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Alternative Constructions of Religious Expertise in a Huichol Community, Jalisco, México

Research Year: 1996

Culture: Huichol

Chronology: Pre-Columbian

Location: Jalisco, México

Site: Santa Catarina Cuexcomatitlan

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Abstract

This is a report on ethnographic fieldwork funded by FAMSI. The research was conducted in the Huichol community of Santa Catarina Cuexcomatitlan, in Jalisco, México between 1996 and the present.

The study focussed on three aspects of Huichol religion: wolf nahualism, mirror divination, and Kieri practice (as an example of religious pluralism). In my proposal, I suggested that the study would "advance our understanding of Pre-Columbian societies by providing ethnographic models for the integral role of religious expertise in the dynamics of social leadership in ancient Mesoamerica." This report will summarize my findings with regard to wolf nahualism, mirror divination, and Kieri practice.

The broader implications of this work, such as the relationship between religious expertise and social leadership must await more intensive analysis. The fieldwork sponsored by FAMSI provided data for the project that will eventually take form as my dissertation in anthropology at Tulane University.

Resumen

Este es el informe de un trabajo de campo de etnografía financiado por FAMSI. La investigación fue llevada a cabo en la comunidad huichol de Santa Catarina Cuexcomatlán, en Jalisco, México, entre 1996 y la actualidad.

El estudio estuvo enfocado sobre tres aspectos de la religión huichol: el nahualismo del lobo, la adivinación con espejos, y la práctica con Kieri (como un ejemplo de pluralismo religioso). En mi propuesta, sugerí que el estudio habría de "hacer avanzar nuestra comprensión de las sociedades precolombinas proporcionando modelos etnográficos de la especialización religiosa en las dinámicas de liderazgo social en la antigua Mesoamérica." Este informe es un resumen de mis hallazgos en relación con el nahualismo del lobo, la adivinación con espejos, y la práctica con Kieri.

Las implicaciones más amplias de este trabajo, tales como la relación entre especialización religiosa y liderazgo social, deberán aguardar análisis más intensivos. El trabajo de campo patrocinado por FAMSI proporcionó datos para el proyecto que con el tiempo pasarán a formar parte de mi tesis de doctorado en antropología, para la Universidad de Tulane.

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Background Information

The Huichol is a group of about 20,000 indigenous people located in the Sierra Madre Occidental of Jalisco and Nayarit, México. Huichol (Wixarika) is a Uto-Aztecan language. The subsistence base is corn and beans farming. Cash is generated by cattle ranching, craft production, and migratory labor at coastal plantations and in the USA. There are three major geographical regions with distinct language, ceremonial practice, and political organization. These are Santa Catarina, San Andrés, and San Sebastián.

Huichol ceremonialism is notably conservative. Many elements are clearly derived from Pre-Columbian antecedents. In the Santa Catarina area, Huichol folk Catholicism and "traditional" ceremonialism (*costumbre* in Spanish) are maintained as distinct systems, each with its own personnel, locations, architecture, and deities. *Costumbre* is notable for its large pantheon, extensive sacred landscape, and full ceremonial cycle. *Costumbre* is practiced on two levels: that of the community and that of the rancho (homestead). On the community level a group of about 25 families takes up responsibility for the maintenance of the ceremonial cycle at the local ceremonial center (*kalihue* in Huichol Spanish, *tukipa* in Huichol) for a period of five years. The Santa

Catarina region is served by three subregional *kalihues*. On the rancho level the members of extended families share the responsibilities of less intensive versions of the ceremonial cycle. On both levels several seasonal ceremonies, ritual deer hunts, and pilgrimages are performed. The pilgrimages include visits to the Pacific Ocean, Lake Chapala, sacred sites in other parts of the Sierra, and the central desert in San Luis Potosí where several sacred places are visited and peyote is gathered for use during the rest of the year.

Huichol religious leadership is gained by individuals who dedicate themselves to relationships with the deities for from 10 to 25 years. Leadership training involves some coaching in ritual practice, but is largely based on visionary and dream experience in the context of pilgrimages and deer hunts. Religious leaders heal, lead ceremonies, and direct deer hunts. Advanced or accomplished leaders are designated *mara'akame*. Most *mara'akame* are men, but some are women.

Huichol religion is primarily concerned with assuring health, abundance, and good fortune for individuals, families, and communities. In Huichol Spanish these qualities are glossed as *vida* and *suerte*. These qualities depend upon proper relationship with the deities. However, Huichols point out that the deities are like humans in that they sometimes forget, neglect to do what they mean to do, get angry, misunderstand, etc. The core activities of "Huichol religion" are: receiving messages from the deities regarding the status of deity/human relationships; informing human individuals and groups of requests made by particular deities; informing deities of human requests and of upcoming events to which they are invited; feeding and entertaining deities; and diagnosing problems resulting from unfulfilled obligations to deities. Each of the topics discussed below is linked with these core activities.

Wolf Nahualism

I hoped to find that wolf-linked practices provided an alternative route to religious expertise for apprentices who were somehow disadvantaged in the "mainstream" approach to religious expertise. However, I found that wolves are less important than they were 40 or 50 years ago. I believe that this results in large measure from the eradication of the population of the Mexican Gray Wolf in the Huichol Sierra (and almost everywhere else in the former range) about 40 years ago. Wolves were eradicated primarily because of their taste for cattle. Older Huichols remember when wolves were present in the Huichol Sierra and were encountered not far from their homes and fields.

Formerly, wolves were a major source of power and learning for apprentice religious leaders. They provided *vida* and *suerte* if called upon and properly rewarded. The association of wolves with power and knowledge is related to their prowess as deer hunters. White-Tailed Deer are very important in Huichol religion. Deer serve as intermediaries between Huichols and the deities. Deer blood is a primary sustenance-offering for the deities. Deer must be hunted successfully for any major ceremony to be

held. Deer hunts are understood to be rituals of contact with supernatural beings and extraordinary information.

One Huichol expressed the understanding that the wolves had left because Huichol individuals had failed to properly repay them for benefits that the wolves had provided them or their parents or grandparents. One must repay the wolves with five bull sacrifices if one becomes a *mara'akame* with their help. Unpaid "debts" of this sort are passed down within families.

However, wolves (although not present as flesh and blood) continue to play roles in Huichol *costumbre*. A serious apprentice *mara'akame* can still ask for and receive help from the wolves. *Murxa Ureh* is a set of sacred places dedicated to the wolves that is located in the Sierra north of Santa Catarina. Pilgrimages can be made to that location.

Sometimes the wolves inform a *mara'akame* in the peyote desert that an individual (anyone, not necessarily a member of the pilgrimage group) is obliged to provide them with a bull sacrifice. The *mara'akame* would then inform the individual, who would eventually perform the sacrifice as an offering to the wolves. The bull sacrifice ceremony would take place in the Santa Catarina region at *muyatoxa*, alternatively known as *casa de lobos*.

Before ceremonial deer hunts, the hunters "speak with the wolves." The wolves (and cougars) help the hunters. Two hunters embody wolf and cougar during the hunt.

Because of the extremely endangered status of the Mexican Gray Wolf, it is worth noting that a wolf population is reported to survive in a wild, forested region of the San Sebastián Huichol community. The wolf refuge is called Sierra de la Flecha or *Uru Makau*. (15:37) (Note: I am including number codes that refer to field note locations. This will enable me to provide additional detail should I receive inquiries about the data.)

Mirror Divination

Mirrors are one of the key tools used by religious experts and apprentices. Round mirrors about four inches in diameter with metal backs are usually used. One *mara'akame* uses a larger mirror with a handle. Practitioners use the same mirrors during their entire lives. One Huichol said that mirrors are like the apprentice's notebook: what the student learns is somehow inscribed in the mirror. Religious experts and apprentices usually have between three and five mirrors. These are kept in special woven containers with other ritual tools. Some mirrors have a single coin stuck in the center of the reflective side.

Mirrors are primary examples of the key religious category "*nierika*." This complex concept includes the ideas of supernatural and comprehensive perception and of an aperture for communication between humans and deities. The visionary cactus peyote is also *nierika*. One Huichol said that lightening is the *nierika* of the rain deity: "You see all in the night. It is an energy for one, for Rain, for all." (10:58)

Nierika are used by *mara'akate* (plural for *mara'akame*) when they communicate with deities. One Huichol said: "The *mara'akame's* telephone is *nierika*. First addresses the fire, which is his *nierika* (at ceremonies). He asks for power to communicate with the east, where the Sun comes up. Next comes *Urameka* and *Tewari Uawi* (two deities): the north. Next the Ocean, where the people came from to go to *Wirikuta* (that is, the point of departure on the primordial peyote pilgrimage). Then he speaks to *Wirikuta* (the peyote desert, the east). Then to the middle, *tierra madre*, *Tacutsi Nakawe* (the deity who formed the earth)." Once he (The male pronoun is used because most, but not all, *mara'akate* are male.) has called the deities of the five directions, he promises them "a bull, a deer." (11:54) *Mara'akate* generally place mirror-*nierika* in front of them on special mats or hold mirrors in hand when addressing the deities in ceremonies.

Mirrors are also used to divine the future and to see into patients' bodies to determine their state of health. For example, during the ceremony that marks the return of the peyote pilgrims to the ceremonial center, a *mara'akame* divines the "*destino*" of each pilgrim using a mirror. He determines "if you will be sick, if there will be family problems." He gives the pilgrim peyote to ingest immediately. (18:64)

Apprentices carry mirrors with them whenever they visit a sacred place. What they learn as a result of the visit is somehow inscribed in the mirror. Furthermore, the mirror serves the apprentice as a channel of communication with the deity at that location. One method of *nierika*-based communication at a sacred place was related by a recently returned pilgrim. He had visited the sacred place of *Tewari Uawi*, the foremost *Kieri*-deity. At that place *Kieri* is embodied as a *Solandra guttata* shrub. He said: "If you carry a mirror, put it there and set peyote on it...Ask for protection, to learn, for *Tewari Uawi's* '*historia*'. That mirror protects one, helps one." (10:56) In this example, the apprentice used two *nierika*, the mirror and the peyote, to access the deity. Another apprentice said: "You can go to any dios for their *nierika*. You can ask with (your) mirror for power from any *dios*, (you can go) to the most important ones: sun, rain, fire, air, earth." (10:58)

***Kieri* Practice**

Kieri is a set of deities embodied in *Solandra guttata* shrubs. These Solanaceous shrubs grow in steep rocky areas within the Sierra. However, only a few *Solandra guttata* shrubs are *Kieri* deities. *Solandra guttata* is a formidable and dangerous hallucinogen if ingested. Most Huichol in the Santa Catarina area insist that it is not necessary or recommendable to ingest the plant in order to "study" with *Kieri*.

Apprentices almost never discuss their own involvement with *Kieri*, probably because *Kieri* is thought to incline some devotees to using their power to do harm. In general, *Kieri* is thought to offer devotees positive power and knowledge: the ability to cure, to deliver ritual orations, and to hunt deer. Deer hunters who have a relationship with *Kieri* can make extraordinary shots. Apprentices can learn to be *mara'akate* in only three years with *Kieri*, rather than in five, ten, or more years, as is normal without *Kieri*.

However, *Kieri* is more "jealous" than other apprentices' patron deities. If an apprentice sleeps with a woman other than his wife (or wives), he will go crazy. This happened during my fieldwork. The apprentice went crazy and died while roaming in wild places.

The several *Kieri* shrubs that are recognized as deities are arranged in a two or three-tier hierarchy. Problems or questions that cannot be resolved with recourse to one of the more accessible, local *Kieris* are passed on to more important *Kieris*. Finally, it might be necessary to visit the most important *Kieri*: *Tewari Uawi*, located outside of the Huichol region. For apprentices, *Tewari Uawi* is advanced education: "elementary school, high school, then on to the highest level."

Tewari Uawi is a patron for religious experts. It is said that an apprentice can sleep at *Tewari Uawi* and "in the morning, you find a mirror, that was not there before. Take it with you!" Apprentices also take mirrors to *Tewari Uawi*, place them there while they sleep and dream. This "charges up" the mirror. (11:25)

Tewari Uawi is present inside of the Church at Santa Catarina. The church was constructed in about 1850 during a period of Franciscan presence in the Sierra. *Tewari Uawi* is represented in the church as Santo Bernalejo, a Christ-like figure on a cross. Santo Bernalejo is paired with Christ in Huichol folk Catholic ritual.