

THE MESSAGE OF HUICHOL CEREMONIAL ART

by Paul L. Tyler

The Huichol Indians are an ancient people from the mountains of Mexico. Their culture represents a continuation of the pre-Columbian civilization of the Aztecs and other early peoples. Norma Jaichima expresses often a reverence for her people's past and a certainty that their ways and traditions can survive even 20th Century progress: "If you are going to look to your future, you're going to look toward your past."

For the Huicholes, the individual and the whole people are of equal importance. Norma Jaichima believes that the Huichol approach to educating their children is what makes her people strong. Children are not given answers, but tools so that they can see for themselves how to use them. The Western way is to teach reading and math. The Huichol way is to teach children to be individuals. This is accomplished through the narrating of legends. Every evening the legends are spoken by the elders or by a Maraa-kame, a guide of shaman. Most Huichol art manifests an individual's interpretation of the legends he or she has heard often.

The ceremonial life of the Huicholes also reinforces the importance of the individual. When young boys become men, they undertake a three-month pilgrimage to a sacred spot. As a group they walk through the mountains and live together. Yet the special training required to become a warrior is an individual task. A Maraa-kame is present to guide and assist each young man in his personal pilgrimage.

The Peyote pilgrimage is of the many spiritual journeys made by the Huicholes. But the individual does not join the search for this cactus, which produces hallucinatory powers when ingested, so that he may come to know himself through drug-induced visions. Rather, the pilgrim already knows himself through long training, and the taking of Peyote is part of an ancient ceremony that intensifies for the pilgrim his identity with his people.

For Norma Jaichima, Huicholes learn to be human according to their ancient way of life, and this ensures their survival as Huicholes. In her words: "If you are secure in yourself you can go anywhere and not worry that anyone will change you."

Interview
June 8, 1987

Paul Tyler: [Are you afraid that your way of life is disappearing?]

Norma Jaichima: We can see that in our clothes we wear our legends. We live in our land which has the pyramids, and the pyramids stand very tall. So therefore, they survive; we are still surviving. And even though the other things are introduced to us, the progress, we see it and we might participate with it. But we do not forget who we are or where come from...So no. I say again. I don't believe that that is so, that we are losing that, because once you teach a Huichol

child how to do bead work, and the legends, and the respect for the earth, we are not falling apart from that.

It is true that some of the young people, and I do not say all the young people, but people who go to the towns. And it is very unfortunate that some of the people working in the tobacco, or any of the fields, sugar cane or the other products that we work on. Some of the Mexican people give them drink, "Oh, to start the morning, compadre." And then later on when they pay you they say, "In case you need, here is some."

So the same person who is there to hire you to work in the tobacco fields, also pays you with the own liquor that he has there. You see, we didn't use that, we used our own drink, alright, and it was not that way. And some of the people have become addicted to some of the alcohol. That is unfortunate. But it is because of that. But we do teach all the people how it is with those people and with what they have to give us.

PT: ...Do you feel that the Huicholes are getting stronger?

NJ: I believe that yes, we are getting stronger...It's not only the Huichol that are getting stronger. All people. When I say all people I mean all the Indians of Mexico as well as the Indians of the United States. Because we travel, Vicente and I travel, and we meet so many Indian people, and we speak with them. And we all have that sense of knowing that we have to come out. Only very few of our people come out by themselves like us. And the one who do come out by themselves do not come out and represent themselves, they come out to work here, in the United States, picking crops. And then they go back.

But us, it's different. We have a message to give to people. We want to instill it in their hearts that again we come out to try to guide back to the earth, which is very important.

So I believe that we will not fall from our culture ever...Can you imagine? We have survived [with] it for such a long, long time. Even though they bring, all the things that have been brought from the outside world, plastic things. And we're exposed in Mexico City, in Guadalajara, and all those towns that are very close by, the big, they have anything that they have here in the United States. And we can see and can participate, but we can also live in the two worlds.

We as Indians think very different. Very different...

PT: You live in two worlds.

NJ: Yes, we live in the two worlds. Vicente and I live in the two worlds...we're able to do that without no difficulty...If we are without, we know how to survive without. If there are things there for us to enjoy, we can enjoy as well. But we don't need them.

PT: You've come out with a message. You feel that Indians, and Huicholes in particular, have something to teach the rest of us. Is that fair to say?

NJ: Yes, I believe that because the cycles now in this world, in all those things that are happening around us--a lot of the pollutions, a lot of the violence, children fighting among themselves, youngsters fighting with their parents, violence, people not being concerned about the earth--there's too much of that already that is happening. Exploiting is not very good either. We see those things that are happening, and it's getting very close to the cycle of the year 2,000. And people are going in that cycle that is taking to some destruction. That is not good.

We come out so that we can try to attune them that our Earth is very important. Because Earth is impregnated with life. And it gives us. And we have to give back to the earth and take care of it, not just take and take and take. We have to be more sensitive.

PT: And that's the most important thing you have to say to the rest of us?

NJ: I think that also to become more sensitive to one another's needs, to be able to help one another, more...If we understand and respect, I think that that is the key, to respect other people even though they are different from you, to learn about them instead of trying to change them.

PT: And you've felt people trying to change you before?

NJ: Yes, yes. We know what it is all about, and we have seen all of that happenings with our fathers and great-great grandfathers. But still we carry on our traditions. We do not say that progress is not good, but there is such a thing as balance also. And when there is progress we have to respect other people. You can not go in and say to the people "We want you to be like this."

PT: The Huichol way lives in balance with the Earth? Gives back as well as takes?

NJ: Yes, we give back as well as taking. We plant, and we also tend to the land. We do not pollute it.

PT: Your way is an example for others? You're not asking others to become Huicholes, but you're giving us an example?

NJ: Yes, not only that, but our philosophy of taking care of our little ones, of the children, which is so important. Because if you take care of your children and you guide them in the right way, and teach them to be human, then all of us are going to be better off.

I don't see no schools here to teach you to be human. Only to learn the 'A-B-Cs,' the '1-2-3s,' but to know about your own person and your own individualness, that is different.

PT: Can you tell how the Huicholes teach their children?

NJ: Yes, when they are young, we have some ceremonies and we use the Kaicha. The little child, when he is born, the mother and father they get the hand, and in ceremonies they teach them that they are doing this in the ceremony already.

PT: Kaicha?

NJ: Yes, which is a way of communicating, is the rattle, what you call the rattle (see #6). So the child, the mother, the father, they do this [a slow regular rhythm] with the child. And for five years, until it on its own...those five years the child really knows and respects the ceremonies, the teachings.

PT: And then at five years the child starts another phase of training?

NJ: Yes...it has its own obligation now to pay the respects of its learning the ceremonies...tilling the land, it learns all those things. Huichol children also play, and they play together very well. The community loves the children, everybody loves the children. It's very important to us, the children.

PT: Can you describe for me some of the ceremonial objects here, their meaning, their use?

NJ: Yes...some of the ceremony objects that you see here. We do use masks (see #s 8-10,12-14,16,19-24) for the dancing in ceremonies and communicating. On the faces, which are beaded, are our legends. So that is a legend that is right there speaking.

PT: On the mask.

NJ: On the mask.

PT: By wearing the mask...everybody knows the legend so you are saying it.

NJ: People have different ways of interpreting the legends, and so therefore, when you incorporate these into the masks then you are showing the legend.

In ceremonies there are people who wear masks to dance... Some people, perhaps anthropologists, have said that masks are not ceremonial. But how do they know, you see, it's only their way. Perhaps we don't speak about this, but perhaps maybe we don't want to say that, so we only say what we want to say.

The yarn paintings (see #s 15,18) is another way of putting our legends so that it can be seen. It is a way of communicating, again, with our deities. Some of the yarn legends here is the experience with an individual, and the way they feel and see their legends. Also, when they have gone...to the pilgrimage to the sacred place of the peyote, and incorporate that into a yarn painting.

PT: How do the children learn the legends?

NJ: Well, the Maraa-kame, or the shaman, in the evenings they sit by the fire and speaks of all those legends. And the children listen year after year after year. And the young mens, which my brother can relate to that, he will say about the pilgrimage that the young mens take in becoming warriors.

PT: So the legends are spoken to the children?

NJ: Yes

PT: As part of their training?

NJ: Yes, and also in the evening to all children, the elders speak about all the legends from the beginning. From the beginning, as the beginning that we know, is related by speaking to them as stories.

PT: Is this a nightly occurrence.

NJ: Yes, this is nightly.

PT: This is like watching television after supper in an American home.

NJ: That's right. And also we do things for happy to us, you know, we dance and we sing, and there's the ceremonies we do before we plant and after we plant. All those things, we participate...The Maraa-kame says, speaks of the universe, the planets. All of those things are incorporated in our legends of our ancestors. We hear about those things, so this is how the children are taught.

Now, the children, for some time the Mexican people brought in some of the religious people...to the mountains. So they give them the school. But still, by giving school they are incorporating their own beliefs. Which is another learning.

PT: So Huichol children are educated in two worlds?

NJ: In two worlds, the world of the Mexican people. They send Mexican school teachers to some areas in the mountain. And they teach children '1-2-3' and 'A-B-Cs,' you know, in the Mexican world. So they incorporate that into their own culture.

But primarily, ours is very strong because our legends and our way and our culture is first in the child, our way of life.

PT: The yarn paintings, do they have ceremonial uses? Are they are more decorative?

NJ: No, it is not that they are decorative. They are put on the wood to relate the legend, or the experience of the individual person. So you find that perhaps five individuals interpreting the legend of Wata'kameh, and he was a young man like your Noah. You know, the Noah's ark? Alright, it is very similar. And this legend was there before the Spaniards came. We knew of him, except that his name was Wata'kameh...

PT: So the yarn paintings are personal expressions, what other objects have you brought here?

NJ: Well the bead work (see #s 3,17,35). And the bead work, again...objects that have here are like representations of little animals like [Huichol name], the rabbit (see #4), and [Huichol name], which is the dove (see #5), and we have legends of both. So the legend is incorporated on top of the bead work. Again...we're talking about the legend, and the legend is put on those objects there. So the legend is the one that is important for us. So it becomes that that has been passed on to us.

PT: To me, who doesn't know the legends, the objects are just beautiful colors and designs, but for the Huichol there is all sorts of other meaning.

NJ: Yes, yes, and we also use little effigies for petitions for things that we leave when we do our praying, in votive bowls, prayer bowls, and also that is incorporated in the bowls that we make.

PT: Did you bring any bowls?

NJ: No, we did not bring any of the bowls...Shall we talk about our dress?

PT: Yes, let me ask about the object right up here behind you.

NJ: This here is a necklace (see #11). And that is worn by men and women. And those birds, here, are also significant of our legends. So that is put on the necklace, and it is worn. It is worn with the warriors; it is worn with the women, and when they are dancing they wear it.

We use this tool, or Vicente uses that when he is doing the dance of the deer. So that is used by him as a young warrior.

PT: So it's worn on special occasions.

NJ: Yes, special occasions.

PT: And the dress you're wearing today (see Slide #s AA-DD)...

NJ: Is an everyday wear.

PT: Everyday!

NJ: Everyday wear...As you can see, we have, the designs also things to us. We have many things here that are very ancient designs. We have the cross, which also signifies the four cardinal points, four elements. It's not only because it's a cross because of Christianity, but to us it already meant something long, long time ago. Our forefathers.

This here is the peyote, as you can see how that is done. You see that?

PT: Yes, yes.

NJ: But it also has the four cardinal points. See, and a lot of people don't know how to interpret this. So they don't say too much about it. We carry ancient designs, as you can see. Those are very ancient designs of our great-great-great-great-grandfathers. And this goes back to the pyramid buildings. And we carry them still with us.

So when we're wearing this in our in our clothing, we are saying "Here is our legend." We will not forget. And we have it and we wear that. So it is a message in itself, too, that we carry with us.

His is the same way. He's got all the double-headed eagle. We have...all of those objects that you see embroidered in there. So when a woman or a man is embroidering, he is going back to the legend while he is working.

PT: Do people embroider their own clothes?

NJ: Yes, people embroider their own clothes. And some of them who do not have that time and they're doing something else, then they go to somebody else to embroider. Because a lot of our people go down to the village to go and do the picking of the tobacco and other fruits as well, produce as well. They work, because in the Sierra you do not have those, you might say, work. So the work will give us money to buy supplies to take in, like corn sometimes has to be bought.

And now, because we are incorporating the threads into our clothing. Before it used to be very different. Long, long time ago our forefathers use the gold, the silver, the jade, the turquoise, the seed-beads, and all the other natural things. But they were taken away, so now we have to use what is there. So we incorporate with it too.

We also are weavers, and we weave our own bags. As you can see the Huichol bag (see #s 25,26,28,29,33). And again, those bags have ancient designs. And it is used to carry things.

PT: Do all the designs have a specific meaning or a symbol of something?

NJ: Yes, symbol of something, always symbol of something. I have seen in many of the books that they have made about us that Huicholes, they say it's only for decoration. And the reason they say this is that when they ask us we say "Oh, it's only for decoration," because we do not want say...

PT: You don't want to say what the meaning is.

NJ: No, no. It's one way of saying, giving them something so they stop asking us. So they put down in books, "It's only used for decoration"...

PT: And what else?...

NJ: The deer horns, that is used on a dance. We also use the horns of a bull to do the, like a Bull Dance. So that is done. And this particular one is used for the dancing of the Peyote Deer. Peyote Deer...

PT: When is this dance done?

NJ: The dance is done in ceremonies, when people have ceremonies when they come back from the Peyote Hunt, or in particular ceremonies that they have. Different times...

The sashes that we weave, also, they have things to say (see #s 27,31,34). The colors, we relate a lot to the colors, and they also have meaning. All of the symbols here have their own meaning, our ancient meanings.

Vicente Rutury: Why don't you talk about the colors, or the meanings?

NJ: Oh, the colors. Yes, to us the colors, in the words that we can put colors, I will explain. Colors are very meaningful. Nobody has put out these colors, but our father and our grandfather used to talk about that a little more open. Whereas the Huichol people will never tell you what colors mean. So therefore, red to us signifies energy and love. Yellow is learning and enlightenment. Black is power of the universe. Blue is for wisdom. Light blue is for knowledge. Orange is for healing. Green is for the beginning of things and strength. This pink is for faith. White is for purity. Brown is for courage. So, they all have a meaning...

PT: Just about every object has all the colors on it. Is that an important thing to get...

NJ: Yes, yes. Color to us is very important. We do not see the world only as the world is, but we see things with its vibrant colors. And that's also when the pilgrimage of the peyote, and the peyote is ingested, the colors are also there, more significant. It is not that we do not know them. It is just that it's blended into what we already know. The peyote does not give us that in itself.

As we had been speaking before, and I mentioned that when we do go to the peyote, we do not use the peyote because we need it to heal. No, and we do not use the peyote to find ourselves. No, or because we want to do something. No, it has been used for thousands of years, on ceremony, and in the pilgrimage, but to be healers, we already know. The Peyote has nothing to do with that, to be doing the healing. So therefore it is the ceremony that is done.

PT: Could you talk about the drum?

NJ: The drum (see #7) Yes, the drum is used in the ceremonies. In all ceremonies the drum is the heart. It is like a heartbeat, and so it is communicating with everyone, in the thoughts of everyone. So it gives you that feeling, the wholeness of the whole community. And it is, it emanates that. It is also used for healing, because the tone of the drum, to certain areas of the body, it heals. And those things are not spoken about either. It's also a way of communicating.

The Kaicha, we use a tool in our ceremonies. We use the flute, the whistle, and we use a tool, when we encounter things, we use the whistle. And that is for the things that sometimes you don't see...

The drum (see #2) is also used when a person is dying, on a ceremony of death. So when some of our people are on the journey to make this exchange or passage into the Spirit World, the drums being also used. And the Maraa-kame is chanting, and going through all this legend and speaking about the person that is dying, and is telling the deities of how it is feeling, about what its path has been and where it is going to guide the person to the other Spirit World...