Flesh of the Gods

THE RITUAL USE OF HALLUCINOGENS

EDITED BY

PETER T. FURST

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To Find Our Life: Peyote Among the Huichol Indians of Mexico

And they knew the qualities, the essence of herbs. The so-called peyote was their discovery. These, when they ate peyote, esteemed it above wine or mushrooms. They assembled together somewhere in the desert, they sang all night, all day. And on the morrow, once more they assembled together. They wept; they wept exceedingly. They said [thus] their eyes were washed; thus they cleaned their eyes.

—Sahagún, History of the Things of New Spain, Book 10.

Life is a constant object of prayer with the Huichols; it is, in their conception, hanging somewhere above them, and must be reached out for.

—Carl Lumholtz, Unknown Mexico, 1902

Persistence and Change in Huichol Religion and Ritual

Fr. Bernardino de Sahagún, the greatest of the early Spanish chroniclers and, as author of the monumental mid-sixteenth-century History of the Things of New Spain (Florentine Codex), the first scholarly ethnographer of an American Indian civilization, credited the primitive

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northern desert hunters he called "Teochichimeca" with the discovery of the hallucinogenic cactus known to the Aztecs as peyotl, to the Huichol as hikuri, and to botanists as *Lophophora Williamsii* (Lemaire) Coulter.* As he described the Teochichimeca peyote ritual Sahagun might have been speaking of the modern peyote hunt, for even today, small bands of Huichol each year still "assemble together somewhere in the desert" 300 miles northeast of their homeland in the Sierra Madre mountains of western Mexico, still "sing all night, all day," still "weep exceedingly," and still so esteem peyote above any other psycho­
tropic plant that the sacred mushrooms, morning-glories, *Daturas*, and other indigenous hallucinogens of which they have knowledge are consigned to the realm of malevolent sorcerers. Only the powerful native tobacco, *Nicotiana rustica* (ye in Huichol, *macuche* in Mexican-Spanish), plays an honored, indeed indispensable, role.

La Barre (1970c: 1201) has suggested that the contemporary Huichol peyote rituals are "probably the closest extant to the pre-Columbian Mexican rite," a judgment that my own studies confirm. Present-day Huichol peyote rituals and their underlying mythology—accepted as valid, with varying degrees of participation, by most of the 10,000 speakers of the Huichol language†—may well be virtually unchanged since Cortes. In any event, the symbolic religious complex that has the peyote quest as its sacred center appears to be the only survival on a major scale of relatively pure Indian religion and ceremonial, without substantial admixture of Catholic elements, in Mexico today.

A variety of factors contributed to the new religion’s failure to take hold among the Huichol even after the nominal conquest in 1722—two centuries later than the conquest of Mexico as a whole—of the Cora—Huichol country in the Sierra Madre Occidental: the incredibly rugged terrain, with endless chains of mountains slashed by precipitous canyons and rivers that are impassable in the long rainy season; the almost total lack of communication except for precarious Indian trails; the absence of economic incentives for intensive colonization; the Indians’ stubbornness.

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*"Lophophora has a latitudinal distribution of about 1200 km. from latitude 20° 54’ to 29° 47’ north. It is found along the Rio Grande drainage basin and southward into the high central plateau of northern Mexico lying between the Sierra Madre Oriental and Sierra Madre Occidental. Generally, the elevation of the localities increases to the southward. Those along the Rio Grande near Reynosa, Tamaulipas, are less than 50 m., while localities in San Luis Potosí exceed 1800 m. in elevation. Ecologists describe this large desert area of Texas and northern Mexico as the Chihuahuan Desert" (Anderson, 1969: 301).

†The actual name of the people for themselves and their language is Wixárika, "Huichol" being a Spanish Colonial corruption of an Indian tribal name which has passed into general usage. Although many Huichol adults know Spanish, and some speak it well, they customarily converse among themselves only in Huichol, a tongue which, like that of the Hopi of Arizona, the sixteenth-century Aztecs, and many contemporary Indian groups, belongs to the Uto-Aztecan language family.
refusal to abandon their characteristic pattern of scattered, independent, extended-family farmsteads (ranchos or rancherias) in favor of larger settlements in which they might receive sustained instruction by the clergy; internal contradictions and dissension within the complex colonial structure; the small number and physical and social isolation of missions established in the Sierra after 1722, and their early abandonment; language difficulties (unlike the early friars, later missionaries hardly ever bothered to learn the native tongue); the relative isolation of the Indians from the mainstream of national life; and, perhaps most significant, the fulfilling nature of their traditional world view.

Like so many American Indians, the Huichol understand the natural phenomena—including man—in terms of immanent and innate powers of creation through transformation. In such a view, all the different manifestations of the biosphere are capable of transformation or metamorphosis. Further, the various phenomena are held to be qualitatively equivalent and imbued with a life force—indeed, even supernatural power. This, of course, is the antithesis of the Judeo-Christian credo that all creatures and other phenomena were created by an omnipotent deity and that man is commissioned by God to assume mastery over—rather than be in and of—nature.

Whatever the reason, at the present time only a small number of Huichol can be regarded as more than nominal converts to Christianity, and of these many have adopted enough other traits of the surrounding majority culture to be classified as Mestizo more than Indian. Nor are there any nativistic Christo-pagan cults comparable to, say, the North American Indian peyote religion, which some scholars trace back to northern Mexico, perhaps even to the Huichol themselves. Not every Huichol has participated in a peyote hunt—some have not even tasted peyote—but so completely integrated is the sacred cactus into the native ideology and ritual that there has been no dilution of the traditional indigenous beliefs regarding peyote nor any tendency to substitute more readily available substances, despite the considerable distance that separates the Huichol homeland in the Sierra from Wiikuta (Real de Catorce), the sacred peyote country in the north-central state of San Luis Potosí.† On the contrary, as will be seen, the very duration,

* The early missionaries among the Huichol were mainly Franciscans; those among the Cora, Jesuits. However, in 1767, only forty-five years after the conquest of the Sierra, the Jesuits were expelled from the Spanish colonies. Although their role as missionaries in the Sierra was taken over by the Franciscans, by 1789 only about a dozen friars in all Nayarit were engaged in missionary work.

† Lumholtz (1902) reported that the Tepehuans sometimes substituted Cannabis sativa for peyote when the latter was difficult to obtain. More recently, Williams Carcia (1967) also described the substitution of marihuana for peyote in the curing rituals of the Tepehua of Veracruz. See W. Emboden, below.
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Peyote, the 1-luichol Indians of Mexico

The privations, and other difficulties of the peyote pilgrimage are themselves an integral part of the peyote quest and its meaning in Huichol culture, somewhat comparable to the privations North American Plains Indians underwent in their vision quests.

This is not to say that European Christian ideology, national life, and material culture have left no imprint on Huichol life. The Huichol still use the traditional digging stick to cultivate their maize plots, but apart from the dog and the native stingless bee, domestic animals are of colonial origin, as are such ubiquitous elements of economic life as coffee, sugar, fruit trees, fiddles, metal tools, and money. On the ideological level, there is a degree of syncretism in part of the ceremonial cycle, resulting from the non-Indian religious rituals that have been added since 1722. For example, as elsewhere in rural Mexico, such Catholic observances as Good Friday and Christmas play an important role in the annual ceremonial round. What sets the Huichol apart from other Indians is that Christian, or Christo-pagan (“folk Catholic”), rituals and supernaturals have not superseded the pre-European ones even nominally, but rather have augmented an already rich native tradition without affecting it in any fundamental sense. Whereas the highland Maya, to cite only one example among many, learned early in the colonial period at least to adopt the names of Christian supernaturals for many of their ancient deities or to ascribe to the former the attributes and functions of the latter, the old Huichol gods continue to form their own closed system, while the traditional rituals—especially those related to peyote and agricultural fertility—remain largely intact, without significant admixture or substitutions from missionary sources.

Old images of saints, introduced into the Sierra by the early clerics, are acknowledged and play a role in the Christo-pagan ceremonies. They may even be found among the paraphernalia of an otherwise purely traditional ritual. Likewise, many Huichol accept the Virgin of Guadalupe as a legitimate, though minor, deity, or else identify her with the celestial eagle mother Taté Werika Uimari (Our Mother Young Eagle Girl). Nevertheless, Christian saints and Biblical events are not generally found in the context of aboriginal mythology, except where a traditional story and one introduced by missionaries happen to overlap. While the traditional myth cycle has thus remained basically unaffected by Christian influences, there is a fascinating independent

- For example, the pre-European Huichol version of the widespread deluge myth might be embellished with elements taken from the Biblical flood account—e.g., adding certain familiar domesticated animals of European origin to the contents of the wooden box or dugout canoe that survived the drowning of the earth. The myth that underlies the peyote pilgrimage, however, contains no Christian elements whatever, nor do the traditional stories of the origin of people, animals, plants, fire, sun, moon, etc.
Christo-pagan cycle of tales of which portions are chanted by the shaman-singers on Good Friday and at other ceremonies of missionary origin. This cycle illustrates the degree to which traditions belonging to an alien cultural context tend to become transformed and distorted over time. For instance, according to one Huichol version (there are several) of the New Testament, Jesucristo was the offspring of the Virgin of Guadalupe and Tayauhp, the Sun Father, who took pity on Guadalupe when she was deserted by her husband, San José (Joseph), because she fell in with "a bunch of drunken Spaniards." Jesucristo subsequently rose to eminence by winning a violin-playing contest!

Such stories are not meant to be irreverent. The Huichol customarily parody the clergy in their native rituals (for example, during peyote ceremonies following the pilgrimage to Wirikuta) but generally are quite respectful of the religious beliefs and practices of others, asking only that others respect theirs in the same way. It is more a case of adapting to their own cultural experience something the missionaries did not permit them (especially the children enrolled in mission schools) to ignore, but which they could not, or would not, accept completely as presented.

Thus Good Friday is observed with great solemnity, but the total effect of these "Christian" celebrations is rather less Christian than a missionary might wish. Similarly, certain aspects of the ceremonies attending the periodic installation of local Huichol governors are more traditional Indian than Colonial Spanish (although the institution of government itself is, of course, of European origin). The Huichol lack the ladder system of rural Indian-Mestizo Mexico and Guatemala, in which the men of the community actively seek ceremonial offices (cargos) of successively higher prestige and correspondingly higher expense to the aspirant, who is expected to make gifts to church and community commensurate with his rise on the scale of public duty and private prestige.

Among the Huichol there is no campaigning for office. The names of the future gobernador (governor) and important officials are often "dreamed" by the ranking mara'akáme (the singing shaman of the tuki, or community sanctuary) and approved in consensus by a council of elders. The expenses of the installation, involving much ritual drinking, are largely borne, not by the chosen individuals, as in the cargo system, but by the community. A poor man is often preferred as governor, since his poverty is taken as proof of his honesty.

In practice, despite the existence of civil government, few—if any—major decisions are arrived at without the decisive participation of the ranking mara'akáme. He consults the supernaturals, among them especially Tatewari (literally Our Grandfather, the deified Fire, often
referred to simply as *Mara'akéme*, in the sense of First Shaman), *Tayaupá* (Our Father, the Sun), and other leading potencies, and communicates their wishes to the civil authorities, who act accordingly. The authority of some of these shamans is unmistakable. I have even heard Indians refer to Nicolás, the prestigious and wise old ranking *mara'akéme* of San Andrés Cohamiata, one of the truly great religious and intellectual personalities of the Sierra, as Tatewari: "Tatewari lives among us here, he lives in 'Colás,'" they say. "Our *mara'akéme* is Tatewari."

Lumholtz (1902:151) confirms the status of the leading *mara'akéme*:

[He] ranks higher than any other shaman, and his dignity is even greater than that of the guardian of Grandfather Fire. In fact, he is the spiritual head of the community, and sets the dates for all the feasts and observances in accordance with communications he is supposed to receive direct from the gods themselves. This singing shaman is the actual chief and even superior to the tatowan, or gobernador.

This total identification of a ranking *mara'akéme* with Tatewari is of course of a different order than the temporary apotheosis of the leader of a peyote hunt into Tatewari. The chief of the peyoteros is often a full-fledged shaman, or at least a novice, who "becomes" Tatewari and is so addressed for the duration of the journey, because it was Tatewari who led the first peyote pilgrimage, of which each such journey is the ritual re-enactment. In the same way, the other participants assume the identities of the deified ancestors who followed Tatewari to Wirikaté "to find their life."

Clearly, then, the Huichol are unique among contemporary Indians north of the tropical rain forests of South America in that not merely certain individuals or groups but, practically speaking, everyone is an active or a passive participant in a pre-European philosophical and ritual system. The primary focus of this system is the "peyote hunt." It is a "hunt" in the literal sense, because to the Huichol, peyote and deer are synonymous. The first of the sacred plants to be seen by the leader of the hunting party contains the essence of Elder Brother Wawatsdri, "master" of the deer species, and manifests itself as deer, which in turn explains why it is first "shot" with bow and arrow before being dug from the ground and ritually divided among the participants in the hunt. At the same time Deer-Peyote embodies the equally sacred and life-giving Maize, so that deer, peyote, and maize together form a symbol complex. On the peyote pilgrimage, or "hunt," these three elements become fused, the mythic "first times" that existed before the separation of man, plants, animals, and "gods" are recreated, man re-unites with his ancestors, and contradictions between what is and what is thought to be or desired, between life and death, and between the
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Sexes are resolved, bringing about that state of unity and continuity between past and present, "between man, nature, society, and the supernatural," that epitomizes the Huichol view of "the good" (Myerhoff, 1968). This is what the Huichol mean when they say that on the peyote hunt "we go to find our life."

The "Diabolic Root"

That the Indians of the Sierra Madre Occidental used peyote ritually in a variety of contexts became known not long after the arrival in western Mexico of the ruthless and avaricious Nuño de Guzmán—one of the most unpleasant characters in the drama of the Spanish Conquest—and the subsequent founding of the province of Nueva Galicia in the early sixteenth century. Although not native to the region, the use of peyote by West Mexican Indians was common enough to be mentioned repeatedly and denounced with righteous fervor by Jesuit and Franciscan clerics of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—i.e., considerably before the actual conquest of the Cora-Huichol country in the rugged Sierra.* The Spanish clergy saw the spineless little psychotropic cactus as a principal medium by which the natives of northwestern Mexico maintained communication with the "devil." One man's devil being another man's god, this assessment was wrong only in its resort to European demonology. Understandably, the good friars recognized peyote as a serious threat to effective Christian instruction and rigorously sought to destroy any vestiges of a peyote cult among Indians under their control—clearly without success.

The most widely quoted of these early denunciations of peyote is that of P. José Ortega, who coined the term "diabolic root" in his Historia del Nayarit, published in Spain in 1754. Ortega convinced himself that with the conquest of the Sierra, the Indians, though for two centuries valiant defenders of their lands and beliefs, had quickly embraced Christianity, becoming "as lambs" and resolutely turning their backs on their former heathen practices. A rather less sanguine assessment comes from an eighteenth-century Franciscan writer, P. José Arlegui, who had firsthand experience with the tenacity of native religion and ritual among the "lambs" of the Province of Zacatecas, which included part of the mountain tribes of the Sierra.† Arlegui (in Santoscoy, 1899)

*Santoscoy (1899) makes the interesting suggestion that Sierra de Xicora, a common seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Spanish name for the then as yet unconquered mountain regions of Nayarit, was actually a corruption of the Cora-Huichol term for peyote, Háuri, and that Sierra de Xicora was therefore nothing else than the Sierra del Peyote.

† For the persistence of the ritual use of peyote and other indigenous hallucinogens in central Mexico in the seventeenth century we have the testimony of Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón (1629) and Jacinto de la Serna (1656), among others.
writes that, of all the herbs used by the natives, peyote was the most venerated and that, ground and mixed with water, it was imbibed for all manner of infirmities and also to attain “fantastic imaginings” and knowledge of the future. He complained that this “internal abuse” persisted not only among Indians out of the reach of the missionary fathers but even among Christianized natives of his province. These, he reports, were adept at procuring the “horrendous drink” and cleverly concealing it from the watchful eyes of the missionaries, so that they might inebriate themselves with it to procure knowledge of future happenings. As an especially brazen example he cites the case of Indian elders (“politecos”) who, in place of the four Gospels one gives to the children in Spain,” concealed peyote in the bags carried by their sons, claiming “without embarrassment or fear” that peyote would make them wise, skillful matadors and agile tamers of horses.* Arlegui tells us that such abuses were severely punished.

Nearly a century earlier, the Jesuit writer Fr. Antonio Arias de Saavedra (in Santocoy, 1889), in a lengthy carta to his superiors describing the conditions and customs of the unconquered “Gentile” Indians of the Sierra of Nayarit, reported that the Cora drank decoctions of peyote to seal their parts with their spirits. The “creator of peyote” was said to be Naycuric, a principal spirit who resided in the earth and who had the form of a crayfish. Santocoy quotes another report on the use of peyote in western Mexico, dated January 20, 1659, in which the cura of San Pedro Teocaltiche, P. Andrés Estrada Flores, complained that the inhabitants of the Caxcana region in northern Jalisco drank peyote ceremonially as well as medicinally, for “different indispositions and convulsions,” and that when they intoxicated themselves with peyote for their ceremonies they saw “horrible visions.”†

The early Jesuits who labored among the Indians on the rugged northwestern frontier in Sinaloa, north of the Cora territory, and among the so-called Laguna Indians of Coahuila, to the north of the

* It is interesting that the Indians chose to emphasize those qualities they thought might favorably impress the Spaniards. They have been doing it ever since. Klineberg (1954: 445-609), for example, reports that when he asked some Huichol what they saw in the peyote vision, the answer was, “the saints?” He was given—and seems to have naively accepted—the same explanation when he inquired about the purpose of the native “god houses.”

† Teocaltiche is the site of an important burial ground dating to the second century A.D., where polychrome pottery figurines with curious mushroom-like capped “horns” on their heads have been found. Together with representations of what may be mushrooms and mushroom spirits among the burial ceramics of Nayarit and Colima, this has given rise to speculation that the ancient mushroom cult of southern Mexico and Guatemala may have extended into western Mexico. Interestingly enough, in the summer of 1970 I came across a Huichol tradition according to which hallucinogenic mushrooms were used “in ancient times” by non-Huichol Indians of western Mexico. Characteristically, the mushroom-users were referred to as “sorcerers.”
sacred peyote country of the Huichol (and Cora) in San Luis Potosí, were also much perturbed by the continued ritual use of peyote by the native population. According to the accounts of the Jesuit fathers, particularly Andrés Pérez de Ribas (1645), peyote was generally consumed in liquid form. Pérez de Ribas, who went to Sinaloa in 1604 and remained for sixteen years, says that, although it had medicinal properties, peyote was forbidden and its use punished by the clergy because it was inextricably bound up with "heathen rituals and superstitions" and used to conjure up evil spirits and "diabolical fantasies."

The widespread use of peyote in colonial times by the native peoples of western Mexico, from Jalisco north to Sinaloa, left the impression that peyote must be indigenous to the area. Even today one reads occasionally that Lophophora Williamsii grows not only in north-central Mexico but also in the Sierra Madre Occidental. That it does not, and that at least the Huichol travel long distances to procure it ritually each year, became generally known with the publication by Lumholtz of his observations among the Huichol between 1895 and 1898 (Lumholtz, 1900, 1902). His contribution is all the more outstanding when one considers the lack of scholarly precedent, the enormous gulf between his own European system of interpreting the world and that of the Indians, and the difficulties of travel, communication (both cross-cultural and physical), and sheer survival that he had to overcome during his travels in the Sierra.

Although Lumholtz did not himself participate in a peyote pilgrimage, he did observe and report in detail certain ceremonies connected

* A Mexican, Rosandro Corona, official engineer of the State of Jalisco, preceded Lumholtz by several years in reporting that peyote, not being native to the Sierra, was procured by the Huichol on long ritual pilgrimages to San Luis Potosí. Corona visited the Huichol gobernancia of Santa Catarina in December, 1888, where he observed the welcoming ceremonies for a group of returning peyote pilgrims. His account was subsequently published by Santoscoy in 1899 in his collection of documents pertaining to the history of Nayarit. In the introduction Santoscoy wrote that "patriotic impulse" and the recent work in the Sierra of two foreign scholars, the Frenchman Leon Diguet and the Norwegian Carl Lumholtz, inspired him to rush his volume of historical materials into print. A year later the American Museum of Natural History published the first monograph by Lumholtz on Huichol symbolic art.

† No anthropologist observed an actual peyote hunt until December, 1966, when the author and Barbara G. Myerhoff, of the University of Southern California, accompanied Ramón Medina Silva, a traditional Huichol artist then aspiring to become a mara'akhäme (shaman), on his fourth peyote trek, and 1968, when the author and his wife were allowed to participate in, and record on film and tape, Ramón's fifth peyote pilgrimage, on which he became a full-fledged mara'akhäme. Another non-Huichol who witnessed a peyote hunt in the 1960's, and whose work deserves attention for its wealth of detail and literary quality, is the Mexican writer Fernando Benítez. Although not a trained ethnographer, Benítez is a sensitive observer of Mexican Indian culture. His numerous publications on Huichol and Cora shamanism and on the cultural meanings of peyote and other sacred hallucinogens in indigenous religion and ritual,
with it and was also given an excellent description of the trek itself by his informants. What Lumholtz said of the pilgrimages and its meaning in Huichol culture was confirmed not only by ourselves but also by Benitez (1968a, 1968b). Indeed, I doubt that any of us would have been able to absorb as much of the ritual as we did had we not had Lumholtz at hand. Not only is this a tribute to his powers of observation and his ability to inspire trust in his Indian friends; it also demonstrates how little change there has been in the ritual in nearly eighty years. This fact gains in significance when one considers that it is precisely this period that has seen the greatest impact of the outside world on Huichol life.

THE PRIMORDIAL PEYOTE QUEST

This comes to us from ancient, ancient times. The times of my great-great-grandfathers, those who were the fathers of my great grandfather, fathers of my grandfather who was the mara'akáme,* fathers of my father. This is a story from those very ancient times...

Those ancient ones of whom I speak, they began to say to one another, "How will it turn out well, so that there will be unity of all, this unity we have?" And another said, "Ah, that is a beautiful thing, that which is our life. It is the hikuri [peyote]." And another said, "It is like a beautiful flower, as one says. It is like the Deer. It is our life. We must go so that it will enable us to see our life."

So begins an account by my long-time Huichol friend Ramón Medina Silva of the original journey to Wirikuta—the primordial quest of the gods that provides the mythological model for the Huichol peyote pilgrimage.

According to the myth, the ancient gods had come together in the first tuki, the prototypical Huichol sanctuary constructed by Tatewari, so that each might have his proper place. When they were met together they discovered that all were ill—one suffered a pain in his chest, another in his stomach, a third in his eyes, a fourth in his legs, and so forth. Those responsible for rain were giving no rain; those who were masters of animals were finding nothing to hunt. It was a time of general malaise in the Sierra, and none knew how to "find his life."

Into this assembly of the ailing gods entered the Mara'akáme, Tatewari, tutelary deity of Huichol shamans. It was Tatewari who had...
called them together, as the singing shaman of the temple to this day calls the supernaturals together "to take their proper places." "What can be ailing us?" they asked, and each spoke of his infirmities. "How shall we be cured? How shall we find our life?"

Tatewari told them that they were ill because they had not gone to Wiriküta (Real de Catorce), the sacred land of the peyote, the place to the east where the Sun was born. If they wished to regain their health, they must prepare themselves ritually and follow him in their proper order on the long and difficult journey to the peyote. They must fast and touch neither salt nor chile. No matter how hungry or thirsty they became, they must nibble only dried tortillas and assuage their thirst with but a drop or two of water.

And so he placed them in their proper order, one after the other.

No females were present—they would join the men later, at the sacred lakes or water holes called Tatei Matiniéri (Where Our Mother Dwells), which lie within sight of the sacred mountains of Wiriküta.

Not all the divine peyote seekers completed the primordial quest. Some, like Rabbit Person and Hummingbird Person, were forced by hunger, thirst, or sheer exhaustion to leave the ritual file. They remained behind in their animal form in places which became sanctified by their presence and which, like the other stopping places of the divine pilgrims, were forever after acknowledged with votive offerings and prayer by those who journey to the peyote. But the principal male gods and the female ones—the Rain Mothers and those of the Earth-Ready-for-Planting and of fertility and children—they followed Tatewari to the sacred mountains at the end of the world—"to the fifth level"—where the Deer-Peyote revealed itself to them in the ceremonial hunt. In this way they "found their life" and by their example taught the Huichol how to attain theirs.

Peyote pilgrimages may take place at any time between the end of the rainy season, in October-November, and early spring. Our own two pilgrimages were held in December, but Ramón and other Huichols have gone as late as February and even March. In general, however, the sacred hunt follows a fall ceremony in which children, the shamanic drum, new maize, and especially the first ripened squash play the principal roles. Although it does not require the use of peyote, this ceremony, which Lumpholtz called "First Fruits," is actually a vital component of the whole peyote complex, for it is the principal ritual through which the shaman inculcates the children of the extended family homestead (often his own) or several related rancherias with the sacred itinerary of the peyote quest.

The "ceremony of the drum and the squash" is one of the few occasions in the annual ceremonial cycle when the mara'ákame employs the
Fig. 24. Ramon Medina, who led the pilgrimage described in these pages, taps a bow string with an arrow. The music of the "bow drum" is intended to tell the supernaturals that the pilgrims are on their way, and to charm the Deer-Peyote.
upright drum (tepu), a hollowed-out log of oak standing on three crudely carved legs, open at the bottom and closed off at the top with a head of deerskin. Like many of the characteristic archaeological ceramic drum miniatures from western Mexico, the Huichol drum has a hole ("mouth") in front through which sacred smoke emerges when burning pitch pine brands are placed beneath the drum to tighten and tune the skin to the proper pitch. Since the body of the drum can be considered to be female and the pitch pine brands male, as is the fire, this act has symbolic connotations as well as a practical purpose. The soot that builds up on the inside of the drum is considered to be therapeutic. The drum itself has great power and possesses a personality. To play it is the sole prerogative of the shaman and his assistants. As elsewhere in the indigenous cultural context, it is exclusively a ritual instrument, never used simply for dancing or other entertainment.

Incessantly pounding the tepu and chanting all the while, the shaman proceeds to "transform" the participating children into hummingbirds and to lead them in magical flight from the Sierra to the country of the peyote:

Look, you hummingbirds [he begins],
Surely we are going where the peyoteros have gone,
On their ancient pilgrimage of the peyote.
Who knows if we are going to get there or not,
Because this journey is very dangerous.

One must fly high in order to pass over the wind,
Light as air,
We will make camp there,
Under the highest trees.

Maxa Kwaxi † gives them guidance,

‡ The widespread symbolic and ritual association of shamanic drums in indigenous culture leads me to interpret the well-known clay figurines of drummers from the tombs of western Mexico as representations of shamans intent on supernatural communication rather than as "musicians," as they are usually called in the literature on pre-Columbian art.

† According to Ramón, the "transformation" of the children into hummingbirds takes place by means of the marañón's "secret"—i.e., his magical powers. The children "ascend" and fly eastward on the vibrations produced by the marañón's rhythmic beating of the drum. Their flight in single file is symbolized by a string along which the children are arranged as puffs of cotton. One end is tied to the drum, the other to a thread cross or a pair of deer horns, representing the deer deity. The deerskin drumhead is symbolic of the deer deity Elder Brother Maxa Kwaxi (Deer Tail), who assists...
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He gives them the names of where they will fly,
So that they may enter there safely.

They rise, they rise,
Like a string of beads,
"How pretty is this pilgrimage,
How very pretty."
So says Maxa Kwaxi.

The chant consists of several hundred short verses, each repeated four times. Along the magical route the shaman points out the sacred landmarks: "Here the ancients made tortillas," "Here they rested," "Here Rabbit Person was left behind in the cactus thicket," "Here is the Place of Lost Water," "Here they ground their face paint,"* etc. Some of these are merely "overflown" or "circled," but at others the hummingbird-children alight, so that they may become familiar with the peculiarities of each of the sacred places, which presumably they will one day visit on an actual peyote quest.

Significantly, Maxa Kwaxi, speaking through the shaman, also warns the children of danger spots: "In this pueblo live bad Spaniards, avoid it." "Here they must not see you, they may try to capture you, do not light a fire" (literally, "do not light Tactwari"). Or, conversely, "Here live people who are good and will help you." There may well be some historical basis for such statements, as there may be also for the story of the first peyote quest of deified ancestors under the leadership of a charismatic great shaman. References to "bad Spaniards who may capture you" could pertain to the colonial period, when peyote seekers from the Sierra must have made their way as much as possible in secret, perhaps traveling by night, ever fearful of discovery and capture, especially by slave raiders for the many Spanish silver mines of Zacatecas and San Luis Potosi. These mines took a fearful toll of Indians in the first two centuries after the Conquest. The peyote country itself must have been particularly perilous, since it is identical with the colonial silver-mining center of Real de Catorce. How many of those who set out for Wirikute never returned?

The shaman as spirit helper on the bird-children's flight. Like Elder Brother Kdahumair, he is conceived both in deer form and as a person wearing antlers: indeed, Maxa Kwaxi and Kdahumair appear to be really two aspects of the same supernatural being. In the construction of the drum, the fitting of the deerskin (male) over the hollowed-out tree trunk (female) "completes" it—that is, makes it at once male and female. The symbolism of the hummingbird as the alter ego of Huichol children on the symbolic peyote quest is of interest in view of the frequent depiction of hummingbirds in pre-Columbian art and the role of the hummingbird in Aztec belief and ritual.

* Uña, a yellow pigment obtained from a desert shrub, used to decorate the faces of peyoteros with the markings of the various supernaturals who participated in the mythological peyote quest. These markings serve the same purpose as the masks in the Indian Southwest.
The critical moment in the flight of the hummingbird-children is the dangerous passage through the "Gateway of Clouds," or "Where the Clouds Open and Close." In the actual peyote pilgrimage this mythological passage is located on a rise near the city of Zacatecas. The shaman invokes the aid of Maxa Kwaxi, and while the latter holds back the threatening clouds on either side with the points of his antlers, the bird-children fly quickly through the passage. The audience of children and their families may be held spellbound while the shaman, in his chant, relates how the clouds closed on the tail feathers of one little girl and how the shaman, "with his power," raised her from the ground and restored her ability to fly. Finally the children reach the sacred springs and places of fertility known as Tateí Matiniéri, "Where Our Mother Lives," the home of the Rain Mothers in the east. From here they set out on the final lap of their magical journey to Wirikùta, home of the peyote and the ancestral gods. Here the children are received by the Great Mother of Huichol children, Niwetúka(me). * "Let us go where Niwetúka(me) is," the shaman sings. "Let us go, all of us, in order to know Our Mother. Let us go where the one who embraces us lives, the one who loves us much." The Mother Goddess greets them: "Now I am content, now I am happy. I will give them life. . . Look, my children, I am the one who embraces you. I am the one who gives you your kùpùri (life force, soul)."

Apart from its more subtle meanings and its obvious function of enculturation and education, the ceremony serves to imprint on the minds of Huichol youngsters a kind of subjective territorial map, on which all the sacred landmarks between the Sierra and the peyote country are indelibly engraved and by which they may one day orient themselves, geographically and culturally, on an actual pilgrimage. As Ramón put it, "In this way they begin to learn what it is to be Huichol."

**Metamorphosis and Spirit Power**

Many Huichol pass their whole lives without ever going on a peyote pilgrimage: "one does or one does not go, as one wishes." Some participate in the rituals before and after the journey and take peyote at the various ceremonials but are not willing to submit themselves to the intense hardships and ritual abstentions from sex, salt, and normal nourishment required of the peyotero. Others have gone five, ten, even twenty times. Nicolás, the ranking mara'akáme of San Andrés, is said to have gone no less than thirty-two times.

*That the Huichol Mother goddess Niwetúka(me) is linguistically as well as functionally closely related to the Keresan Great Mother, Iyetáku, is only one of numerous cultural correspondences between the Huichol and Pueblo Indians.*
Some go to Wirikūta in fulfillment of a vow, perhaps made in a moment of stress, or at the behest of a shaman when someone in the family fell ill. Ramón himself, and his wife Guadalupe, went on his sixth journey (and her third) because she was suffering from rheumatism and had made a promise to the supernaturals to make the difficult trek to obtain their aid for a cure. Although the pain in her legs was often so severe that she could barely stand up, in early 1970 she and Ramón walked the whole way to Wirikūta—over 300 miles!

Why do they go? "Patriotism," among many other reasons, says Lumholtz, by which he presumably means the same thing as Ramón's "being Huichol." "What does one go for?" asks Ramón. "One goes to have one's life." The pilgrimage helps one attain whatever one desires—health, children, rain, protection from lightning and sorcerers, or divine intervention against the ever-troublesome vecinos ("neighbors," Mestizos), who encroach illegally on the Huichol lands with their cattle and sometimes employ force to drive the Indians from their farms. Above all, one goes to attain visions of great beauty, to hear the voices of the spirits, the divine ancestors, and to receive their guidance.

In a sense, participation in a peyote journey makes of each man a kind of shaman or priest. For a long time following a pilgrimage its members acknowledge a ritual bond with one another. They recognize and greet each other in special ways. They have special names. They wear special insignia: the tobacco gourd of Tatwari, squirrel tails on the hats. The peyote journey also has the characteristics of initiation; one who has never gone is said to be "new," like a baby; he is a matewáme and must undergo special restrictions, because his tenderness makes him extraordinarily vulnerable to the malevolent magic of sorcerers.

But if all peyoteros have attributes of shamans (for one thing, because for the duration of the pilgrimage they can transform themselves, or are transformed, into spirit beings, a capability normally belonging only to true shamans), they are shamans on a very low level. Real and aspiring shamans feel that they are charged with a deeper purpose than ordinary pilgrims. Of course, they too have needs that they hope to have answered through the peyote pilgrimage—for health, children, calves, rain, maize. There are no full-time specialists, and shamans, like any other Huichol, must support themselves primarily through primitive milpa agriculture. But for them the peyote quest has deeper meanings.

A man who would assume the enormous burden, ritual and psychological, of a mara'akáme, who would make himself responsible for the welfare of his community, must first complete at least five peyote pilgrimages. But he must do this not as a follower, intent only on private
thought and private vision. He must demonstrate on each such journey his capacity to be an effective soul guide, or "psychopomp," who escorts his spirit companions safely across the barriers of space and time, through the gateway of the clashing clouds, and to the sacred mountains at the end of the world in the east, where the ancestor spirits await them.

He must prove his capacity to endure not only lack of food and water but lack of sleep. Even at night, when his companions rest around the sacred fire, he must remain awake, alert, ever ready to defend their spiritual integrity against supernatural enemies. (Ramón, whom I have twice seen go without sleep for seven nights in a row in the course of the peyote pilgrimage, said a leader of peyoteros is "like one who is bent low under the heaviest carrying basket. Its ropes cut so deeply into his shoulders that they bleed.") They are all spirits, of course, for the duration of the journey. But he more than any other man must transcend the limitations of his bodily self and achieve that unique breakthrough that sets the shaman apart from ordinary men. If he lacks these qualities he will never "complete himself." It goes without saying that the leader must know the minutest mythological detail of the itinerary, as well as the correct sequence and proper manner in which each ritual is to be carried out at the sacred places along the way and, above all, in the peyote country itself. And he must "see" with an inner eye, for only he will recognize the tracks of the Deer-Peyote and see the brilliant rainbow-soul of Elder Brother Wawatsári, the Principal Deer, rise from the peyote plant as it is "slain" by his arrows.

I want to emphasize that this idea of completing a certain number of pilgrimages in order to become a shaman is not a matter of adding up so many miles, so many hardships, so many visions, to a required total—like collecting merit badges or battle stars. Rather, it is accumulation of spirit power, in geometric progression, through repeated and ever more intense metamorphosis. "Completing oneself" is really progressive minimization of matter and maximization of spirit to the point where temporary transformation makes the transition to spiritual exaltation and apotheosis.

It is my impression that this special condition of the shaman cannot be faked—that not only he himself but his companions really do know whether or not a man who lays claim to being a mará'akáme has what the Huichol call "balance"—that special, ineffable capacity to venture without fear onto the "narrow bridge" across the great chasm separating the ordinary world from the world beyond.

In the summer of 1966 Ramón gave us a memorable demonstration of the meaning of "balance." He took us to a spectacular waterfall,
with a sheer drop of hundreds of feet to the valley below. This, he said, was “specially for shamans.” While the other Huichol grouped themselves in a semicircle in a safe place some distance from the edge, Ramón removed his sandals and, after making a series of ritual gestures to the world directions, proceeded to leap—“fly” might be more appropriate—from one rock to another with arms stretched wide, often landing but a few inches from the slippery edge. Occasionally he would disappear behind a boulder, only to emerge from an unexpected direction. Or he would stand motionless at the extreme limit of a massive rock, wheel about suddenly and make a great leap to the other side of the rushing water, never showing the slightest concern about the obvious danger that he might lose his balance and fall into space. We were frankly terrified, even annoyed, at such “foolhardiness,” but neither his wife nor the other Huichol watching showed any real apprehension. The demonstration ended as abruptly as it had begun, without any explanation of Ramón’s strange behavior.

The following day he asked if we thought he had been showing off. He said, “Perhaps you thought, ‘Ah, Ramón is drunk with too much beer.’ But no. I took you there to show what it means ‘to have balance.’ So you could see and understand. Because when one crosses over as a shaman one looks below, and then one perceives this great abyss filled with all those animals waiting to kill one. Those who do not have balance are afraid. They fall and are killed.” In order to render intelligible something he feared our cultural experience might not have prepared us to understand, he had decided to give us a physical demonstration—a kind of literal translation—of a phenomenon basic to shamanism wherever it occurs.*

* In a lecture in the UCLA series on which this volume is based, Carlos Castaneda, author of The Teachings of Don Juan, told of a strikingly similar experience he had with a Mazatec shaman named don Genaro, the teacher of his own teacher don Juan. Although sixty-five years old, don Genaro took Castaneda, don Juan, and two assistants to a steep waterfall near Oaxaca, in southern Mexico, sat them down at the base, and started to make the perilous ascent to the top of the fall. On the way up he appeared repeatedly to be losing his footing and about to plunge to his death, but showed no concern whatever. Nor did don Juan. When he neared the summit, he “slipped” again and hung on only by his fingertips, looking down at Castaneda without any expression. Then he hoisted himself up, stood momentarily perched on top of the fall, almost at the edge. Holding on to a small rock with his feet, said Castaneda, don Genaro stood there, his body tensed, “like a feline about to leap.” Then he literally flung himself through the air, landing on a little cone-shaped rock no more than six inches across, where he remained motionless for several minutes, after which he leaped without warning to the other side of the water, performed a sudden somersault to his left, and disappeared—all this within inches of the cliff face (see also Castaneda, 1971). As for Ramón’s “great abyss” filled with dangerous animals, this is reminiscent of other shamanic initiatory experiences, including especially that described by J. Wilbert, above.
Peter T. Furst

THE PEYOTE PILGRIMAGE

So intense is the drama of the actual hunt for the Deer-Peyote in Wirikuta that certain prior events of crucial importance for the success of the quest tend to be overshadowed. The first of these is the ritual of confession and purification through which the participants are initiated into the sacred enterprise of the pilgrimage.

This is an extraordinary ceremony. Everyone—peyotero as well as those who remain at home—is required to acknowledge publicly all his or her sexual adventures, from the beginning of adulthood to the present. Further, each sexual partner must be identified by name, regardless of the presence of spouses or lovers, although old people are allowed to telescope their love affairs and be less precise about names. No display of jealousy, hurt, resentment, or anger is permitted; more than that, no one is even allowed to entertain such feelings “in one’s heart.” Any show of hostility and any deliberate omission of sexual intimacy or a lover’s name would jeopardize not only the offender but his companions and the entire sacred enterprise. The quest for life could prove fruitless. At the very least, even if the peyote country were reached, those who had failed to purge themselves or who carried “bad thoughts in their hearts” would probably fall victim to sorcerers, suffer terrible hallucinations, and perhaps even die. An extraordinary spectacle indeed—doubly so if one has been taught to regard jealousy and its expression as a “natural” human emotion, common to all people everywhere, rather than as an artifact of culture.

It may be that individual participants in the peyote rites do feel resentment, especially at an unexpected revelation of infidelity on the part of a spouse or lover. However, in neither of the two confession rituals I attended was there the slightest expression of hostility. On the contrary, there was an atmosphere of marked lightheartedness. Individual recitations of “transgressions” were frequently punctuated by laughter and ribald jokes, particularly when a wife found it necessary to jog her husband’s memory by reminding him of an extramarital escapade he had overlooked.

On our 1968 pilgrimage the ceremony of confession was held late in the evening of the first day. The seventeen Indians—nine men, five women, and three children, the youngest only seven days old when we started on the trek—were seated or squatting in a circle around the ceremonial fire. As mara’akéme, Ramón was seated in his i’wéni (shamans’ chair) on the west side, facing east across the sacred fire, flanked by his two principal assistants. Following incantations and the recitation of the story of the primordial gathering of the supernaturals for this same cerem-
mony, Ramón gave the signal for the first of the participants to be brought before him. In his hands he held a sisal fiber string and his miviéri, or shaman’s plumes. By his feet lay a pair of deer antlers, the likeness of Kóuyumute, the Deer spirit helper whose presence is indispensable for shamanizing; his takwalti, an oblong basket in which ceremonial paraphernalia and power objects are stored; and a votive gourd bowl.

Serving as a kind of constable for this ritual and the remainder of the peyote pilgrimage was Crescenciano, who on this peregrination was the personator or likeness of Elder Brother Páwikuté, patron of animals and hunting. Crescenciano-Páwikuté led the peyote seekers in ceremonial circuits counterclockwise around the fire, ending in front of Ramón. Men came first, then women, and finally the oldest of Crescenciano’s three children, a boy aged ten. Each gave a ritual recitation of past love affairs—except, of course, little Francisco, who shook his head, grinning from ear to ear, when Ramón addressed him and asked with perfect seriousness, “Well, little matewáme (novice), tell the Mara’akáme, tell Tatewári, how many women have you enjoyed in your life?” Everyone roared with laughter.

For each reported love affair Ramón made one knot in the cord. Those whose memory faltered were assisted by shouts of encouragement or a reminder of this or that extramarital escapade. As the personator of Tayaupe, the Sun, and oldest of the pilgrims, José was the first to come before Ramón; he named several women and then said, “I have led such a long life that my feet are already rotting in the earth; if I spoke here of all those whom I have enjoyed we would not leave here tomorrow or the day after tomorrow.” This was hugely appreciated by all, and Ramón said, yes, for Tayaupe he would make only one knot, a very large one, or there would be no room left on the string for anyone else. Again, laughter. The entire ritual passed in this way, without tension of any kind.

Nevertheless, the lighthearted banter (which I understand is characteristic of every such ritual confession) should not be taken to mean that the ceremony is not in dead earnest—quite the contrary. Laughter, yes, cynicism, never; not the slightest hint at any time that all did not participate fully, “with their hearts,” that they did not feel deeply the

* In accordance with the ritual reversal of terms and meanings which is also an integral part of the peyote pilgrimage, José, as the oldest, subsequently became known as numutí (baby), and was addressed as Tayaupe only on certain ceremonial occasions. Some reversals are institutionalized, such as nose for penis or sneezing for ejaculation, some are obvious (boy-girl, earth-sky, sand-water, night-day, hot-cold, etc.) and some are arbitrary, the important thing being only that opposites be employed as much as possible in conversation. The reason for this is not clear but one suspects that it serves to reinforce the general quality of metamorphosis in the peyote quest.
extreme seriousness of what they were doing, or that they did not completely accept the potentially fatal consequences of any violation of prescribed behavior. Rather, it seemed to me that the good-natured badinage that accompanies the confessions serves primarily to reinforce the ritual obligation to preserve good will toward each of the companions, no matter what.

In any event, if the potential sting of a confession is neutralized by ritually required good humor, the manner in which the peyoteros are "purged," as it were, of their sexual past leaves no doubt of the extreme gravity of the occasion. As each peyotero completed the ritual recitation and the last knot was tied for him or her, Ramón rose and brushed his ceremonial arrow with its pendant hawk plumes (muiviér) over the face, shoulders, arms, and chest, and down the thighs and knees to the feet. He directed the pilgrim to face Tatewari, the purifying fire, and ask that he "burn away everything, everything, burn away all your transgressions, burn it all away, so that nothing will remain, so that you will be new. The Mara'akáme (Tatewari) does and undoes (transforms)." Leaning into the flames, the peyoteros held first one hand and then the other over the fire and followed the same procedure with their feet. The women lifted their skirts so that the heat could travel up their thighs. Some braver souls actually leaped over the flames, a rite which they repeated several times on the trek and which seems to suggest a former practice of ritual fire-walking.

When everyone—including Ramón himself—had completed his confessions and been purified, Ramón rolled the sisal fiber cord, now crowded with knots, into a spiral and placed it on the fire. It flared briefly and was soon turned to ashes. Ramón stirred these with the brazilwood point of his ceremonial arrow and said, "Now you see that you are new. Tatewarí has burned it all away. He has removed it all from you. Now we can cross over there. The Mara'akáme does and undoes."

How is one to understand this event? Lumholtz recognized its fundamental importance to the success of the peyote pilgrimage but interpreted it primarily in terms of sexual purity. The Huichol, he wrote (1902:129–30), seek to achieve health, good fortune, indeed life itself, by gathering peyote. For these goals to be attained, the participants must purge themselves of all sin, i.e., their sexual experiences: "... inasmuch as the pure fire cannot benefit those who are impure, the men and women must not only commit no transgression for the time being, but must also purge themselves from any past sin." *

* Lumholtz refers to separate confessions by men and women, but no such separation occurred in the two rituals we witnessed. Also, the confession was held on the first night out, not the fourth, as Lumholtz reports. It may be that the sequence has
At first glance one might be tempted to explain the whole phenomenon in terms of Catholic influence. Why else would the Huichol, who sanction polygamy and who in any event are not noted for their sexual fidelity, equate sex with sin, or at least with transgression? Nevertheless, I see no reason to regard the Huichol rite as anything but purely aboriginal and pre-European. In the first place, confession was practiced in Mesoamerica long before the arrival of the Spaniards (an Aztec goddess to whom confessions were addressed was appropriately known as "The Eater of Filth"). Secondly, there are fundamental differences between the Catholic and Huichol rites that are obscured by the very term "confession." In Catholic practice the confessor admits to having sinned and, if the priest accepts his act of contrition and repentance as genuine, is absolved from the sins he has acknowledged. The Huichol does not repent but merely acknowledges a certain act as fact. In this sense "profession" might be more accurate than "confession," except that of course in the context of the peyote quest sexual intercourse per se is disapproved and hence a "transgression." But "transgression" of what and against whom?

I would suggest that the answer is to be found in the meaning of the peyote pilgrimage itself. Just as metamorphosis and return to origins are the Leitmotiv and fertility the purpose of the peyote quest as a whole, so it seems to me to be metamorphosis, not abolution, that lies at the heart of the confession ceremony—metamorphosis from man to child, from ordinary mortal to spirit being. What is less obvious is the relationship this may bear to the concept of incest. Incest is a grave offense among the Huichol (incest and sexual intercourse with a "Spaniard" are the only offenses for which there is punishment after death), and incest on a symbolic level also enters into the quest for the peyote never been rigidly structured, or else that it has changed somewhat due to the increasing use by the peyoteros of wheeled transportation for at least part of the itinerary. With respect to the latter, it is interesting that even when—as in our case—the peyoteros know full well that they will be traveling all the way by motor vehicle, they insist on behaving as though they were really on foot. In the primordial pilgrimage the gods "slapped down" their sandals in front of Tatewari and asked him to strengthen them for the long and difficult trek; our peyoteros did the same. Throughout the pilgrimage I heard references to our "walk" by car to Wirikuta; one peyote song I recorded on the first night in the peyote country had this refrain:

The white machine, the white machine
Which brought us here to Wirikuta,
That white machine is so good for walking,
So good for walking.

As a matter of fact, the Huichol custom of making knots for each transgression and then burning the knotted cord is reminiscent of an Aztec confession ritual in which straws were drawn through the pierced tongue and then ritually burned in a sacred fire. "With this," reports the sixteenth-century chronicler Fr. Diego Durán (1971:247), "everyone felt he was cleansed and pardoned for his transgressions and sins, having the same faith that we hold for the Divine Sacrament of penance."
vision. It is in this direction that I suggest we must look for additional meaning in the confession ritual. (This dimension of the ceremony was not apparent to me in the first peyote pilgrimage and did not begin to take shape until some time after the second, when there had been an opportunity to stand back from the experience, compare observations, and analyze a good deal of visual data on film.)

Myerhoff (1968), who participated in the first pilgrimage in 1966, correctly recognized the journey to Wiriküta as a symbolic return to an original state. In order for ordinary mortals to undertake this sacred quest, she writes, "the pilgrims must be cleansed of all sexual experience, that is, they must return to the period of life when they were innocent, before they were mature, worldly adults." In that sense, she suggests (again correctly, I believe), the confession ritual is itself a journey to origins, as is the peyote pilgrimage as a whole. But why should shedding one's adulthood open the door to the sacred country? What, indeed, is the sacred country—that is, beyond the obvious answer that it is the place where the sacred cactus grows? Might the sacred country be a kind of "Great Mother"? If so, we would have at least one explanation for the emphasis on ridding oneself of all adult sexual experience before embarking on the journey, lest the whole enterprise come to naught or the offender go mad in Wiriküta. To "enter" the Mother as an experienced adult would be tantamount to incest, and incest is far and away the most unthinkable transgression in the social universe, an act that threatens not merely the transgressor but his whole group.* I want to emphasize that there is no overt equation of Wiriküta with a "Great Mother" in the Huichol peyote traditions. Nevertheless, it is implied: one need only recall the emphasis on the embrace of the hummingbird-children by the Mother Goddess Niwetüka(me) as they finally reach the sacred peyote country.

Many interpretations are possible, of course, within the over-all theme of the return to a mythical original state, the paradise for which all men yearn. Identification of the sacred country with a Great Mother almost certainly represents only one level in a very complex system built around the peyote quest, with others remaining to be probed (but not necessarily understood within the Western tradition). That this should be so is not surprising: there is really no such thing as a "primitive" people, and the Huichol, who may be characterized as a case of incomplete transition between a former life as food gatherers and hunters—with powerful vestiges remaining still of the world view typical of this type of culture—and their present existence as subsistence farmers in a rapidly changing world, are sufficiently complex ideologically for a lifetime of study.

* For comparable data, see G. Reichel-Dolmatoff, above.
I said earlier that metamorphosis is implicit in the confession ritual. The peyotero has been made over, "become new." He has shed one state of being, maturity, and assumed—or reassumed—another, that of childhood innocence. At the same time, transformation has occurred on another level, for the peyotero has "become" the likeness of one of the supernaturals of the original peyote quest. More than merely child, he has had to become spirit, for the gates to the Otherworld will open only for one who is spirit.

If the attainment of childhood innocence is the immediate purpose of confession and purification, just how far back into his own life is the peyotero supposed to be transported? The answer may lie, at least in part, in a second sacred cord into which the shaman "knots" the peyoteros as an integral part of the ritual preparations for the actual peyote hunt. From the manner in which these knots are tied (and eventually untied, following the return of the pilgrims from the peyote quest), it appears that the peyote seeker is really meant to be taken back to his very beginnings as a human being, or at least to the moment of birth. Indeed, as will be seen, for novices the reversal of their lives is complete in that they will soon find themselves in the total darkness of a simulated prenatal state.

Some time after the obliteration by fire of the sisal string with its accumulated sexual transgressions, Ramón took a second string, considerably longer than the first, from the gourd bowl by his seat. He uncoiled it, held one end to the back of his hunting bow, beat the bowstring several times with an arrow, and for some moments chanted quietly. Then he and José (Tayaupa), seated to his left, passed the cord twice around themselves, once in front and again in back. Ramón rose and walked with cord and muviéri (ceremonial arrow) to the far end of the circle of peyoteros. Moving from right to left, he stopped before each, touched him with the hawk feathers, and tied a knot. When the seventeen Indians, including the seven-day-old infant, had thus been knotted in by the marakdame, he made several additional knots for the observers, "so that we will all be of one heart."

Back in his chair, Ramón once more held the end (or beginning) of the cord to the back of his bow, beat the bowstring, and passed the cord to José-Tayaupa. While he continued to beat the bow in the manner of a drum, the knotted cord, stretched tight, traveled counterclockwise in back of the entire group and clockwise in front. When it was back in Ramón's hands, he coiled it in a spiral and tied it to the back of the bow.

The identity of this knotted cord and the string on which the hummingbird-children are symbolically arranged as puffs of cotton in the drum-and-squash ceremony is obvious. Also, there is no question that
for the Huichol, knots, knotting, and binding have much the same magical significance as they have elsewhere: folk belief, customs, and religion the world over "attribute to knots and bonds a function of healing, a defense against demons, or of conservation of the magic and vital forces" (Eliade, 1961:111). However, in the context of the peyote pilgrimage the knotted cord seems to have an additional dimension which may even be its primary symbolic function: that of umbilicus. This became apparent only after I had time to consider the implications of a basic difference between the tying ceremony before the pilgrims set out for the sacred country and an untying ceremony following their return. In the first—at least as we observed it—it is the shaman who ties the knot for each participant. In the second it is the pilgrim who unties it. This seems to suggest the following: Just as the midwife ties off the umbilical cord of the newborn infant, so the "new" peyotero cannot tie the knot for himself but must have it done for him by the *mara'akáme*, who in a very real sense acts as midwife for his passage into the Otherworld, both at this point and later on in the journey. But once the sacred goal has been attained and the pilgrims have returned from their quest for life, they regain their former status as adults. This seems to be reinforced symbolically by the ritual untying of the knots upon their return to western Mexico. In this ceremony, the knotted string, which has been in the custody of the *mara'akáme* throughout the pilgrimage, is passed twice around the circle of participants, once counterclockwise and once clockwise (to symbolize transformation, or, as the Huichol call it, "doing and undoing"). Then the *mara'akáme* walks around the inside of the circle with the cord in his hands, stopping before each pilgrim in turn to allow him or her to untie his or her own knot, this time without the *mara'akáme*’s assistance.

It is this apparent identity of the knotted sisal fiber string with the umbilical cord that explains why the *mara'akáme* ties the string with the cotton puffs to his drum and why the end, or beginning, of the knotted cord is held to the back of the bow before being passed around the circle to be tied and, after the pilgrimage, untied. For drum and bow are identical. They are male-female, representing the maternal

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*The literature on this subject is voluminous. A useful summary is Chapter III, “The God who Binds and the Symbolism of Knots,” in Mircea Eliade, Images and Symbols (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961). The bow serves as drum throughout the peyote pilgrimage. Its beat tells the supernaturals that the pilgrims are coming and guides them through the dangerous passage of the Clashing Clouds. It is also played to "make Elder Brother happy" in the final tracking and walking of the Deer-Peyote in *Winkwite*. According to tradition, "in ancient times" the Huichol had no drum at all. Instead, the shaman used his bow as drum, holding it with one foot, string-up, on an inverted gourd bowl and beating it with two arrows. This "musical bow"—called "bow-drum"—is still used in the Huichol territory today, although Lumboltz observed it only in the Cora region.*
aspect, the Great Mother-Earth from whom her children receive nourishment through the umbilical cord and, at the same time, the male procreative principle.*

We can now shed some light on the previously suggested connection between incest and the confession and purification ceremony. We recall that before the peyote seekers enter the peyote country, they must visit Tated Matinieri, Where Our Mother Dwells, the desert water holes from which one catches one's first awesome glimpse of the sacred mountains of Wirikuta. It is here that one asks for rain and fertility. Here the mateyamete, the novices, "emerge into the light" (quite literally, as we shall see). Here the peyoteros are ritually washed by the mara'akame, as the midwife washes newborn infants. Here the containers are filled with the water that has the power of fertility. In the total context of the quest, the confession ritual, by canceling out adult sexuality (i.e., matter), facilitates metamorphosis to spirit. In relation to the specific confrontation, symbolic intercourse with the maternal, creative forces at the Place of Our Mother would be tantamount to incest were it not for the prior restoration of the "innocent" condition of childhood. At least that is one way of looking at it. The perilousness and ambiguity of the undertaking are underscored in the passage of the Place of the 'clashing Clouds that threaten to crush those who would venture on the journey to the Otherworld.

The Dangerous Passage

That critical rites prior to and during the dangerous passage took place only a few yards from a heavily traveled highway seemed to matter not at all to the Huichol. As usual they acted as though the twentieth century had never happened—or, more accurately, as though the flow of time had been reversed. As a matter of fact, nothing we saw on the entire pilgrimage demonstrated more dramatically the time-out-of-life

*Dr. Enrique Campos Cidávez, medical officer of the Cora-Huichol Center of the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (INI) in Tepic, Nayarit, who accompanied us on the 1968 pilgrimage, has recently made some important discoveries regarding the umbilical cord which shed new light on its importance in Huichol thought and ritual. According to Dr. Campos (personal communication) the umbilicus plays a vital role in Huichol conceptions of man's fate throughout his life. After parturition the umbilical cord is planted together with the seed of one or another fruit-bearing tree or large cactus, such as the nopal. The earth is "Our Mother the Earth Ready for Planting," who nourishes the seed and helps it germinate, as the Huichol mother nourished the unborn fetus through the umbilical cord. Seedling and child lead parallel lives and their fate is interdependent, similar to the relationship between "companion animal" and man in the Maya area. Should the young tree sicken or die, the child would suffer the same fate, and vice versa. Whereas the cord thus serves to link child and companion tree through the medium of the earth mother, the placenta is customarily placed by the mother or midwife into the high branches of a tree in a wrapping of grass (although some women nowadays bury it in or near the house).
quality of the whole enterprise than the sight of the hikuri seekers acting out their deepest beliefs on the very outskirts of the city of Zacatecas, within sight and sound of the rushing traffic, oblivious of the trucks and buses fighting the long grade.

There are two stages to the actual crossing of the critical threshold. The first is called Gateway, or Entrance, of Clouds; the second, Where the Clouds Open. They are only a few steps apart, but the emotional impact on the participants of passing from one to the other is enormous. From here one travels to the place called Vagina, and from there the trail leads through a series of named stations (the stopping places of the first peyote pilgrims) directly to Tateí Matinié, Where Our Mother Dwells. However, one would search in vain on any map for places around this historic mining capital that bear such names, in Huichol or Spanish. For like other sacred loci on the peyote itinerary, these are landmarks only in the geography of the mind.

It was mid-morning of the fourth day out when we arrived at the outskirts of Zacatecas. The vehicles were parked and, assembling once more "in their proper order" (i.e., as decreed by Tatewan), the pilgrims proceeded single file to some low-growing nopal cactus and thorn bushes a few hundred feet from the highway. Here they halted, and Ramón moved down the line, brushing each pilgrim with his miviéi and ritually pronouncing his or her new name as the likeness of one of the original hikuri seekers. They listened carefully as he related the relevant passages of the peyote traditions and invoked the protection of Kduyumarie and other supernaturals for the coming ordeal. At his direction, each then took one small green and red parrot feather from a bunch carried by a mateudme, or novice, and tied it to the spiny branches of a small bush. When the last feather had been fastened they filed by, muttered prayers, and returned to the vehicles. Instead of embarking, however, Ramón had the cars drive slowly ahead while the pilgrims followed on foot. This, he later explained, was so that Kduyumarie, whose likeness in the form of antlers and ceremonial arrows was mounted on the front of each vehicle, could act as guide and scout on this final approach to the Clashing Clouds (in a more traditional pilgrimage on foot the deer horns would be carried by the mara'akáme). Beyond their obvious symbolism of celestial flight, the feather offerings commemorate an event on the pilgrimage of the gods and serve as prayers for safe passage "to the other side." 

We recall that on the mythical flight to Wirikula in the drum-and-squash ceremony one of the bird-children lost tail feathers in the dangerous passage. Nonfatal injury, such as loss of feathers, a foot, or part of the stem of a vessel, is a common feature in many versions of this widespread motif of the dangerous passage, from the clashing rocks or Symplegades of ancient Greek tradition to funerary or shamanistic mythologies in Australia, Siberia, the Arctic, and the Americas. There are several versions of the
Some distance up the road the pilgrims were led to an open space that commanded a magnificent view of the valley from which we had just come. Here they formed a semicircle—men to Ramón's left, women and children to his right. Although everyone knew the peyote traditions by heart, all listened with rapt attention as he told them how the ancestors had "done this thing," and how with Kanyumari's assistance they would soon pass safely through the perilous Gateway of Clashing Clouds into the sacred country. But from now on, until they came to the Place of Our Mothers, those who had not yet traveled to the peyote would have to "walk" in darkness. For they were "new," he said, "new and very delicate," easily blinded by the glare emanating from the sacred country on the other side of the clouds and especially vulnerable to whirlwinds and other dangers which malevolent sorcerers cast in the way of hikuri seekers. Blindfolded they would be safe, but they would have to proceed with caution, holding on to the one in front and taking care not to stumble or fall. "It will be hard," he said, "very hard, this walk. It is a great penance, this journey to Wiriküta, and you will cry very much."

Starting with the women, Ramón proceeded to blindfold those who were "new and delicate." Even the three children had their eyes covered, although for the baby this act was only symbolic. He was very gentle with all of the pilgrims, in speech and touch, exhorting them, and especially the matewámite, to "be of one heart" and take good care as they walked, for soon they would come to the Gateway. It would be dangerous, but with his power (i.e., the power of Tatewarí) and that of Kanyumari, they would be "admitted" and pass safely "to the other side."

Although everyone took the blindfolding seriously (some actually cried), we were again impressed by the quick shifts between solemnity and humor. As Ramón came to those who, as veterans of previous journeys, did not require blindfolds, spirited and often very funny dialogues ensued. Was the companion well fed, had he quenched his thirst? Oh, yes, went the reply, the pilgrim's stomach was full to bursting with all manner of good things to eat and drink. And yes, he was happy to be "walking" such a long way in such ease and comfort. In truth none had had more than minimal nourishment for days. The reference to ease and comfort, by the way, had nothing to do with the fact that they were riding in a vehicle instead of walking. Several of the Indians even said that they much preferred walking, "because it is more beautiful." Rather, it was part of the aforementioned reversal of meanings, an integral part

motif of the dangerous passage (clashing rocks, stone traps, solar rays, snapping jaws, etc.) in Huichol mythology, in connection with the shamanic quest for supernatural power or the journey of the soul (and the shaman) to the Otherworld (Purcell, 1967). Clashing rocks were also a feature of Aztec funerary belief, as they continue to be among Nahuatl-speaking Indians in Mexico to the present day.
Fig. 25. Peyote seekers line up by the side of the highway near the city of Zacatecas for the blindfolding ceremony, which precedes the symbolic passage through the incessantly opening and closing mythic "cloud gates" and the entrance into sacred country.

of the peyote quest which intensifies as the pilgrimage progresses toward its climax. Reversal was to become more common after we left the paved highway ("oh, what a rocky path, so full of holes and stones!") and entered upon desert or deeply rutted wagon trails ("ah, what a fine highway, so well paved, so smooth!").

Following the blindfolding ceremony Ramón took the peyoteros some hundreds of yards northeastward, to the fateful cosmic threshold which only he, as shaman, perceived, but whose reality was evidently in no wise doubted by the pilgrims. When he reached a certain point he stopped abruptly, motioning to those behind him to do likewise.

Here, on a little rise of dusty adobe on the edge of Zacatecas, a place entirely unremarkable to the untutored eye, was the mystical divide, the Symplegades of the peyote quest. The pilgrims remained rooted where
they stood, intent upon Ramón's every move. Some lit candles. Lips moved in silent or barely audible supplication. Ramón bent down and laid his bow and arrows crosswise over his shaman's basket—bow and quiver pointing east in the direction of Wirikuta. He rose and conducted what appeared to be an urgent dialogue with unseen supernaturals, all the while gesturing with his muviéri in the directions of the world quarters and the sacred center.

Visually, the passage through the clashing cloud gates was undramatic. Ramón stepped forward, lifted the bow, and, placing one end against his mouth while rhythmically beating the string with an arrow, walked straight ahead, stopped once more, gestured (to Káuyumarie, we were told later, to thank him for holding back the cloud doors with his horns, at the place called "Where the Clouds Open"), and set out again at a more rapid pace, all the while beating his bow. The others followed close behind in their customary single file. Where the terrain was rough some of the blindfolded matewamete held on to those in front. Others
made it as best they could by themselves. Ramón's bow music sounded like a high-pitched drum beat, but with a recognizable tune.

Whatever the event might have lacked in visual drama for an uninitiated observer, there was no mistaking its impact on the participants. Their faces clearly reflected the emotional stress of this critical passage, their deep commitment to its truth, and their relief and pleasure that Ramón had proved to have the power to transport them safely through the clashing gates. At one point a battered and noisy dump truck crossed their line of march, drowning out the musical beat of Ramón's bow. To us, watching it roll over the sacred ground the Indians had just vacated, the symbolism was so stark, so explicit, as to be almost trite. Yet I doubt very much that the Huichol themselves even noticed its presence—or, if they did, that it disturbed them nearly so much as it did us.

Ramon himself showed the strain of all that had transpired here. He was solicitous of the blindfolded matewáme, assisting them in entering the cars and speaking soothingly to them, as one would to a frightened child. But he was also insistent that they hurry. For while all had gone well, one should not linger longer than necessary in such dangerous and sacred places.

The degree to which what we had just witnessed conforms to Eliade's analysis of the meaning of the Symplegades motif in shamanism and funerary and heroic mythologies is remarkable. According to Eliade (1964), the "paradoxical passage" opens only to those who are spirit—i.e., the dead or those who have become transformed. In Huichol mythology, the peyote pilgrimage seems to be the only occasion in which ordinary men, and not just shamans, souls, and supernaturals, can achieve the breakthrough from this world to the one beyond. They are able to do so because they are no longer "ordinary" but are transformed. Yet they are not allowed to forget that this condition is only temporary, even for the shaman—that they are men, not gods. Hence the required assistance of K'duyumarie. Hence also the lost feathers of the bird-child. It is after all only the dead and the supernaturals who are truly and permanently spirit.

_The Springs of Our Mothers_

We arrived at the sacred water holes the Huichol call Tateí Matiniéri, in San Luis Potosí, in the late afternoon. Ramón would have preferred dawn, when the rising Sun Father is stronger and therefore a more effective protector than the setting Sun. A number of awesome things were to happen here, and the pilgrims were excited and tense with expectation. The physical setting was hardly inspiring: an impoverished Mestizo desert pueblo at the edge of a former lake, now dry; a few hundred yards
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beyond the last of its adobe huts, a cluster of water holes surrounded by marsh. On the peyote quest, however, it is not ordinary reality that matters, but the reality of the mind’s eye. Accordingly, to the Huichol Tatéi Matiniérci is not a forlorn and probably polluted desert oasis. It is beautiful, they say, because Our Mothers live here, and because it is the wellspring of the water of life.

The pilgrims were conducted single file to the edge of the bog. They set down their bundles and the gourds, bottles, and flasks they had brought to be filled from the springs, and proceeded to pray with great fervor toward the east. The matewámecte were again admonished to be very still. When Ramón motioned everyone to sit or squat he told the blindfolded novices to make themselves small and keep their heads down. Then things became very busy, with much going back and forth to the various water holes, each of which represented a different Mother and was known by her name. As one of his first acts Ramón inserted the wooden point of his maweé into several of the cavities, stirred the cloudy liquid, and sprayed water in the world directions and on the pilgrims. (We had already observed something very similar at the confession-purification ceremony, when ceremonial and hunting arrows were used to spray water from bottle gourds on the women.) Meanwhile those who were not blindfolded unpacked offerings—ceremonial or votive arrows, thread crosses, animal crackers, yarn designs, candles, votive gourds, etc.—and laid them out carefully “for Our Mothers to see.” Some were gifts or prayers to the Mothers themselves and would be left in their cavities; others were to be sacrificed by fire in Wirikuta. Whether intended as generalized offerings or more specifically as petitions for health, rain, fertility, luck in hunting, or whatever, such offerings gain greatly in effectiveness by being impregnated with the life-giving fluid of the springs.

For the blindfolded matewámecte, the enforced period of sightlessness was about to come to an end, for much of what went on about them was designed to prepare the way for their “emergence” into the light. To a degree this was true also for the others, since everyone present, including Ramón, was to be ritually washed and internally purified with the water of Our Mothers. Only after this washing ceremony would they be capable of perceiving the sacred country all around them, and especially the mountains of the peyote country on the distant eastern horizon.

Although Ramón was obviously anxious to hurry the proceedings in order to finish before sundown, the preliminaries took a while. Some of what people did was then, and remains today, obscure; unfortunately, for much of what happens in these ritual situations there really is no clearer explanation than the stock answer, “That is the way one does
this thing." Original meanings have been forgotten, or else the act requires no explanation because its meaning is known to everyone who belongs to the culture.

On the other hand, just as the blindfolding before the dangerous passage can be understood in terms of a return to the womb as well as metamorphosis (unborn children are spirits and become human only when they receive their essential life force through the fontanelle at the time of birth), so the manner in which the Mothers "receive" the pilgrims from the mara'akdme is seen to symbolize birth—or, better, rebirth. Consider the following:

Having dipped the muvieri into the cavity of one of the rain and fertility Mothers and ritually purified a gourd bowl, the mara'akáme requests that the pilgrims be brought before him one by one. The assistant selects one of the waiting companions and pulls him by the arm around the water hole and in front of the mara'akame. The mara'akdme asks whether the companion fed himself well on the journey and how much tequila and beer he consumed. Is his belly full? Is he happy? Is he warm and comfortable behind his blindfold "in the dark"? As before, the stereotyped reply is that yes, his belly is full and yes, he (or she) has drunk much and is snug and warm (in truth it is uncomfortably cold here at over 5000 feet in mid-December; at night the temperature often falls to the freezing point or below). This exchange brings on laughter and shouts of encouragement from everyone except the blindfolded mateudweme, who remain very much subdued, kneeling or squatting motionlessly with their heads down and their shoulders hunched up. Then Ramón bends down, scoops up a gourdful of water, holds it behind his back, lifts the companion's hat or scarf, and, if he is a mateudweme, removes the blindfold. With sweeping gestures he now points to the east, exclaiming, "There, companion, now you are able to see Behold now the sacred places," or words to that effect, and suddenly pours the contents of the bowl over the latter's head. He instructs him to rub vigorously, working the sacred water into his hair, face, and eyes. Although the water is very cold and must come as a considerable shock, no one shows any indication of discomfort—quite the contrary. Ramón meanwhile takes up another gourdful from the water hole and holds it to the pilgrim's lips, telling him to drink it all down without leaving a single drop. Subsequently he is given his "first food," bits of tortilla and animal crackers which have been softened by soaking in sacred water. This is baby food, and its purpose is to reinforce the symbolic condition of "newness," i.e., of having just been born.

These rituals were repeated in more or less the same way for all, although more gently for the two youngest children. Then Ramón himself was ritually washed and "made to see" by one of the other men. It
should be noted here that, with the exception of a required ritual bath and ritual washing of the hair at the beginning of the pilgrimage, this is the only occasion on which a hikuri-seeker is allowed to wash for the duration—even when the pilgrimage is on foot and takes up to forty-five days.*

Several things remained to be done before we could resume what the pilgrims insisted on calling our "walk." The naming of the baby, by now ten days old, had been put off because Ramón, who as mara'akáme was to do the naming, had agreed with the parents that it would be propitious for the child's health and proper growth if it were to be given its name in the presence of the Mothers. This was done by presenting it to the Mothers as well as to the Sun, the four quarters, and the sacred center and pronouncing the name, which had come to the mara'akáme in a dream.

Next the numerous containers had to be filled with the water of the Mothers. A small amount of this potent fluid was required for the rituals in the peyote country, but most was to be taken back to the Sierra for the rituals of agricultural fertility and other rites of the ceremonial cycle. Tatei Matiniére is not the only source of water to which magical potency is ascribed (indeed, in a sense all water and all bodies of water are sacred to the Huichol), but these desert springs on the way to the peyote country are believed to possess unique powers of fertility. It is no accident that one of the first acts of the returning pilgrims is to spray their wives with bouquets of flowers that have been dipped into gourds full of water from Tatei Matiniére—an act also performed in the peyote country itself by the mara'akáme. Water from the sacred maternal springs is utilized in numerous ways, all related to the concept of fertility and germination: it is drunk in small quantities at the rituals; added to naut, the ceremonial maize beer, in the fermentation process; mixed with peyote infusions, and sprinkled or sprayed on fields, crops, animals, people, tools, hunting weapons, and the likenesses of supernaturals. It is also carried by shamans to the Pacific Ocean (Our Mother Haramdra) for rituals designed to facilitate rain.

Characteristically, the manner of filling the gourds and other containers from the sacred springs is ritually prescribed. The way in which it is done can be interpreted as yet another symbolic act of sexual union and impregnation, with the ceremonial arrow serving as phallus and the empty container as uterus. Before the hikuri seeker can pour water into

* The traditional pilgrimage on foot was ritually fixed at twenty days in each direction. Although the Huichol do not have a formal ceremonial calendar or even the memory of one, it may be that the length of the pilgrimage was in some way related to the twenty-day "month" of the 260-day ceremonial calendar of prehispanic Mesoamerica. Such a calendar survives today in certain areas, especially the Maya region.
his bottle or fill it by submerging it in one of the water holes, the *mara'akdme* has to transfer a few drops from the cavity into the bottle with the long hardwood point of his ceremonial arrow. However, despite such readily apparent sexual symbolism, it would be simplistic in the extreme to reduce this particular ritual at *Tatéi Matiniëri* to the level of symbolic coitus alone. As already noted, the Huichol are by no means lacking in sensuality. Sex for its own sake is considered pleasurable. On the peyote pilgrimage, however, it is not sex that matters but fertility—the survival of the people and their natural and cultural environment. What the *mara'akdme* simulates with his ceremonial arrow, therefore, is not coitus but unity—the life-producing union of the male and female principles in all nature.

Not surprisingly, water from the sacred springs is considered to be a powerful agent against barrenness, and before the journey to *Wirikúta* was resumed, one of the pilgrims, a childless woman, asked Ramón to "cure" her so that she might conceive. The curing ceremony that followed differed little from traditional shamanic curing elsewhere in Indian America, with this exception: in addition to such familiar ritual acts as blowing tobacco smoke over her body, spitting, and sucking to remove the intrusive foreign agent believed to be making her ill (e.g., small stone, splinter, etc.), Ramón sprinkled water from one of the water holes on her bared stomach and spread it about with his fingers and the *muviëri*. Two days later, in the peyote country, he touched the region of her stomach with a peyote cactus and told her to do likewise. We also noted her special petition to the Deer-Peyote and the other supernaturals of *Wirikúta*: a small votive gourd decorated on the inside with the image of a child, in the form of a crude little stick figure of beeswax embellished with tiny colored beads and wool yarn.

**The Hunt for Elder Brother**

As has been said before, the peyote country is more or less identical with the Colonial Spanish mining district called Real de Catorce, in the high desert of northwestern San Luis Potosí. It is typical Chihuahuan-type desert country, 5000 feet or more in altitude, covered with creosote bush, mesquite, tar bush, agave, yucca, Euphorbia, and many kinds of cactus. The Huichol say "it is beautiful, very beautiful" here, and one has the feeling that they really mean it and are not just using ritual reversals. Presumably, when they say that the *Wirikúta* desert is covered with "flowers of brilliant colors" they are speaking of the peyote that grows here. In 1966 Ramón had taken us by the hand and pointed out everything that made survival and even a reasonably good life possible—edible leaves and seeds and roots, barrel cactus full of thirst-quenching liquid, herbs good for wounds and sickness of all kinds (peyote itself is
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considered the best medicine of all, effective not only against fatigue but infections and intestinal complaints, and the burrows and lairs of small animals. "One lives well here," he said, "if one has learned well and does not take more than one needs." That particular lesson in desert ecology came back to me later, when someone tried to convince me that the hallucinogenic properties of peyote "must" have been discovered accidentally, because "there is nothing to eat in the desert and the starving Indians were so desperate they tried everything and anything, even the bitter peyote." My own view, admittedly unprovable, is that the discovery of peyote, like many other sacred hallucinogens, was probably the consequence of a deliberate search for "mind-altering" substances by shamans engaged on the vision quest.

The sacred "Patio of the Grandfathers" is actually much more extensive than the area in which peyote is ritually collected. It lies between two mountain ranges about thirty miles apart. One is Wirikuta proper, and it is below its slopes that the Deer-Peyote is hunted. The other is called Tsinurita. It is said that peyote also grows on the lower slopes of the latter, which the Huichol deluge myth identifies as one of the ends of the world and which is conceived as the mirror image of Wirikuta, the sacred mountains per excellence. The individual peaks of both ranges are said to be the abodes of the Kakauyarixi, the generic name by which the Huichol address their supernaturals. No translation that makes sense in English is possible; the Huichol say it means "ancient, ancient ones," or ancestral gods. The most sacred of the Wirikuta peaks is 'Unaxu, legendary birthplace of the Sun; its mirror image on the Tsinurita range is the mountain of Tatewari. Tatewari also has his sacred mountain in Nayarit, close to the Pacific coast. The Kakauyarixi do not always remain in their abodes but sometimes travel west, to the Huichol country and the Pacific coast. When they do so, they may assume the form of ducks—as do the supernaturals of the Pueblo Indians of the Southwest.* The analogy between Wirikuta and the sacred San Francisco Mountains of the Pueblos is striking, but it is only one of many traits that point to ancestral ties between the Cora-Huichol and the Pueblos of Arizona and New Mexico.

Between Tcate Matiniéri and the peyote country proper there were to be two more camps. The second was only ten miles (in this rugged desert, two hours' driving time) from the area Ramón had selected in his mind for the hunt of Elder Brother Wawatsari. We broke camp before dawn, in bitter cold, waiting only for the first red glow in the

* One is tempted to relate these beliefs to the frequent naturalistic and abstract representations of ducks (but not geese) in the ancient art of Mexico—especially the tomb ceramics of western Mexico, which are rich in sculptures of ducks, in pairs, trios, and even quartets.
east so that the pilgrims might pay their proper respect to the rising Sun
Father and ask his protection. There was little conversation on this
final stretch. Everyone remained still, except for the times when the
vehicles had to be emptied of passengers to get past a particularly
difficult spot in the trail. Even then there were few unnecessary words.
Lupe and José lit candles the moment we started out and held them
the entire distance.

It was just past 7:00 A.M. when Ramón stopped the cars and told the
Indians to get out and assemble in single file by the side of the trail.
It was time to walk. For no matter how one had traveled thus far, one
must enter and leave the Patio of the Grandfathers exactly as had
Tatewari and his ancient pilgrims—on foot, blowing a horn and beating
the hunting bow. In former times, and occasionally today, the horn was
a conch shell; José’s was a goat horn, and one of the others used a
cow-horn trumpet.

As the hikuri seekers walked they picked up bits of dry wood and
branches of creosote. Little Francisco, who was carrying his two-year-old
brother, stopped to break off a green branch for himself and also stuck
a long dry stick in the little boy’s hand. This was the food of Tatewari.
It is another mark of the total unity of the hikuritamete that each
companion, down to the youngest, is expected to participate in the first
“feeding” of the ceremonial Fire when it is brought to life by the
mara’ak’dme.

This happened so quickly that we almost missed it. The line stopped,
Ramón squatted, and seconds later there was a wisp of blue smoke
and a tiny flame. Tatewari had been “brought out” (fire is inherent in wood
and only needs “bringing out”). Now more than at any other time on
the pilgrimage, speed and skill in starting the fire are of the essence,
for one is in precarious balance in this sacred land and urgently requires
the manifestation of Tatewari for protection. The fire is allowed to go
out only at the end, when sacred water is poured on the hot ashes, after
which the mara’ak’dme selects a coal, the kąpurí (soul, life force) of
Tatewari, and places it in the little ceremonial bag around his neck. Since
the ritual is repeated at each campsite there is an accumulation of
magic coals, which become part of the mara’ak’dme’s array of power
objects.

Chanting and praying, Ramón piled up bits of brush which quickly
caught fire. The others, meanwhile, arranged themselves in a circle with
their pieces of firewood and began to pray with great fervor and obvious
emotion. We saw tears course down Lupe’s face, and there was much
sobbing also among the others. Such ritualized manifestations of joy
mixed with sorrow were to recur several times during our stay in Wirikúta,
especially at the successful conclusion of the “hunt,” and
again when we were getting ready to take our final leave. After much praying, chanting, and gesturing with firewood in the sacred directions, and a counter-sunwise ceremonial circuit around the fire, the individual gifts of “food” were given to Tatewari, and everyone went off to prepare for the crucial pursuit of the Deer-Peyote.

It was midmorning when Ramón signaled the beginning of the hunt. To my question how far we would have to walk to find peyote, he replied, “Far, very far. Tamási Wawatsári, the principal deer, waits for us up there, on the slopes of the mountain.” I judged the distance to be about three miles.

Everyone gathered up his offerings and stuffed them in bags and baskets. Bowstrings were tested. Catarino Rios, the personator of Tatutsi (Great-grandfather), one of the principal supernaturals, stopped playing his bow to help his wife Veradera (Our Mother Haramára, the Pacific Ocean) cut a few loose strings from the little yarn painting she had made to give as a petition to the sacrificed Deer-Peyote. It depicted a calf. Catarino’s bow music, we were told, was to make the deer happy before his impending death. Ramón conducted the pilgrims in another counterclockwise circuit around the fire, during which everyone laid more “food” on the flames and pleaded for protection. Ramón entreated Tatewari not to go out and to greet them on their return. Then he led the companions away from camp toward the distant hills.

About 300 feet from camp we crossed a railroad track and beyond it, a barbed-wire fence. The men had their bows and arrows ready. Everyone had shoulder bags and some had baskets as well, containing offerings. We had walked perhaps 500 feet when Ramón lifted his fingers to his lips in a warning of silence, placed an arrow on his bowstring, and motioned to the others to fan out quickly and quietly in a wide arc. I pointed to the distant rise—was that not where we would find the peyote? He shook his head and smiled. Of course, I had forgotten the reversals! When he had said, “Far, very far,” he really meant very close. Ramón now crept forward, crouching low, intently watching the ground. Catarino’s bow, which he had sounded along the route “to please Elder Brother,” fell silent. The women hung back. Ramón halted suddenly, pointed to the ground, and whispered urgently, “His tracks, his tracks!” I could see nothing. José-Tavapas sneaked up close and nodded happy assent: “Yes, yes, mar'ak’dme, there amid the new maize, there are his tracks, there at the first level.” (There are five conceptual levels; for a man to reach the fifth, as Ramón was to do here in Wirikúta, means he has “completed himself”—i.e., become shaman.) The “new maize” was a sad little stand of dried-up twigs. The hunters look for any growth that can be associated with stands of maize, for the deer is not only peyote but maize as well. Likewise,
peyote is differentiated by "color," corresponding to the five sacred colors of maize—blue, red, yellow, white, and multicolored.

Ramon moved forward once more, Jose following close behind and to one side, his face lit up with the pleasure of discovery and anticipation. All at once Ramon stopped dead, motioning urgently to the others to come close. About 20 feet ahead stood a small shrub. He pointed: "There, there, the Deer!" Barely visible above ground under the bush were some flecks of dusty green—evidently a whole cluster of Lophophora Williamsii. Although I have seen peyote plants grow-

Fig. 27. A clump of Lophophora Williamsii in the San Luis Potosi desert. Characteristically the plants barely show above ground. These young peyotes, because they have five ribs, are considered especially precious by the Huichol, who regard five as the symbol of completion.
ing in full sunlight, more often it is found like this—in a thicket of mesquite or creosote, shaded by a yucca or Euphorbia (especially *Euphorbia antisyphilitica*), or close to some well-armed *Opuntia* cactus, such as rabbit ear or cholla. Its broad, flat crown is usually almost level with the earth and so is easily missed by the inexperienced eye.

Ramón took aim, and the first of his arrows buried itself a fraction of an inch from the crown of the nearest *hikuri*. He let fly with a second, which hit slightly to one side. José ran forward and fired a third, almost straight down. Ramón completed the “kill” by sticking a ceremonial arrow with pendant hawk feathers into the ground on the far side, so that the sacred plant was now enclosed by arrows in each of the world quarters. The *mara’akáme* bent down to examine the peyote. “Look there,” he said, “how sacred it is, how beautiful, the five-pointed deer!” Remarkably, every one of the peyotes in the cluster had the same number of ribs—five, the sacred number of completion! Later on, he was to string a whole series of “five-pointed” peyotes on a sisal fiber cord and drape it over the horns of *Kuuyumarie* mounted on the vehicles.

The companions formed a circle around the place where Elder Brother lay “dying.” Many sobbed. All prayed loudly. The one called *Tatutsi*, Great-grandfather, unwrapped Ramón’s basket of power objects, the *rakwatsi*, from the red kerchief in which it was kept and laid it open for Ramón’s use in the complex and lengthy rituals of propitiation of the dead deer and division of its flesh among the communicants. Ramón explained how the *kiipuri*, the life essence of the deer, which, as with humans, resides in the fontanelle, was “rising, rising, rising, like a brilliantly colored rainbow, seeking to escape to the top of the sacred mountains.” Do not be angry, Elder Brother, Ramón implored, do not punish us for killing you, for you have not really died. You will rise again, Ramón was echoed by the pilgrims. we will feed you well, for we have brought you many offerings, we have brought you tobacco, we have brought you water from Our Mothers, we have brought you arrows, we have brought you votive gourds, we have brought you maize and your favorite grasses, we have brought you tamales, we have brought you our prayers. We honor you and we give you our devotion. Take them, Elder Brother, take them and give us our life. We offer our devotion to the *kakauyarixi* who live here in Wirikúta; we have come to be received by them, for we know they await us. We have come from afar to greet you.

To push the rainbow-*kiipuri*, which only he could see, back into the Deer, Ramón lifted his *muvieri*, first to the sky and the world directions, and then pressed it slowly downward, as though with great force, until the hawk feathers touched the crown of the sacred plant. In his chant
he described how all around the dead deer peyotes were springing up, growing from his horns, his back, his tail, his shins, his hooves. *Tamdsi Wauaсидri, he said, is giving us our life. He took his knife from the basket and began to cut away the earth around the cactus. Then, instead of taking it out whole, he cut it off at the base, leaving a bit of the root in the ground. This is done so that “Elder Brother can grow again from his bones.” Ramón sliced off the tough bottom half of the cactus and peeled away the rough brown skin, carefully preserving the waste for ritual disposition later. Then he divided the cactus into five pieces by cutting along the natural ridges and placed these pieces in a votive gourd. The process was repeated by Ramón and Lupe with several additional plants, for there had to be enough to give each of the companions a part of “Elder Brother’s flesh.” Those who had made previous pilgrimages came first. One by one they squatted or knelt before Ramón, who removed a section of peyote from the gourd and, after touching it to the pilgrim’s forehead (in lieu of the fontanelle hidden under the hat or scarf), eyes, voice box, and heart, placed it into his or her mouth. The pilgrim was told to “chew it well, chew it well, for thus you will see your life.” Then he summoned the non-Huichol observers and repeated the same ritual for them (as he had also included them in the knotting-in ceremony).

In the meantime Ramón had gathered up all the tobacco gourds (yékue-te) belonging to the pilgrims and placed them near the sacred cavities from which the peyote had been taken. As Lumholtz noted, these gourds are an indispensable part of the outfit of the hikuri-seeker, giving him, as it were, priestly status (the tobacco gourd was also a priestly insignia in Aztec times). I have heard it said that ye, tobacco, was once a hawk and the kué, gourd, a snake. The tobacco is always the so-called wild species, Nicotiana rustica—the “tobacco of Tatewari”—which contains nicotine in far greater amounts than the domestic brands. Tobacco gourds are specially raised for the purpose. Those with numerous natural excrescences are highly valued, although smooth ones are.

* Anderson (1969), who has been engaged in extensive field studies of Lophophora throughout its natural range from Texas to San Luis Potosí and Querétaro since 1957, reports that “injury or harvesting by man induces the formation of many stems from a single rootstock. Single clones more than 1.5 m. across have been observed in San Luis Potosí, for example” (p. 302). The ritual practice of leaving part of the rootstock in the ground to induce new growth “from Elder Brother’s bones” is common among Huichol peyote seekers. Clones growing from a single rootstock are considered especially sacred and powerful and are treated accordingly. Ramón, for example, would not allow anyone else to touch one such clone he had removed from the ground until it had been propitiated in the proper manner. Characteristically, he left part of the root where it grew.

† The voice box is obviously of great significance in a nonliterate culture, for, as Ramón said, “If one could not speak, how would his children know how to be Huichol?”
also employed, sometimes with a covering of skin from the scrotum of a deer. This, of course, makes them especially powerful.

All the hikuri that had "grown from the horns and body of Elder Brother" had been dug up and set on the ground. Bows and arrows were stacked against a nearby cactus. Votive offerings and prayers addressed to the Deer and the kakautuyarixi were placed in a pile in front of the holes where the peyote had been. The pilgrims were seated on the ground in a circle. Ramón touched the offerings with his muviéri, prayed, and set fire to one of the little wool yarn paintings he had made, depicting Elder Brother. As the wax melted, the flames licked at the ceremonial arrows, and soon the entire pile of offerings and the dry creosote bush itself were ablaze. Ramón muttered incantations and with his muviéri wafted some of the smoke toward the sacred mountains. Then he rose and with a gourd filled with peyote passed in a ceremonial circuit from right to left on the inside of the circle to give each his portion of "Elder Brother's flesh." Forehead, eyes, larynx, and heart were touched and the peyote placed into the mouth of each pilgrim in turn. The matewdempte especially were exhorted over and over to "chew it well, brother [or sister], so that you will see your life, so that it will appear to you with clarity." When Ramón came to ten-year-old Francisco, all turned to watch. Peyote is not given in any quantity to young children, but after the age of three it can be a sign whether or not the child has the disposition to become a mara'akáme. If he or she likes the taste, which is exceedingly bitter and difficult to tolerate, it is taken as a positive omen. If it is rejected, it is a negative sign—though not necessarily definitive. Ramón touched Francisco on the head, eyes, throat, and heart and placed a small piece between his lips. "Chew, little brother," he admonished, "and we will see how you like it. Chew well, chew well, for it is sweet, it is delicious to the taste." There were smiles at this obvious reversal but no laughter—this was not a time for hilarity. After slight hesitation Francisco, who had not tasted peyote before, began to chew vigorously. He nodded—yes, he liked it. Later he participated with great enthusiasm in the search for peyote and that night ate a goodly amount himself, with no visible ill effect. He danced for hours, fell asleep smiling happily, and next morning was his old self. One matewdemp who was obviously greatly moved by the whole experience was Veradera, a strikingly handsome girl apparently under twenty. Veradera ate more peyote than anyone with the exception of Ramón and Lupe, and later that night fell into a deep trance that lasted for many hours and caused everyone to regard her as specially sacred.

When every one of the companions had chewed a piece of the first sacrificial hikuri, Ramón took out his fiddle and one of the others a
guitar (both homemade), and the veterans stood aside in a group to
sing and dance the mateudmete into a "receptive condition." In the
meantime, another gourd had been filled with peyote cut into small
pieces, and the initiates were not allowed to rise until they had emptied
it. As the bowl was handed around, the others, led by Ramón, exhorted
them over and over to "chew well, companion, chew well, for that is
how you will see your life." Lupe then took a sizable whole plant,
sliced off the bottom, lifted her long, magnificently embroidered skirt
(like Ramón's clothes, it had been made specially for this journey),
and rubbed the moist end of the cactus on her legs, especially on the
numerous small scratches and cuts inflicted by spines and thorns during
the trek through the desert. The others followed her example. Lupe
explained that peyote not only discourages hunger and thirst and
restores one's spirit but heals wounds and prevents infection.*

Hikuri-seekers know about a small cactus they call tsuwiri, which
grows in the north-central high desert and which they say is liable
to manifest itself as true hikuri to those who have not properly purified
themselves. Its effect, as described to me by Ramón, approximates the
"bad trip." † Ramón having admonished the companions repeatedly to

*It might be argued (as has La Barre) that these medicinal qualities are ascribed
to peyote by the Huichol, not on any real evidence, but on the basis of its inherent
supernatural powers and its exalted place in Huichol belief and ritual. It is my im­
pression, however, that Huichol shamans at least are accomplished herbalists, and
that many of their medicinal plants really do possess at least some of the curative powers
with which they are credited. That this applies also to peyote is supported by a recent
scientific study. Researchers at the University of Arizona separated a water-soluble
crystalline substance from an ethanol extract of Lophophora Williamsii which, they
report, exhibited "antibiotic activity against a wide spectrum of bacteria and a species
of the imperfect fungi. The name peyocactin has been given to the principal anti­
microbial component contained in this partially purified substance. Of particular in­
terest was its inhibitory action against eighteen strains of penicillin-resistant Staphy­
lococcus aureus. Preliminary protection studies with mice suggest the in vivo effective­
ness of peyocactin" (McLeary, Sypherd, and Walkington, 1960:247-49). As for the effec­
tiveness of peyote against even the most extreme fatigue, we have, among others, the
testimony of Lumholtz (1902:178-79). Totally exhausted after a long trek and unable to
walk another step (to make matters worse he had just recovered from an attack of
malaria), Lumholtz was given a single hikuri by his Indian friends: "The effect was
almost instantaneous, and I ascended the hill quite easily, resting now and then to
draw a full breath of air."‡ Following our return to Tepic, Nayarit, one of the pilgrims gave me a specimen
of the cactus the Huichol call tsuwiri, or "false peyote." It turned out to be Ariocarpus
retusus, which does not actually resemble the true hikuri, Lophophora Williamsii,
very closely but which is nevertheless called peyote in some parts of northern Mexico.
Along with Ariocarpus fissuratus, which is said by the Tarahumara Indians of Chihua­
hua to be more powerful than Lophophora Williamsii and other members of this group,
A. retusus does in fact belong to the same cactus subtribe (Cereae) as L. Williamsii
and like the latter has long been reputed to possess magical and medicinal properties.
Two alkaloids also found in L. Williamsii, hordenine and N-methyltyramine, as well as
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Fig. 28. *Ariocarpus retusus*, called *tsuwiri*, or “false peyote,” by the Huichol. Pilgrims who are not completely “pure,” who have committed incest, or who have been insufficiently instructed by the shaman-leader of the pilgrimage may be misled into eating this cactus instead of peyote and suffer a “bad trip,” madness, or even death unless they are cured in time by the shaman.

“be of a pure heart” and not be misled by *tsuwiri*, the actual *hikuri* harvest was ready to commence, and the pilgrims went off into the desert, alone or in pairs. *Hikuri* “hides itself well,” and several of the companions had to walk a considerable distance before seeing their first peyote. Lupe, on the other hand, almost at once discovered a thicket of cactus and mesquite so rich in *peyote* that in a couple of hours she had filled her tall collecting basket. Occasionally she would stop to admire and speak quietly to an especially beautiful *hikuri* and to touch it to her forehead, face, throat, and heart before adding it to the others. We also saw people exchanging gifts of *peyote*. This seemed to us a very beautiful aspect of the pilgrimage. No ceremony in which *peyote* was eaten communally went by without this kind of ritual exchange, in which each participant is expected to share his

peyote with every companion. A man or a woman would carefully divide a peyote, rise, and walk from individual to individual, handing over a piece and receiving one in return. Sometimes an older participant would place his gift directly into the mouth of a younger one, urging him to “chew well, younger brother, chew well, so that you will see your life.” But most often these ritual exchanges took place in silence.

No hikuri was ever dug carelessly or dropped casually on the ground or into a basket or bag. On the contrary, it was handled with tenderness and respect and addressed soothingly by the hikuri-seeker, who would thank it for allowing itself to be seen, call it by endearing names, and apologize for removing it from its home. As mentioned, small, tender, five-ribbed (“five-pointed”) plants are considered especially desirable. Being young, they are also less disagreeable to the taste. Some plants were cleaned and popped directly into the mouth—after first being held to forehead, face, and heart. Lupe sometimes wept when she did this. She was also chewing incessantly, as was Ramón.

Toward four in the afternoon Ramón rose from where he had been digging peyotes and called out that it was time to return to camp. One of the hikuri-seekers had just spotted a sizable cluster and was reluctant to abandon so rich a find. Ramón admonished him: “Our game bags are full. One must not take more than one needs.” If one did, if one did not leave gifts and propitiate the slain Deer-Peyote (just as one should propitiate the spirits of animals one hunts, the maize one harvests, and the trees one cuts), Elder Brother would be offended and would conceal the hikuri or withdraw them altogether, so that next time the seekers would walk away empty-handed. We would call this practice conservation; to the Huichol it is part of the principle of reciprocity by which he orders his social relationships and his relationship to the natural and supernatural environment. So the pilgrims gathered their gear and their bags and baskets, now heavy with peyote, and after a tearful farewell returned to camp as they had come, walking single file to the sound of the bow. On the way they stopped here and there to pick up “food” for Tatewari.

On arriving at camp they made the usual ceremonial circuit around the fire and offered thanks for its protection, without laying down their burdens. Again there was much weeping. Ramón’s basket, held in one arm while he gestured in the sacred directions with the other, must have weighed a good thirty pounds. Though dormant, the ashes were still aglow, and new flames quickly licked through the growing pile of brush as each deposited some “food” for Tatewari. The green branches, wet with dew, sent thick clouds of white smoke billowing to the leaden sky. It was turning cold and damp.

The night was passed in singing and dancing around the ceremonial
Peyote Among the Huichol Indians of Mexico

fire, chewing peyote in astounding quantities, and listening to the ancient stories. Considering the lack of food, the long days on the road, the bitterly cold nights with little sleep (by now, Ramón had not closed his eyes to sleep for six days and nights!), and above all the high emotional pitch of the sacred drama, with its succession of increasingly intense and exalted encounters, one might have expected them to feel some letdown now that they had successfully “hunted the deer” and to lapse into a dream state induced by the considerable quantities of hikuri they had already consumed. True, after their return from the hunt they were, for the most part, somewhat subdued and quiet. Some had actually entered trances. Veradera had been sitting motionless for hours, arms clasped around her knees, eyes closed. When night fell Lupe placed candles around her to protect her against attacks by sorcerers while her soul was traveling outside her body. But most of the others were wide awake, in varying states of exaltation, supremely happy and possessed of seemingly boundless energy. If the dancing and singing stopped it was only because Ramón laid down his fiddle to commune quietly with the ceremonial fire or to chant the stories of the first pilgrimage. Neither he nor Lupe was ever without a piece of peyote in the mouth. Yet they were never out of control—indeed, none of them was—and neither they nor any of the others, little Francisco included, showed the slightest adverse effect, then or later.

The singing, dancing, and speech-making, punctuated by laughter and trumpet-blowing, went on with few interruptions until well past midnight, when Ramón laid aside his fiddle and allowed the peyote to take hold of him completely, so that he might speak directly with Tatewari and the kakanyarixi and listen to their counsel. It is in this dream state also that the mara’akâme obtains the new peyote names for the pilgrims (e.g., Offering of Blue Maize, Votive Gourd of the Sun, Arrows of Tatewari, etc.). These names are said to “emerge” from the center of the fire like brilliantly colored, luminous ribbons. They are conferred on the hikuri-seekers on the final day and preserved at least until the participants are formally released from their sacred bonds and restrictions by a ceremonial deer hunt some time after their return to the Sierra.

The Huichol regard their peyote experiences as private and do not, as a rule, discuss them with anyone, except in the most general terms (“there were many beautiful colors,” “I saw maize in brilliant colors, much maize,” or simply, “I saw my life”). Under certain conditions the mara’akâme might be called upon to assist in giving form and meaning to a vision, especially for a maitewâme, or in a cure. This much is clear, however: beyond certain “universal” visual and auditory sensations, which may be laid to the chemistry of the plant and its effect on the
After midnight Ramón laid aside his fiddle and entered a trance state in which he listened to the voices of ("Grandfather") Tatewari, the old Fire Shaman, and the other supernaturals who reside in Wirikuta, the sacred land of the ancestors and the peyote.
Central nervous system, there are powerful cultural factors at work that influence, if they do not actually determine, both content and interpretation of the drug experience. This is true not only between cultures but even within the same culture. Huichol are convinced that the mara'akame, or one preparing himself to become a mara'akame, and the ordinary person have different kinds of peyote experiences. Certainly a mara'akame embarks on the pilgrimage and the drug experience itself with a somewhat different set of expectations than the ordinary Huichol. He seeks to experience a catharsis that allows him to enter upon a personal encounter with Tatewari and to travel to “the fifth level” to meet the supreme spirits at the ends of the world. And so he does. Ordinary Huichol also “experience” the supernaturals, but they do so essentially through the medium of their shaman. In any event, I have met no one who was not convinced of this essential difference or who laid claim to the same kinds of exalted and illuminating confrontations with the Otherworld as the mara'akame. In an objective sense his visions might be similar, but subjectively they are differently perceived and interpreted.

The hikuri-seekers left as they had entered—on foot, single file, blowing their horns. Their once-white clothing was caked with the yellow earth of the desert, for during the night it had begun to drizzle—an astonishing event at the height of the dry season and an auspicious omen. Behind them a thin plume of blue smoke rose from the ceremonial fire. They had circled it as required. They had made their offerings of tobacco and bits of food and sacred water from the springs of Our Mothers. They had purified their sandals. They had wept bitter tears as they bade farewell to Tatewari, to Elder Brother, to the kakauyarixi. A few hundred yards down the trail they halted once more. Facing the mountains and the sun, they shouted their pleasure at having found their life and their pain at having to depart so soon. “Do not leave,” they implored the supernaturals, “do not abandon your places, for we will come again another year.” And they sang, song after song—their parting gift to the kakauyarixi:

What pretty hills, what pretty hills,
So very green where we are.
Now I don’t even feel,
Now I don’t even feel,
Now I don’t even feel like going to my rancho.
For there at my rancho it is so ugly,
So terribly ugly there at my rancho,
And here in Wirikùata so green, so green.
And eating in comfort as one likes,
Amid the flowers, so pretty,
Nothing but flowers here,
Pretty flowers, with brilliant colors,
So pretty, so pretty.
And eating one's fill of everything,
Everyone so full here, so full with food.
The hills very pretty for walking,
For shouting and laughing,
So comfortable, as one desires,
And being together with all one's companions.
Do not weep, brothers, do not weep.
For we came to enjoy it,
We came on this trek,
To find our life.

For we are all,
We are all,
We are all the children of,
We are all the sons of,
A brilliantly colored flower,
A flaming flower.
And there is no one,
There is no one,
Who regrets what we are.

POSTSCRIPT

On June 25, 1971, Ramón Medina Silva died of wounds sustained during a shooting incident at a fiesta held at his rancho in the Sierra to celebrate the preparation of the soil for the planting of the new maize crop. As is customary on such festive and sacred occasions, there had been a good deal of ritual and recreational drinking. At the time of his death at age forty-five, he had become widely recognized as the leading Huichol artist, and as a marakame of considerable and very special gifts. His loss, to his people and to his friends, is in- calculable.


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