vision is extended and elaborated into a world view, much of which can be explained by reference to their use of peyote. That hallucinogenic drugs produce regular experiences is now an established fact: what interests us is how these Indians use those experiences. To say that peyote is the direct cause of the Huichol world view would be an oversimplification. Peyote use produces the raw material which is built into a system of thought, a *Weltanschauung*. The individual peyote eater's expectations precede and profoundly influence perceptions and interpretations of

personal visions. But these expectations are not random; they are shaped by the regularly recurring results of eating peyote. Thus do culture and individual interlock.

Peyote is the touchstone for the Huichol world view. In the basic psychedelic experience we find the source of much of their version of the ideal—in human relations, in the relationship of men and women to the natural world, in the understanding of human history and ultimate destiny.

The Huichol world view may be understood as a combination of several layers of belief: the mystic vision, classical shamanism, and a hunting ideology. Many features typically associated with the last of these include the continuity between man and animal; the belief that the animal (deer-peyote) is reborn from its bones; the deer as the *mara'akame's* familiar spirit; the shamanic flight through dangerous passages to the other world; the shaman's access to direct knowledge of the supernatural realm, and so forth.

Perhaps in the present context the most significant lesson

of the Huichol use of peyote is a fuller understanding of a hallucinogenic drug in a sacred context. Peyote produces certain biochemical changes to some degree uniform in their effects. What is done with these effects, what meanings they are given, and how they are integrated and elaborated into a context of significance, coherence, and beauty, is the concern of anthropologists. Simply stated, we see peyote used as a means. Clearly, its effects per se are valued, but they are a relatively small part of the entire picture. To discuss Huichol peyote use in terms of "kicks," "highs," "escapes," and all the other terms used to describe the goals of individualistic drug-taking outside of an integrated cultural setting would be a profanation. Peyote is woven into every dimension of Huichol life. It is venerated for its gifts of beauty and pleasure. But this projection is Durkheimian; with it we see with the Huichols venerating their own customs and traditions, the sense and pattern of a way of life which uses this little plant, this part of its natural environment, so wisely and so well.