

The Crossing of the Souls: Huichol Perceptions of Peyote

by Stacy B. Schaefer

It was an early March morning in 1988. I was at the Tepic airport, waiting for the plane to take me once again into the Sierra, when I ran into some of the Huichols who had been my companions on a pilgrimage from San Andrés Cohamiata to the peyote country in San Luis Potosí. I was surprised and pleased to see them because I had brought copies of photographs from the journey to give to them. Sharing my pictures with the peyoteros had been one of their conditions for allowing me to record the event with my camera. Along the way they even directed my attention to scenes, objects, people, and actions they thought were important for me to capture on film. Now they stood around, photos in hand, laughing at their own images and pointing out details.

Minutes later, another Huichol whom I knew from the community approached our little group, took a look at a photo of some pilgrims collecting peyote and became a bit agitated. "You people take photographs," he said to me. "You come with us on the pilgrimage and even partake of the peyote. But you never ask 'why' to the peyote. You never ask. Well, I'm going to tell you: peyote is everything, it is the crossing of the souls, it is everything that is. Without peyote nothing would exist, but you people never ask why."

At first I was somewhat taken aback at his reaction. In retrospect, however, I owe him a debt of thanks. At the very least, his reproach was a humbling experience for me, and a constructive reminder that, as ethnographer, I should never be deceived into thinking that I fully understand Huichol culture. Regardless of how many years I have now been doing field work, or

of the fact that I have gone with the Huichols on their sacred pilgrimage, I must constantly remind myself that there will always be so much more that I do not know and still have to learn—indeed, that there is much I will probably never know or understand. Concerning peyote and its meaning to Huichols, this one man's words posed a challenge: look for answers to his question, "Why?" What did he mean when he said peyote is the "crossing of the souls"? These questions inevitably led to others. There is an abundance of recent literature on peyote use and symbolism among the Huichols; Furst (1972, 1976), Myerhoff (1974, 1978a, 1978b), Valadez (1978, 1986b), Benítez (1968a, 1968b), Mata Torres (1976, 1980), and Negrín (1975, 1977, 1985) have all written on the subject. But I wanted to go further and learn firsthand, not what westerners think about the sacred cactus, but what Huichols themselves know and believe—about the botany of this powerful little plant; about what kinds of experiences they have; about what meanings they place on a psychoactive succulent that, not being native to the Huichol country of the Sierra Madre Occidental, requires them to make long and arduous journeys to collect it in the high desert hundreds of miles to the east.

Since that chance meeting in 1988, another milepost in my professional and personal life has steered me in this direction of inquiry. In 1989-90, with Ph.D. in hand and field work among the Huichols ongoing, but now at last beyond the dissertation stage, it was time to look for academic employment. The job market for anthropologists has not been good for several years, but as luck would have it, a tenure-track

position did open up for someone with my qualifications and interests—at, of all possible places, the University of Texas-Pan American. As it happens, the campus is situated in the lower Río Grande Valley in South Texas, the only region north of Mexico where peyote grows naturally. And, sure enough, in my first year there I actually entertained Huichol visitors who had heard of peyote growing north of the Río Bravo (the Mexican name for the river we know as the Rio Grande) and who were eager to see it for themselves. They had traveled to Texas in the company of Susana and Mariano Valadez, old friends of mine who are co-directors of the Huichol Center for Cultural Survival and the Traditional Arts in Santiago Ixcuintla, Nayarit. Mariano is Huichol, a renowned yarn painter; Susana is a U.S. citizen with an M.A. degree from my own alma mater, UCLA, who has spent years working with Huichols, including a two-year residence in the Huichol *comunidad* of San Andrés Cohamiata. By this time I had already become familiar with some of the places north of the border where peyote grows wild, and it is there that I took my visitors. Although it was not their revered Wirikúta, the Huichols were visibly touched by the sight of so many peyote plants. Most important for me, they were moved to talk about things connected with the sacred cactus I had not known before.

Rich though this experience was for me, most of my contact with Huichols has been with families living in and near San Andrés. I have worked there since the 1970s, and over the years have had the chance to develop close relations with a number of individuals. They, in turn, have become valued consultants for my work as ethnogra-



Peyoteros leave offerings at Wakuli Kiteni, the "doorway" to Wirikúta.

(Photograph by Stacy B. Schaefer, 1987.)

pher. My major consultants are men and women who are *mara'akámes*, shamans, and/or have been raised in a traditional environment and are thus well versed in Huichol religious beliefs, rituals, and ideology. All have participated in the pilgrimage, some as many as five times, others ten times or more.

I do not claim that what I have learned about peyote from these people applies across the board to the beliefs and practices of all Huichols. Regional and individual variations concerning the sacred cactus, its use, and rituals that revolve around it can be found from community to community, a phenomenon to which scholars who have accompanied Huichols on the pilgrimage can attest. At best, I would call the following essay a progress report—information that I hope and intend to build upon over the years. For I, too, see myself as a pilgrim, on an endless path seeking knowledge over time and through experience.

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On the pilgrimage in which I participated, one of the *kawiteros*, who are usually wise old shamans, taught me how to look for peyote. He harvested a cluster of nine peyotes from their common root stock, as usual taking care to leave the bottom part of the root in the ground. One of these had a little pinkish-lavender flower blooming on top. He picked the flower, pressed it to my eyes, put it in my mouth and told me in a soft but sure voice, "Eat this flower of the peyote. We are not allowed to eat peyote

yet, it is not time. But if you eat this peyote flower it will help you, it will guide you to find many, many beautiful peyotes." I ate the flower and began to look. It was uncanny but within minutes I found clusters of peyote all around me. When I called the *kawitéro* over to tell him about this, he calmly replied with a smile, "I told you the truth, I do not tell lies. I know these things, that's why I am a *kawitéro*."

Preparation and Consumption of Peyote

The preparation and consumption of peyote is almost always done within a strictly ceremonial context.¹ Eating peyote, as pointed out by Furst (1972:76, 1976:125-127) is a highly ritualized activity likened to the partaking of sacramental food. The optimal manner of ingesting peyote is in Wirikúta when it is freshly harvested. Peyote cannot be eaten until all of the ritual obligations are performed by the pilgrims. The *peyoteros* must first stalk and hunt it like deer in Wirikúta. Afterwards, the pilgrims collect peyote in the surrounding area in their woven baskets, known as *kiliwei*. No peyote is eaten until the shaman indicates that the time is right to do so. On the pilgrimage in which I participated, the blessing and eating of peyote commenced on top of Kauyumaritzie. This hill in the center of Wirikúta is the home of Elder Brother Kauyumári, from where the shamans summon him to participate in the ceremonies. It is covered with scrub cactus and on the summit there is some flowering

sage. Everyone sat on the rocks crowning the summit, positioning themselves so as to face east. All of the ritual objects were taken out and blessed by the leading shaman with sacred water. Candles and copal incense were lit and while the shaman pointed his plumed wand to the five directions everyone prayed. Votive bowls were taken out and fresh peyote placed inside them. The shaman purified everyone with his feather wand and sacred water and touched the peyote to their cheeks, throat and wrists. The white tufts on the peyote were removed and placed with the offerings. Then the *peyoteros* peeled the tough skin at the base of the cactus and consumed small amounts of the first peyote of the pilgrimage. That done, everyone hiked down the hill to our encampment.²

Back in camp, the sacred fire was kindled and that night the shaman, with the help of his assistants, sang. Throughout the night all the pilgrims circled the area five times. Five is the sacred number for Huichols and all the members consumed peyote five times during the night. At the first rays of dawn, they painted designs on the faces of their ritual companions, *compañeros* in Spanish, with the ground-up yellow root of a desert shrub known as *uxa*. They also exchanged peyote they had selected especially, each giving some to all the others and receiving some in turn from everyone else, a custom also observed by Furst (1972; 1976:128). Then it was time to hunt "the Mother of Peyote," the peyote cluster whose form resembles a lifesize deer. When the "deer" was found, some of its constituent plants were skewered onto votive arrows. Sacred gourd bowls were unwrapped and fresh peyote was put inside them. Candles and copal were lit. The leading shaman called each family to the site and blessed everyone with sacred water and peyote. One large peyote in the cluster represented the heart of the deer. The *mara'akáme* divided this up into slivers. He sandwiched the slivers into peyote buttons that had been opened and cleaned, and placed one each inside the mouths of the pilgrims. Upon completing this ritual, and having spent the night consuming peyote at regular intervals, the pilgrims had reached the state in which they were journeying inwards, caught up in their own visions, their own communications with the divine Huichol entities.

Although Huichols prefer to consume peyote fresh, the pilgrims also dry peyote in the desert in order to store it better. This is done by trimming the roots of the plants, opening the buttons so that all the ribbed sections are exposed to the sun, and re-

moving the white tufts in the very center of the cactus. As noted earlier, later they may be strung on a special twined maguey cactus fiber string and carried back to the Sierra, where they will be used in future ceremonies such as Hikuri Neixa (Peyote Dance.)

During this latter ceremony a woman is specially selected to grind the dried peyote on her metate. She adds water to the pulverized peyote, making it into a white frothy drink for the participants. The leading shaman stirs the drink with the point of a prayer arrow and people are anointed on the head with the foam from the peyote. In some instances, cattle are also anointed on their heads and horns, as are bags of offerings. The celebration of Hikuri Neixa lasts two days and nights. During this time, the pilgrims and their *compañeros* dance five times around the temple compound. Five spots are demarcated with pine trees to indicate the cardinal directions and the sacred center. At each location, the participants drink cupfuls of the liquified peyote and offer the same to their companions. Some Huichols say that the potency of the peyote does not diminish when dried. In fact, when drinking peyote one may ingest more than when eating it fresh, because it is easier to consume greater amounts more quickly in liquid form. I was told by one Huichol about a relative of his who came across some dried peyote he had been saving for the last two years. He was getting ready to prepare his land for planting and took the peyote with him. He ground the cactus, consecrated the soil with the powder, added water to the rest, and drank the mixture so that he would have more energy to complete the task of clearing his field. Even though the peyote was over two years old, it was stronger than he expected and he ended up "wandering lost" in his field until the effects wore off.

To return to the pilgrimage, there are two important people who serve as guides for the pilgrims. One is the leading shaman, known as Saulítsika, the other is the "Keeper of the Peyote," called Nauxa (pron. nauzrra). Saulítsika presides over all of the rituals, and when he sings he travels beyond his immediate surroundings of the circle of the pilgrims around the fire in Wirikúta, by calling upon all of the gods to come join them on their journey. His song becomes a road that transports both pilgrims and divine entities. Nauxa has the major responsibility of making sure that the pilgrims are able to travel along this path. He fills a basket with peyote that his fellow pilgrims have gathered for the ceremony. When the fire is lit and burning



When harvested properly, clumps of peyotes grow from the root stock left in the ground. (Photograph by Peter T. Furst.)

and all the necessary prayers are made to Tatewarí, Grandfather Fire, Nauxa first blesses the Saulítsika and Urukuakáme, the Keeper of the Temple. He then circles the fire and blesses each pilgrim in turn. In completion of this ritual, Nauxa circles the fire again, walks some distance away, blows on the bull's horn trumpet that is also used for the deer hunt, and returns to the group.

By this time the pilgrims, seated around the fire, have selected a certain quantity of fresh peyote which they place in front of themselves. Nauxa blesses the peyote with his *muviéri*, his plumed wand, and gives each pilgrim the number of peyote they themselves have indicated they plan to consume at this time. Everyone eats his or her peyote and the mara'akáme begins the chanting that will continue through the entire night. While the mara'akáme carries the souls of the pilgrims along the journey of his song, Nauxa makes certain that the pilgrims are in the physical and mental states that facilitate their out-of-body travel along this path. Five times during the night, when the pilgrims must circle the fire after a cycle is completed in the mara'akáme's song, Nauxa places the same amount of peyote as originally consumed in front of each pilgrim. If an individual started the ceremony eating five peyotes, he or she would eat five more peyotes after each cycle in the shaman's song. By the time the night is over, that individual would thus have consumed twenty-five peyote plants. What this means is that although the individual

participants decide ahead of time on the dosage they plan to take, it is Nauxa who distributes the peyote and who, in doing so, keeps the road open for all the pilgrims to travel.

This ceremony is replicated later in the Sierra upon the pilgrims' return to the temple and their awaiting families. It is Nauxa who is the vital link between the pilgrims and those members of their families who stayed behind. He goes ahead of the pilgrims to the temple and announces their arrival. Slung across his shoulders he carries bags filled with votive gourds and peyote that have been given him by the pilgrims. On this night Saulítsika sits outside and sings the entire night. Nauxa blesses and distributes the peyote on five separate occasions to the families inside of the temple. As one of my consultants explained, "Afterwards, at dawn, the pilgrims begin to arrive at the temple. They give blessed water to their women, their mothers, to all of their family. But the family members are 'lost,' they are in another realm, at least those who ate a lot of peyote. Only Nauxa and Saulítsika know what is happening there and who is traveling with the peyote. They know this because of the singing and because of the center of the fire. Nauxa knows what is being sung and what is happening in the temple."

When the temple ceremony has been completed, the pilgrims return to their *ranchos* and repeat the peyote rituals with their family members. This time, the fam-



Baskets of peyote are displayed at the ceremonies following a peyote hunt. (Photograph by Stacy B. Schaefer, 1987.)

ily ancestor-god house, *xiriki*, serves as the temple, the place where the offerings are deposited and the peyote distributed. The pilgrims present their close kin, young and old, with peyote they have selected especially for each, as well as with thinly sliced pieces of the "heart of the Mother of Peyote" originally gathered in Wirikúta. In the past, the family rancho was structured similarly to the temple cargo [ritual office] system. Everyone in the extended family had a special cargo that changed every five years. At the present time, only some of the cargos continue to be assigned to individuals. The family members who have gone to Wirikúta and the shaman, or shamans, in the family preside over this ceremony to celebrate the successful pilgrimage. The family members who partake of the peyote usually spend the night around the fire insulated from the external world while embarked on a journey within their own personal realms.

Peyote Visions

Upon the ingestion of peyote an individual can expect to experience brilliantly colored visions in fluid motion. Before these visionary effects manifest themselves, the body, as it breaks down and absorbs

the plant alkaloids, undergoes a period of "contentment and hypersensitivity followed by calm and muscular sluggishness." The individual "sees flashes of color across the field of vision, the depth and saturation of the colors (which always precede the visions) defying description" (Schultes 1972:15). Within three hours after ingestion, endlessly repeated geometric patterns such as mandalas and latticework designs, as well as more complex imagery of elements such as flowers, animals, people, and scenery, appear in vibrant colors. These are typical designs that arise from stimulation of the central nervous system discharging neurons into structures of the eye (Siegel 1977:139). The designs perceived are phosphene patterns and are intimately related to the geometry of the eye, the visual pathway and the temporal cortex (Oster 1970: 83). Phosphene imagery, first analyzed by Heinrich Klüver (1926, 1928, 1942, 1966), appears in constant patterns that are characterized by varied and saturated colors of intense brightness, giving the impression of having textures and symmetrical configurations. Given the right conditions, any human can perceive these patterns. The luminosity and fluidity of such designs can vary with the dosage taken.

Huichols consider these designs to be a form of communication with the gods, and individuals actively strive to receive these visions (Siegel and Jarvik 1975:138-139). Since peyote-induced phosphene images are constant, Huichols have integrated these designs into their cultural worldview and have endowed them with special meaning and significance.

Phosphenes induced by psychoactive chemicals appear in two stages. The first involves brightly colored geometric imagery in motion, called *niérika* by Huichols, in reference to sacred designs that serve as portals to other worlds. Many take the form of pulsating mandalas. The Huichol shaman interviewed by Eger Valadez (1978:41) describes these as follows: "The peyote *niérika* are very colorful and pass by often, many of them. They just go passing by, passing by, all moving, getting bigger and smaller all of the time. Many animals and beautiful snakes also appear and pass by, without any explanation." I have received various descriptions of snake imagery. One woman told me: "I saw some animals that looked like snakes of many colors, some were striped. They filled the room. I turned and saw up above it was filled with snakes. Wherever I turned there

were snakes all over." Elements in the natural environment can become incorporated into this psychedelic imagery. Numerous Huichols reflect upon their visions of the sun as a brightly glowing sphere that shines like a mirror. One consultant describes what he saw when looking into the fire: "I felt I saw the fire turn into tissue paper.... The form of the fire disappeared and I saw only tissue paper in the glowing form of flowers like the ones we make when we are going to sacrifice a calf. There were many colors of this flowerlike tissue paper." Huichol women experience the same kinds of phosphene designs and consider them to be sacred gifts from the gods. They feel it is their duty to record these psychedelic patterns in their weaving and embroidery designs after they have returned home. Failure to do so may result in serious hardships and illness sent by the gods for not having shared these divine communications with their family and community (Schaefer 1990, 1993; Eger 1978; Eger Valadez 1986b).

Some pass from this first phase of phosphene imagery into a second phase where figural representations appear that for the most part are culturally determined. Reichel Dolmatoff (1978:47) notes that while the more geometric phosphene patterns are already present within the structure of the eye, the figurative images are projections of preexisting models that are culturally determined. During the second phase of phosphene perception, Huichols say they have direct communication with various gods. The link from the first to the second phase of psychedelic images is sometimes likened to going through a tunnel, following a path through the darkness, and entering through a doorway or passage to reach what lies ahead. My consultant who told me of his vision of the fire goes on to describe this experience: "Then in the very center of the fire I saw in the distance a person; afterwards the mara'akáme told me it was Tatewarí, Grandfather Fire. I saw the entrance to the temple, even though we were in Wirikúta, and I entered the temple. I saw the vines that hang from the rafters in the temple roof to mark the four directions. From there, in the very center I saw Haramara (the goddess of the Pacific Ocean) in motion; then I saw Chapala (a large lake south of Guadalajara where the goddess Rapauwiewéme lives) in motion."

My comadre related to me part of the visions she had when we were in Wirikúta: "I saw a large plant where we had left offerings for the Mother of Peyote. Rays of light like ribbons were coming from this plant. On one side there was a lit candle.



A young peyote pilgrim wears a traditional peyote design made with uxa face paint.
(Photograph by Stacy B. Schaefer, 1987.)

This same candle had roots. There was a deer where the peyote was. The deer acted like it was drunk. Then white foam started to come from its mouth, the kind of foam that comes from grinding peyote. It was coming out of its mouth. The foam looked like soap, like when the hikuri is killed. That's how it was pouring out. But the deer was talking to me. I didn't hear her very well until she saw me and we looked each other right in the eye."

The figurative images that come from this second phase of psychedelic phosphenes are interpreted as actual representations of the Huichol gods, and play a special part in the visions of shamans. One mara'akáme explains it as follows:

If I eat peyote at sunset, then I will feel this way about midnight. I will begin to see beings that look like people, but they aren't people; they are gods, messengers of the gods, who are beautiful. They have beautiful clothes on, their faces are painted, they wear lots of feathers. Then they begin to speak to me and reveal many things about themselves, how they came to be, and what things I must do. (Valadez 1986a:21)

In addition to visual effects, the mescaline in peyote can bring on olfactory, tactile, gustatory, and auditory sensations. I have not recorded any olfactory ones, but with respect to gustatory experiences I have heard from several Huichols that after eating the first peyote, which tastes extremely

bitter, the next ones taste much sweeter and are easier to chew and swallow. This was also reported by Furst (1972:177), who quotes Ramón Medina as telling a pilgrim to "Chew well, chew well, for it is sweet, it is delicious to the taste." Although Furst attributed Ramon's instruction to the youth as a ritual reversal of words and meaning, there may in fact be some validity to this in cases where gustatory sensations are also involved.

As for tactile experiences, the only one that was related to me was that of my comadre's son. At the time, he was twelve years old. He and his sisters had eaten the peyote their parents had brought them from Wirikúta. He retreated inside his house and lay down on the pallet, completely covered with a blanket. I went in to talk to him and touched him on the back. He recoiled and I heard him take a deep breath. His sister told me that he was "lost, traveling with the peyote." I later found out he was having a vision of snakes all over the room. They were completely covering him, he could feel them slithering back and forth, and curling around his body.

Many Huichols with whom I spoke talked of auditory sensations. The wind and its different sounds are often described. One woman told me that when she was deep within the peyote a man came to visit her. It was the god of the wind Eka Tewari



After harvesting peyote in Wirikúta, peyoteros slice buttons in order to dry them for transportation. (Photograph by Stacy B. Schaefer.)

(Wind Person). He spoke to her and told her she had to remember his song. He began to sing for her and repeated the song until she knew it well. In the morning she related this to the mara'akáme, who told her she must sing the song for the whole temple group. Once she sang it out loud for everyone she knew she had it memorized. She says that it is now a part of her forever.

On one occasion I was attending the Hikuri Neixa ceremony. It was the wee hours of the morning and, having stayed up two days and nights straight, most of the members were sleeping in the temple, myself included. I awoke to hear the woman who shared the cargo of Tatewari with her husband break into a spontaneous song. She sang on and off for close to an hour. Later, I asked my comadre about this and she said it was the peyote that brought her the songs.

Receiving these songs is a sign of good luck and that the gods are pleased. During

a Hikuri Neixa ceremony I attended in 1992, one of my compadres was completing his tenth year with the role of Nauxa. He sang and sang with great emotion, all the while dancing in step to the beat. Other temple members followed him, and the violin and guitar player who held cargo in the temple improvised to accompany him and his songs. A fellow temple member recorded the singing on his tape recorder. The next day my compadre told me that he didn't "make up these songs"; rather, they were songs the peyote had given him.

The mara'akáme interviewed by Valadez (1989a:21) explains how the music comes to him when he is *empeyotado* (intoxicated with peyote):

For about the first hour I don't feel anything. Then my voice will start to feel strange and I won't understand very well what people are speaking. Then I will have a very strong urge to play music, so I will play my violin. I will listen to music coming out of the air, pure air. Then I'll be feeling that the air is coming

down, like a cloud that is being lowered onto the earth. Soon I'll be able to hear everything very close and clear, but I'll hear things differently than they normally sound.

Not all Huichols achieve this state of going beyond the geometric designs to seeing figures, scenes, or animated objects. Not everyone is able to hear the gods and converse with them. Those who strive to reach these levels will eat many peyote plants over a long period of time. Even then, such deep visions are never assured.

Peyote visions, as explained by one shaman, differ depending on the level of spiritual awareness an individual has achieved on his or her life's path:

...when mara'akámes who have reached a very high level look into the fire they will see Tatewari—Grandfather Fire—as a person, an old, old man with grey hair and a wrinkled face. He speaks to the mara'akámes and they listen to him.... The mara'akámes use their mirrors and their muviéris (feathered wands) to understand him better. The other people, the ones who

aren't as far along on their 'path', don't see this old man in the fire. They will only see rattle-snakes, speckled lizards (relatives of the Gila Monster), and mountain lions, who are the special messengers of this god—his representatives.

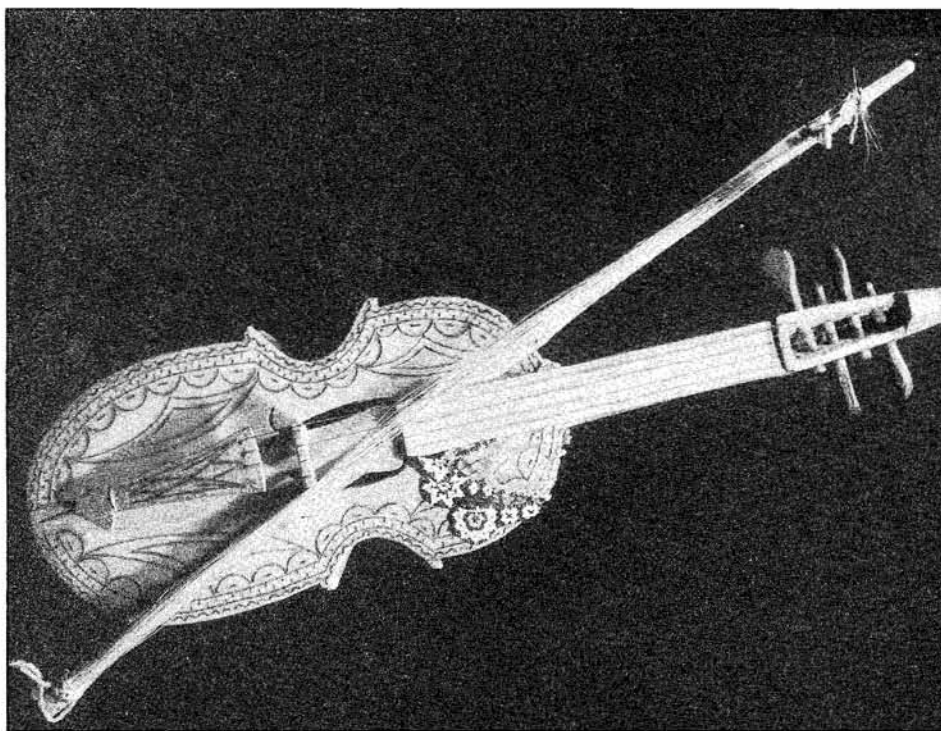
Huichol shamans incorporate the visionary and other effects they experience into the ceremonies they are performing, as well as in healing and divining rituals. An older female shaman with whom I have a close friendship, will sit with her family in a circle around the fire. After eating peyote, she wraps herself from head to toe in her blanket and waits until the peyote takes effect. At intervals in the night she sings songs that are meant for specific family members. She has attuned herself to the peyote to such a fine degree that even when not intoxicated, she can hold peyote, or merely be in its presence, and break into song. She tell me she sings what the peyote are saying. The peyote also enables her to dream better so that she can heal people.

The mara'akámes, being experienced travelers who have sought knowledge from the teachings of peyote, interpret the visions that other pilgrims have received:

They have to reveal it to the mara'akáme, because they see important things in their visions. They receive directions from the gods.... So all the people speak of their visions together ... everything appears in a person's visions, and so he talks of it. He reveals everything except for the special messages of the gods that pertain only to his own life and shamanic path. Those special instructions pertain to him and only him, and he won't explain any of this. (Valadez 1989a:21-22)

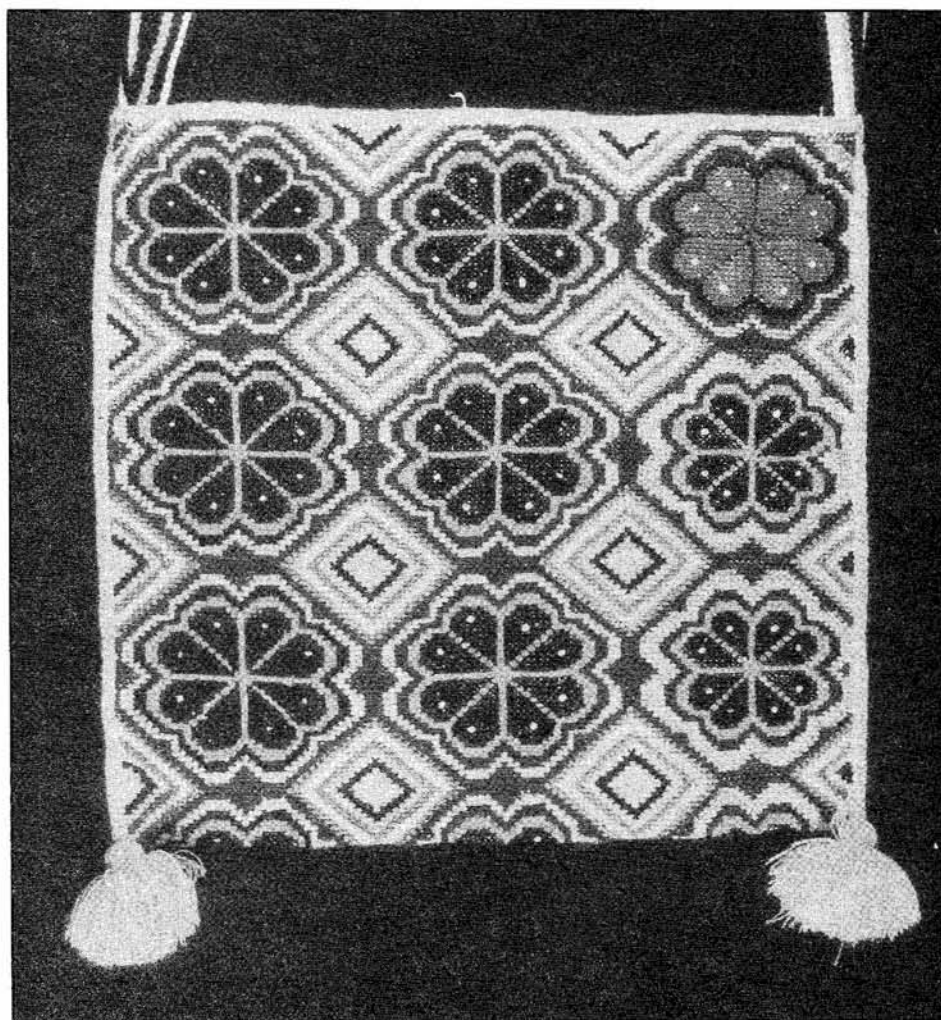
Levels of Meaning

Peyote and the peyote pilgrimage are integrating elements that reinforce Huichol cosmology and the beliefs and traditions that revolve around their culturally shared worldview. Peyote serves as an enculturating force, echoing religious tenets in recurring themes that are transcended to visions, the spoken word through myths and songs, actions in rituals and ceremonies, and beliefs that permeate all levels of individual and collective Huichol consciousness. Having visions of a sacred deer appearing out of a large peyote cluster, as did my comadre, and feeling it look you right in the eye and talk directly to you, is bound to have a profound effect on any individual. Within the context of Huichol culture, believing in the myths, rituals, even the entire religious system, is no longer a matter of passive acceptance of one's indoctrination but of truly interacting with all they contain, and experiencing them as realities



ABOVE: *Traditional beaded peyote designs and burnt engravings decorate Ramón Medina's homemade Huichol-style violin.* (Photograph by Peter T. Furst.)

BELOW: *An embroidered bag, by Guadalupe de la Cruz Ríos, depicts mature peyotes, with a "Mother of Peyote" in the upper right corner.* (Photograph by Stacy B. Schaefer, 1986.)





Huichols participate in a Hikuri Neixa, or Peyote Dance, performed at the San José temple. (Photograph by Stacy B. Schaefer, 1986.)

and as truths about the nature of the world and humanity at large.

Huichols, like participants in any society, begin learning about their culture at birth. The fact that they are introduced to peyote, first while in the mother's womb, then through her milk, and finally by actually ingesting the sacred cactus, has a definite effect on how children see the world, and how they learn to interpret these phenomena. I have noticed a marked change in the behavior of children after they have received small doses of peyote via their mother's milk. They become very calm, smiling often, and occasionally grabbing into the air at what I believe must be imaginary objects and colors. Several women confirmed my observations, stating that the disposition of their children does indeed change if they nurse at a time when they have been consuming peyote.

Huichol children, even before they reach the age where they will eat enough peyote to dramatically change their conscious state of mind, are well clued-in to what they can anticipate to experience (Eger 1978:41-43). They learn about this when family mem-

bers talk of their peyote experiences, or when they hear temple members give accounts of their inner experiences before the leading mara'akáme. Brilliant peyote-induced phosphene designs surround them in their daily life in woven and embroidered clothing, belts, and bags—even in the yarn and bead art work Huichols make to sell. The fact that they actually see many of these same phosphene images under the influence of peyote gives credence to the worldview that Huichols have constructed around the peyote. Combined with this is the peyote pilgrimage itself. Mothers who are still nursing or have children two years or under, prefer to take them along wherever they go. This includes the journey to Wirikúta, where children, like all members, become pilgrims and actively participate in the sacred rituals. Another ceremony, Tatéi Neixa, which celebrates the first maize and green squashes, is also held especially for all children five and under. The shaman, through his song, metaphorically transforms the children into hummingbirds, eagles, or other birds and takes them on the pilgrimage to Wirikúta, an

event that has been discussed in great detail by Furst and Anguiano (1976).

Peyote and the pilgrimage to Wirikúta have a powerful influence on unifying the family as well as the temple community and all of its members. Huichol conceptions of family have been explained to me by various consultants as resembling the growth of a vine. One woman said: "Do you know a plant that we have which grows and makes new buds that turn into branches? This is the way we see the family. If you have family, and if you are a plant, then you grow. At one point a branch grows as if it were your hand, and another like your legs. And it gives off more branches on this side and that. I think that the gods see us this way when we are a family. The gods know us because we grow this way."

Families share the same *iyári*, heart-memory. From the descriptions I have received about this, the concept of *iyári* seems to refer to a kind of genetic memory that comes from past and present family members. This same woman told me, "Although we were born without a single thought, a

single memory, it was there for us, it came from my mother and father, they gave this memory to us from before." Even after someone in the family has died, he or she is still physically present in the form of a rock crystal captured by the shaman in a special ceremony to bring the deceased back to the family. The *urukáme* lives in the family shrine, upon the altar, and is brought out for all the rituals (Furst 1967; Perrin 1996).

With these concepts of family in mind, it is no wonder that when some of the family go on the pilgrimage, those who are left behind at the rancho follow their loved ones along the journey in their thoughts and in the rituals they must perform to ensure their safety on this dangerous passage. They, too, observe many of the same restrictions, fast until late afternoon, do not eat salt, and abstain from sex. They make the ritual fire every day and pray for the pilgrims. At night they dream with them, and from these dreams the elders usually predict where they are on the pilgrimage and what has happened to them. Upon the return of the pilgrims, each family member in the rancho is blessed with sacred water and given peyote chosen especially for them so that they may also share the visions and other experiences. If a family member has not been truthful in naming all of the people with whom he or she has had sexual relations, aside from the spouse, the consequences may be devastating when it comes to eating the peyote. In one rancho where I attended the ceremony marking the return of the pilgrims, the eldest daughter and her husband retreated into their bamboo house after eating the peyote. Several hours later the rest of the family, myself included, were sitting around the fire in the patio and could hear her thrashing around, moaning, and occasionally screaming. I was concerned about her, but her mother told me to leave her be, that the peyote was punishing her because she had not confessed completely. The mother and grandmother had tears in their eyes, and the next morning it was a very emotional scene when they talked to the young woman and convinced her to tell all before the *mará'akáme* so that they all would be clean and purified.³ This was the first time I had ever seen someone have a "bad trip" with peyote. Everyone I talked to, however, had a story or two to tell about someone they knew who had a negative experience. Other reasons for such an adverse reaction to the sacred plant are that the person has not fully completed ritual obligations with a god, or has not been truthful in his or her dealings with others. Thus, peyote also reinforces the importance of properly fol-



A Huichol family whose child almost died leaves offerings at the sacred water holes called Tatéi Matiniéri, "Where Our Mother Dwells." (Photograph by Stacy B. Schaefer, 1987.)

lowing the traditions as well as the moral code, which, in turn, brings families closer together in a unified whole.

The temple members are united on the pilgrimage. When the group sets out on the journey, its members also undergo a purification ritual that involves confessing any sexual transgressions. Afterwards, the shaman ties knots in a special string, with each knot representing a pilgrim and the uniting of the souls of all participants. They are thus both physically and symbolically tied together for the entire pilgrimage, as well as afterwards, up to and including the completion of *Hikuri Neixa*, months later, when in one of the concluding rituals the knots are untied.

I witnessed the importance of this concept and the degree to which all the members vehemently acted this out when we stopped in Zacatecas before reaching *Wirikúta*. We were traveling in the trucks and van of several mestizo friends and acquaintances of the temple group. One Huichol man had a very sick little daughter. Before leaving San Andrés on the pilgrimage, the medical doctor of the clinic, Armando Casillas Romo, had supplied the family with a mixture of water and glucose to administer orally to the little girl. Emaciated from debilitating diarrhea, she had also developed a severe cough that racked her frail body. Since the child's mother was in a ritual fast, her breast milk had dried up. The mestizo companions were

very concerned, and with the best of intentions made a detour to take them to the emergency room in the city hospital. The doctor there insisted that the only way the child could recover would be to leave her in the hospital for several days or more; the mother could stay with her. All of the Huichols rejected this, and those most adamant were the child's father and the leading *mará'akáme*. They insisted that she was part of the pilgrim group, that the group was all joined together, and that we could not be separated. Everyone contributed to pay for antibiotics, glucose solution to be given orally, and powdered milk. Despite the unbearable heat in the day, the freezing nights, and lack of purified water, the little girl made it through the pilgrimage and is now a healthy eleven-year-old. Father and shaman attributed this miraculous recovery to the help of the gods and the offerings left for them in their sacred peyote homeland.

Perhaps the most poignant example of the enculturating forces at work in the consumption of peyote and the rituals of the pilgrimage was brought to my attention with a Huichol woman I have known for more than eight years. I first met her in the mestizo town of Santiago Ixcuintla, Nayarit, near the Pacific coast. She had come to visit the Huichol Center there, and I began to get to know her.

At first I thought she was a mestizo because she wore the typical western dress



Dressed in beautiful feathered hats and embroidered outfits, a group of peyoteros return home to San José following a peyote pilgrimage. (Photograph by Stacy B. Schaefer, 1987.)

of a mestizo woman and because her Spanish was excellent. But it turned out that her family was from San Andrés Cohamiata, where she had also been born and raised. At a very young age, she had been taken to the Franciscan boarding school at the mission of Santa Clara, about two hours away, whether by her parents' choice or by force is not clear to me. I have gathered some accounts from Huichols who were fellow students at the mission school. Some of them had indeed been compelled to go, under threat that otherwise the nuns would not help the sick who had come for medical aid. The arrangement was that in exchange for the nuns' medical services, one of the children had to stay behind and attend the school. The woman in question completed the sixth grade, married a Huichol who also had attended the school, and they had moved down from the Sierra to live near Tepic, the capital of Nayarit. She rarely went to the Sierra to visit her family and did not actively participate in any of the religious ceremonies.

The national economic crisis in the 1980s affected everyone, and, no longer able to afford to live in the city, a few years ago she and her husband decided to move back to San Andrés Cohamiata. After some years living there, they were given a cargo in the community government, and at this writing have just received a major temple cargo. In 1992 they joined the temple group on the peyote pilgrimage. For both of them it was the first time they had assumed so great a

responsibility, and it was also the first time they had ever eaten peyote. I talked to this woman after their return from the pilgrimage. Both she and her husband were elated, praising the sacredness of the peyote and the beauty it brought to them in their visions and experiences. Now, they are active members in the temple and eagerly look forward to the next pilgrimage the group will make. The woman also took me aside and confided something very special. She told me that for years she and her husband had been trying to have a second child. After consulting a mara'akáme, and with his guidance leaving special prayers and offerings in Wirikúta, she has just become pregnant. With a warm, broad smile on her face she told me that what the shamans say is true—that what the peyote tells you is true, that you must follow these teachings with your heart and the gods will look after you.

Conclusion

Having sought answers to why peyote is "the crossing of the souls," and what it is that Huichols know about the sacred cactus, and having collected firsthand descriptions of inner experiences with peyote, I am only too well aware how much remains for me to learn about the multiple meanings that for Huichols revolve around peyote. From the perspective of an ethnographer, I would say that peyote is meaningful because it unifies family and community members; and that it serves an

enculturative purpose, instilling and reinforcing the importance of cultural beliefs and values, as well as a collectively shared worldview. However, speaking from a more personal point of view, from the intimate conversations I have had with Huichols about peyote, and from the experiences that I, myself, have had with these people and their sacred plant, I am led to think that it is much more than this. As one Huichol put it, "Peyote is for learning; those with strong hearts will receive messages from the gods." Peyote enables a person to tap into other dimensions, other ways of seeing, feeling, hearing, and sensing the world. With their carefully structured cosmology that includes a belief system constructed around peyote and nature, the Huichols are provided with a cultural framework in which to place the information received and interpret the things they experience. The door is thereby opened for one to develop and evolve a more profound sense of self as well as family and community. Experiences such as these make one contemplate life, mortality, the metaphysical world, and the requirements involved in following a spiritual path to reach higher levels of awareness. As the twentieth century draws to a close, Huichols are experiencing greater pressures than ever from the outside world and are challenged more than ever to maintain their own cultural integrity. The peyote experiences are an essential way for Huichols to reaffirm their cultural identity and yet step beyond this cultural threshold to understand and become part of a greater whole, of an increasingly multicultural world where cultures transcend political boundaries.

Nevertheless, because of antidrug agitation and federal and local police action, many Huichols now have great fear of running into problems with the authorities in the states through which they pass on their way to Wirikúta. There have, in fact, been detentions of pilgrims for possessing peyote, for the use of peyote, even among Huichols, is still not legal under Mexican federal law. A great deal of ambiguity exists in this body of legislation. The Supreme Law, which defines general normative principles of the Mexican federal law, contains nothing that would suggest peyote prohibition. The regulatory laws, codes and regulations, however, forbid the use of peyote. Classified as a psychotropic substance, it falls under the most stringently regulated category of narcotics. (Ari Raijsbaum 1995, personal communication).

The other thing Huichols fear is that overharvesting by people other than them-

selves will one day exhaust the peyote supply. This concern is real and well founded. Ari Raijsbaum, an INI official working in the Procuría de Justicia (Justice Department of Indian Affairs), told me in the fall of 1995 that clandestine harvesting in Wirikúta by non-Huichols has escalated to the point of jeopardizing the quantity, supply, and well-being of the peyote population as a whole, especially old-growth peyote. Raijsbaum reports that the plants are ripped from the ground, root and all, leaving no possibility for the peyote to regenerate. As a result, where there once used to be areas filled with larger clusters of peyote, only a scattering of small immature plants now remain, if any at all.

But protecting peyote and its ritual use has implications beyond allowing some indigenous cultures to practice their religious traditions. The quest for peyote among the Huichols is also a quest for the self. In that sense, the peyote hunt is part and parcel of a universal quest for society and the sacred that transcends cultural boundaries and unites humankind in its ultimate search for its own humanity. No doubt, not all Huichols are conscious of these meanings beyond their own society. But some are. It is worth quoting what a Huichol shaman said to me during the closing peyote ceremony before the coming of the rains. He was telling me that the neighboring mestizos think that Huichols are lazy, that they don't work hard because they have so many ceremonies. He went on to say: "Yes, it's true that we have many ceremonies to ask our gods for luck, health, that the maize grows well, that there are many deer and cattle, that our families are healthy. What these people don't understand is that we do not have these ceremonies just for ourselves alone. We have them to ask the gods to care for all the people, everywhere, so that the world will keep going, so that life (in the world) will continue to exist."

Notes

1. Outside of ritual, peyote is consumed only to restore energy, stay awake, ward off hunger, and alleviate intestinal disorders.

2. Although not occurring on this particular pilgrimage, in some instances a peyotero may spend the entire night on the summit of Kauyumári's hill in the hope of receiving a special message from the deities.

3. Lumholtz (1902:156) describes the effect of peyote on one Huichol man, who, based on his behavior, was said to have violated the rule of sexual abstinence during the deer hunting rituals:

The attack lasts only a few minutes, and subsides as suddenly as it came on, though a person may become very violent, tear off his clothes, and run against the others with threatening gestures and wild, loud talking. In that case he is seized and tied hand and foot until he regains his senses.

The importance of confessing sexual transgressions

during the purification rituals of the peyote pilgrimage is made clear in Myerhoff's account of the 1966 pilgrimage she and Furst attended (Myerhoff 1974:135-136). One of the young women participants was very reluctant to name her sexual partners and was sharply berated for it by her companions. According to Myerhoff: *Ramón explained that her action had jeopardized the entire journey, that had she not at last relented, the trip could not have been undertaken that year, for "all must be of one heart, there must be complete unity among us."*

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