Current Comments

Huichol Mythology and Culture. Part 2.

Can the Huichols Absorb Modern Technology and Retain Their Traditions?

Number 29

July 20, 1981

Last week I told you about the muralsized Huichol yarn painting that ISI commissioned and purchased as part of its corporate art program. About a year ago, I discussed many aspects of Huichol culture and tradition. In this essay, I would like to focus on the daily life of the Huichols—on what it means to be a Huichol living in today's world—as I experienced it firsthand.

While I've long been curious about Huichol culture, my interest increased when, about a year ago, Olga Vasquez Brooks went to live with the Huichols to do a master's thesis on exceptional children. Her husband, Bob Brooks, runs the small importing business from which we purchase the Huichol art. Given my interest in gifted children,4 Olga asked me to read her thesis proposal, and I later agreed to become one of her advisers. While she was in Mexico-under the aegis of the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (INI)-Olga showed the director of INI my Current Contents® essay on the Huichol Indians.3 Having read it, he suggested to Olga that I visit the Huichols during their annual fiesta in January. (January is the time that the replacement of tribal authorities takes place—a kind of annual inauguration.) I was delighted with the opportunity to have a personal look at the culture of the people who create the artwork that I love so much.

My ultimate destination was San Andres, a little settlement in the Mexican state of Jalisco that accommodates

about 100 fiesta participants. Very few Huichols dwell there year-round. The Huichols are a community of about 12,000 people, scattered over a considerable area of the southern tip of Mexico's rugged Sierra Madre Occidental Range.⁵ San Andres itself is located in the northernmost section of the mountainous region the Huichols inhabit.6 Though some authorities believe the Huichols to be descended from Toltec and Aztec refugees of the Spanish conquest.7 others believe they are linked with the coastal tribes of Navarit, and had settled in the Sierra long before the Aztecs first entered the valley of Mexico.8

In traveling, half the adventure, they say, is just getting to where you are going, and that was certainly true on this trip. In Guadalajara, my first stop in Mexico, the weather was fantasticwarm during the day and comfortably cool as soon as the sun went down. Since I had two days before I had to leave for Magdalena, headquarters of INI and jumping-off point for the more remote regions that the Huichols live in. I decided to do a little sightseeing. Guadalajara is the home of the great Mexican muralist José Clemente Orozco, who, together with Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros, is part of Mexico's most illustrious artistic triumvirate. Since Orozco was such a great influence on Guillermo Wagner Granizo, who had executed a mural for ISI,2 and since I had never seen Orozco's murals firsthand, I decided that this was a good chance to become better acquainted with his work.

My first visit was to the Palacio del Gobierno, the building in which the Congress of the State of Jalisco meets. Both the Sala del Congrejo and the stairway you climb to reach it are adorned with Orozco's art. Orozco's murals are full of anger-stark portrayals of the evils of the clergy, the Nazis, the communists, and government in general. Though I was shocked and impressed by what I saw, I am sure that one has to understand the artist better-as well as Mexican history-in order to truly appreciate these murals. They are not exactly the kind of artwork I would choose to adorn my home. They better serve as a constant reminder to the elected representatives of Jalisco of the horrors that past governments have perpetrated on both the Mexican people and the people of the world. After a brief visit to the National Museum, I went to the Hospicio Cabana, a former orphanage in which there are also a great number of Orozco frescoes, reflecting the same horrors I have just described.

I spent most of the next day navigating through a chaotic but effective bus system while trying to get to Magdalena via Tequila, where the drink is made. In Magdalena I spent the evening viewing a film about illegal farm workers called Johnny Chicano. At 8:30 the following morning, I took a taxi to the airfield about a mile outside of Magdalena; it was there that my contacts from INI were supposed to meet me. It so happened that there were two Huichols there: 75-year-old Francisco Serio, a respected shaman, or mara'akame, and the younger of his two wives, who was about 30 years old. Like me, they were waiting for an official from INI and a plane to San Andres. INI pays for these flights but the airport manager would not allow anyone to leave without the proper INI signatures and authorization—even when I offered to pay their way.

By 10:30 am, I was still hanging around the airfield, waiting for an INI official to show up. One of the local residents, who had worked in Arizona. drove me back to town. We located the INI offices and there I found Mario. who was supposed to have met me at the airport. Mario in tow, I returned to the airfield to find that a plane from San Andres had just come in. The pilot informed me that Olga and Jorge Martinez Rodriguez, the local physician. were waiting for me at the San Andres airstrip. I was all set to board when Mario informed me that they could not send a plane out with less than five passengers. We retrieved Serio and his wife from the air terminal, but even myself and one counting Huichol-who, we were informed, was back at INI headquarters, waiting for a flight to San Andres-we were still one passenger shy. Mario asked me whether or not I had enough baggage to make up the difference.

Just then, another Huichol bound for San Andres turned up, so now, at least, we would have our proper complement of passengers. But still another snag developed: a flight could not go out unless either the director or the sub-director of INI had signed the authorization. Mario obligingly made up the papers, but when we took them back to INI headquarters, neither the director nor the sub-director was available. Eventually, we got an economist to sign the forms. Then we all trooped back to the airport, but the airport manager refused to let the plane go out because our papers contained a mere economist's signature. I showed the manager my letter of authorization from INI-which contained the signature of the director—and after some haggling, we were permitted to board our Cessna and take off for the Sierra Madre Occidental. I had to leave the letter with the airport manager, however, which later caused some embarrassment.

When we finally landed in San Andres, Olga and Jorge were still waiting patiently to meet me. The "clinic" where I was to live stood just a few hundred yards to the left of the airstrip, while the village was about the same distance to the right.

The Huichol Indians, as I mentioned earlier, live scattered over an enormous, mostly mountainous area. They are primarily an agricultural people, and corn is at the center of their life and religion. San Andres is located on a mesa—a flat table of rock—situated among canyons and all sorts of mountainous terrain. There is one access road used by a few trucks bringing in supplies, but on the whole, much of what comes in is by burro or mule.

The village itself contains a small Huichol temple, or calibuey, a Christian church, and a school accommodating about 100 students-relatively large by Huichol standards. The village serves mainly as a political-religious center and contains public housing for times of fiesta or other gatherings of the Huichols. The houses are otherwise empty for much of the year. They are taken on a first-come, first-served basis during social events, and it is not unusual to find Huichol families tripling or even quadrupling up in these public shelters, of which perhaps only six or seven are occupied year-round. During the rest of the year, most of the Indians live on rancherias (homesteads) of varying size. A few Indians, mainly the merchants and cattle-herders, are relatively well-off, but most live marginal existences. Apart from the Huichols, there are a very few mestizos-Mexicans of Spanish-Indian descent—living on Huichol communal land in the Sierra. Incidentally, an indication of Mexico's cultural diversity is the fact that there are 56 indigenous languages spoken.

Though I took no meals with the Huichol families during my stay in San Andres, I did have lunch one day with a group of ganaderos-mestizos who come to buy Huichol horses and cattle. They took the thick skin of a pig, cut it up into square chunks, and dropped it into a caldron full of boiling oil standing over a fire-almost fondue-fashion. The result of this was a dish known as chicharones, pieces of meat that are very crispy on the outside but quite wet and fatty at the center. Though the ganaderos have special permission to wander in Huichol territory, they are watched very closely by both tribal authorities and officials of the INI alike. because they tend to exploit the Huichols by purchasing animals when the Indians are incapacitated by liquor or hard times.

Olga and Jorge put together their meals on the top of a rusty old oil drum, which was heated from beneath by a wood fire. Jorge would use the water he boiled in this fashion for sterilizing syringes as well as cooking eggs. He had come to San Andres three weeks prior to my own arrival there, and was determined to stay a full year—his obligation as a new doctor under Mexican law. But several of his predecessors had staved only a few weeks and then left. Over dinner beside the smoky fire under the oil drum. Olga told me that medical attention was inconsistent at best in the Sierra. By the time people learn that a doctor has arrived at the clinic and are able to reach it, generally the doctor has already gone.

Part of the blame for the poor quality of the medical treatment, however, lies with the Huichols themselves. Though one boy of eight silently endured eight stitches in his face after falling on some barbed wire, the Huichols are not always so cooperative. Many of them are reluctant to go to the doctor, and even when they do, they often fail to take their medicine. One woman, for in-

stance, had evidently neglected an infection for two years before she finally came to Jorge for treatment. Jorge wanted to give her intravenous injections of antibiotics to stop the infection quickly. She refused these, but she permitted him to give her the shots intramuscularly. She improved noticeably during the few days I was there. Jorge wanted another woman, who was pregnant, to remain in the clinic overnight, but she refused and probably delivered her child at home. On yet another occasion. Jorge tried unsuccessfully to convince a family that they all had to be treated for TB, even though the mother was the only one showing obvious symptoms. Despite these difficulties, however, and despite the fact that some of the Huichols in Jorge's territory are a fourhour walk away from the clinic, the waiting room often has 20 patients in it. In fact, when a family member does have a medical emergency, many more family members generally end up being treated for various maladies also.

There isn't much to do in San Andres after the harvest is in, so many of the women spend a great deal of time embroidering the colorful suits that the Huichol men wear. But they also sell a few to the tourists by bringing them to Tepic or other places, even Guadalaiara. The embroidered designs are fantastic. The Huichols may lead an otherwise low-key existence, but they do enjoy a riot of vibrant colors in their clothing. In addition to the embroidered clothes, the women make colorful beaded hats, bracelets, necklaces, earrings and rings, many of which are for sale to tourists in towns like Tepic. There are even a few artisans who make ceremonial masks, one of which I bought for 1,000 pesos, or about \$50. Though it is difficult to see in the photograph, hundreds of small beads are pressed into beeswax.

Although the Huichols do not like to have too many visitors, I found that

those I spoke to were either friendly or at the worst nonchalant-never hostile. Though the Huichols do not consider drinking a problem, there is, by American standards, a significant alcoholism problem among them. I met quite a few drunks during my stay, but this was primarily because of the fiesta. It is during their fiestas that the Huichols do much of their heavy drinking. Otherwise, they rarely appear in public in such an exaggerated condition. Intoxication is an acceptable form of behavior among the Huichols. Possibly this is because they accept the "altered state" produced by eating peyote. Nevertheless, the Mexican government considers drinking a serious medical problem-not only among the Huichols in the Sierra, but throughout Mexico. Illustrating the extent to which alcohol is used among the Huichols is the fact that, even when food was in short supply, commercial incentives ensured that cases of beer were always available. At \$.75 a can, the price was a nontrivial amount to bear for many Huichol families.

Life is hard in San Andres—as it is throughout the Sierra. The operation performed on the eight-year-old boy that I mentioned earlier was done first by the light of my flashlight and a candle, and then with a gas lamp after someone figured out how to use it. Yet. the light that the lamp provided would have been judged barely adequate to read by in most other places. In fact, very little in San Andres is the way it is in more "civilized" parts of the world. A teacher's job, for instance, is not just pedagogic—he or she must also see to the care of those children who come from far away, and who must stay overnight in order to attend classes. Every morning, we, and the villagers, hauled water from a well 600 yards away from the clinic. And the mornings themselves are very cold and damp. The sun usually warms everything up by around 11:00,



Huichol ceremonial masks. Hundreds of small colored beads are pressed into the beeswax coating the surface.

and I had to change clothes by noon. But the Huichols wear the same outfit all day, and drape themselves in a blanket when they are cold. Not all of them have blankets, and perhaps not surprisingly, respiratory diseases such as TB are quite common, due to the altitude, climate, and poor nutrition. Though the Huichol women are absolutely beautiful by anyone's standards, they seem to age rapidly under their harsh existence.

The clinic has no fence around it. The cattle and mules leave their droppings wherever they please, so that the area immediately surrounding the clinic is somewhat less than sanitary. Since the village has no running water, the toilet facilities are the great outdoors. The Indians have promised to build a cooking stove for Jorge—he had made that a condition for staying on. He could also use a nurse or some other assistant, but that would be fanciful thinking indeed for a man who even lacked a stetho-

scope. Later we "borrowed" one that wasn't being used from a Catholic mission in Santa Clara, a neighboring Huichol settlement.

The trip to Santa Clara that had netted Jorge his stethoscope had been prompted by the offer of medical supplies by the mission there. They had been sent a shipment of drugs by a relief group in New York, but they had no doctor and could not put the drugs to practical use. When Jorge and I arrived, we found a hodgepodge of medicines, mostly samples. We discarded the antibiotics that had expired (a pity, considering the chronic shortage of these drugs in San Andres), but we did find plenty of isoniazid, and a few precious antibiotics, such as Kanamycin, that were still viable. The priests and sisters at the mission were very pleasant to us and provided us with a nice lunch of chick-pea soup, bean soup, and tortillas. While we ate, we were surrounded by dozens of giggling Huichol children.

Santa Clara, incidentally, is rather welloff by the standards of the region: it has a toilet and running water.

We had come to Santa Clara by mule, covering the distance in one-and-a-half hours. Someone in Santa Clara told Jorge that my mule was a little unpredictable, and though he had not been a problem, I agreed to change mules. The stirrups on the new mule were too long for me, but since I had already been riding with my feet out of the stirrups most of the time, I didn't think it important and did not ask that they be adjusted. This proved to be a serious mistake.

Just as we were arriving back at San Andres, Olga sent her mule into a gallop. With no urging from me, my mule immediately followed suit, and since I couldn't put my feet in the stirrups, I bounced up and down until I fell off. I hit the ground with my hands first, then my side and head. My face was badly bruised, and some of the Indians later asked me if I had been in a fight. They appreciated the humor when I said that my fight had been with a mule that did not like gringos.

Toward the end of my stay, I met the San Andres social worker Maria Gonzales. She is a Huichol who speaks beautiful, easy-to-understand Spanish. I asked her why there are no medicallytrained Huichols. She replied that the Mexican government provides scholarships past the secundaria, or high school, level, so it is up to the family to help students through school. While tuition may not be a serious problem, books and other expenses often are. Yet at present costs, only \$200.00 a month would support a medical student. It turned out that there was in fact one Huichol youngster from another village who was on the road to a medical degree. But Maria also knew of another gifted young person, in San Andres, who was ready for preparatoria. This is similar to our junior college. He could

be supported initially for even less. I promised her I would contact relevant US foundations to find out whether their programs might support Huichol education. To date, I've been unsuccessful.

A basic education program on the secundaria and preparatoria levels would have to function on a large enough scale so that at least a few dozen potential students could finish preparatoria. Hopefully, several of them would go on to finish a medical program. The conditions for making such scholarships or loans available to Huichol students should include returning to practice medicine among their own people. Unlike doctors from other parts of Mexico, Huichol doctors would not only know the language and customs; they would also have families there as an incentive to remain permanently.

I'm sure there is a need for at least a couple of dozen doctors among the thousands of people scattered throughout the huge area that makes up the Huichol homeland. While I am still hoping to find a foundation willing to fund such a proposal, ISI will in the meantime adopt that gifted Huichol young person Maria spoke of. Hopefully, he will make it through medical school. She assured me that all funds provided would be devoted directly to his personal support. In fact, I will be visiting Cristino Reza Carrillo, aged 18, this month in either Tepic or Magdalena.

Some people fear that the Huichol language may not survive, considering the need to include words of Spanish—and even English—origin in daily conversation. Attempts to develop a Huichol written language have so far been unsuccessful. But for the time being, I see no danger that the language will die. The problem, rather, is that economic conditions are increasingly driving the young people into the cities, never to return, and never again to live as their forefathers had in their

ancestral homeland. The INI is only a token attempt by the Mexican government to help the indigenous cultures of Mexico. It is strangely ironic that an oilrich country cannot find a way to provide enough funds to support the education of a few thousand doctors and professionals. But you have to experience the frustration of dealing with Mexican bureaucracy to understand why so little changes. The irony is that with proper legal and managerial skill, one might be able to extract available funds from existing programs.

Will the Huichols continue to create and wear their decorative clothing? None of the Huichol teachers I met did, nor did most other Huichols who had acquired an advanced education. But most of the Huichols are still barely literate. Will they continue to create their distinctive yarn paintings, even in the face of the cheap imitations turned out for tourists? Only occasionally.

It is easy to say that we would like to see Huichol or other old Mexican cultures preserved. But these people want the "good life" too—the amenities of life we take for granted. It is difficult to see how the Huichols can obtain them without contamination or dilution of their way of life. A Coca Cola sign over the village store symbolizes the breadth and permanence of the cultural invasion. Unless a significant number of people become interested in their paintings, it is doubtful that the work could support more than a few families. I am certain that the artist of our mural received only a fraction of the price, exploited by middlemen even more than artists in other places. It is possible that the commissioning of this particular work stimulated some additional interest in large Huichol paintings. But only after I have returned to Mexico will I learn if that interest can be sustained. I would be delighted to learn of interest on the part of any museum that would want to commission a similar work.

My thanks to Stephen Bonaduce for his help in the preparation of this essay.

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