

THE SPLENDOR OF MEXICO



# *Ritual Huichol Art*

The Drum Fiesta and  
The Use of Body Paint

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**T**he Huichol indigenous people are known in Mexico and a large part of the world for the richness and diversity of their crafts. The majority of their very colorful yarn pictures, bead weaves, and textiles use a wide range of fearlessly contrasting hues.

They are comprised of geometric forms like a kaleidoscopic, with animals, flowers, plants, ritual objects, human figures, or mythical scenes parading through them, framed in plentiful scenes full of form and color.

This production is nourished by their tradition, but since it is made for the market, it is far from what we could call “genuine Wixaritari art.” That kind of aesthetic expression is related to and created in the context and the praxis of the group’s ceremonial religious life. Nevertheless, as Johannes Neurath states, “Pure ritual does not exist, nor does art that is only representation.”<sup>1</sup>

In many cases, ritual art is the expression of the world of the ancestors, learned, recreated, and shared by people who have gotten close to the world of tradition and achieved “the gift of seeing,” which is translated into visions. For this reason, it is not only the creation of individual human beings, but something handed down by ancestors and a way *par excellence* to relate to each other and honor those ancestors through offerings, dances, songs, paintings, and innumerable aesthetic expressions of the Wixaritari intellectual tradition.

I have covered the issue of body painting, its color and designs, in different publications.<sup>2</sup> But the drum festival is the ideal pretext for looking in detail at what comprises ritual art, an art that is the product of tradition, whose specificity and objective are human relations.

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Photos courtesy of the author.

**Tatei Neixa, better known as the drum festival, is an agricultural cycle fiesta that combines seasonal rites of passage with the initiation rites for the life cycle of human beings.**



Huichol crafts: yarn drawings and bead weaving.



The drum is a sacred instrument, the personification of the deer ancestor Tamatsi Kauyumarie.

Ritual art is the expression of the world of the ancestors, learned, recreated, and shared by people who have entered into the world of tradition and achieved “the gift of seeing.”

This is a form of art in which symbolism is at the service of a collective aesthetic, in which the ephemeral is what predominates over the permanence that characterizes the aesthetics of craft work. The latter seeks to fix an idea; this contrasts with ritual art, in which the creation of images is temporary, and their production and reproduction are dangerous, subject to taboos. We are dealing here with an aesthetic devised deliberately to be observed and experienced solely in that moment and conditioned to not being reproduced with other ends and elsewhere.

*Tatei Neixa*, better known as the drum fiesta or festival, is a ceremony that the Huichol celebrate toward the end of the rainy season. It usually falls in the last weeks of October, when the crops are almost completely developed and about to be harvested. It is an agricultural cycle fiesta that combines the seasonal rites of passage with the initiation rites for the life cycle of human beings. In it, ears of corn and squash as well as newborns and children up to the age of five are central figures.

Identified with each other during the fiesta, corn, squash, and children are considered equal, or “unripe fruit.” This means that for a certain length of time, the two vegetables

and children are indistinguishable “beings.” This identity has to do with shared morphological characteristics: due to the great similarity of their forms and bodies, a relationship is established between them; but in addition, they are attributed with common qualities such as humidity, softness, tenderness, and immaturity.

At the same time, they are considered children of the deities, beings with a common origin, that have a pre-existence before being handed over to human beings in the form of gifts. At first view, the children are the progeny of their biological parents, while the squash and the ears of corn are the product of growing in the fields that farmers have sown and worked. However, in the Huichol intellectual tradition, very little escapes the intervention of the ancestors. Thus, everything that human beings obtain is thanks to them. So, the fruit of the fields, before being the result of farm work, and children, the progeny of their human parents, are all children of the ancestors. Mainly, they are the children of the mother corn, *Tatei Niwetsika*, and the young eagle mother, *Tatei Werika Wimari*, who have given them the soul, or *iyari*, to be able to live.

In the Huichol intellectual tradition, very little escapes the intervention of the ancestors. Thus, everything that human beings obtain is thanks to them.

Participating in the drum fiesta for five consecutive years allows the children to stop being like vegetables, so they can move on to a more human condition, to become people; this also translates into the transition to another stage in which they will gradually take on the responsibilities of adults. Parallel to this, the squash and ears of corn are divested of the quality of being actors when they are sacrificed and cooked; this turns them into food, which will later be consumed at the end of the fiesta.

To differentiate the ears of corn, squash, and children year after year, during the drum festival, they are taken on a long trip through a wide geography of worship: it stretches from the Pacific Ocean to the desert. The objective is to introduce them and take them to visit the abodes of the ancestors who have given them life. Both the children and the corn and squash participate directly in person, while their souls or *iyarite* in the form of a ball of cotton on a string are transferred from one place to another by the *mara'akame* or shaman, who narrates the experience in his song.

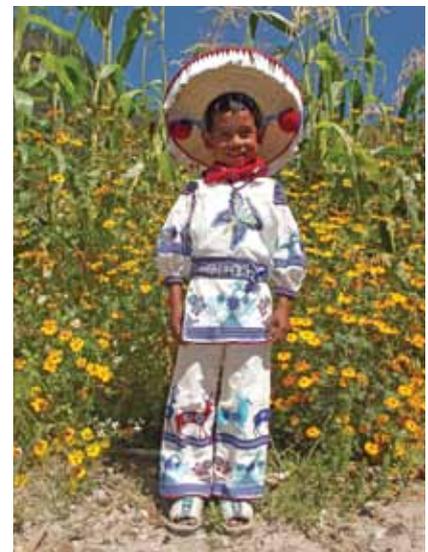
It is a journey in two stages, moving through land, sea, and air. In the first stage, beginning when the Sun reaches its zenith and ending almost at midnight, all of them, ears of corn, squash, and children, are taken airborne through the world aboveground, flying to Wirikuta in the East, to the desert where the myth says their father Sun was born, and they are then returned to their community.

In this flight, the children and their souls are described as winged beings: birds, butterflies, or bees, that accompany the drum played in the middle of the venue during the entire fiesta. Using their own wings or *wainurite*, the children journey together with a musical instrument considered to be the personification of the deer ancestor, Tamatsi Kauyumarie. During the mythical period, this ancestor helped the Sun rise to the firmament after he was born in Wirikuta by pushing with its antlers.

Through singing the *mara'akame* and the percussion, the drum passes through a metamorphosis, going from



White Rock, a sacred place, the dwelling of the mother goddess of the sea Tatei Haramara.



Huichol child in ritual garb.



Salinas Hill in the high desert of San Luis Potosí.

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Extracting *uxa* dye.

being an inert or flat object —as Philippe Descola would describe it, bereft of a soul or other personality traits—<sup>3</sup> to temporarily become an animated thing, a living subject.

As Fernando Santos-Granero points out, in indigenous intellectual traditions, the things or objects most likely to turn into subjectivities are the ones that enter into contact with the bodies of human beings when used or touched by them.<sup>4</sup> This is what happens to the *tepo* drum, which is infused with a soul through the direct action of many of the ritual participants through four actions: when it is painted and dressed; when fire or warmth is put inside it; when it is touched together with the beating of the children's rattles; and through the pleas of the *mar'akame*.

Its condition as a deer is expressed by the sounds it makes, a tapping or beat, which the listeners hear and perceive as the beat of the deer's heart and the pounding of its hooves. This piece consists of a hollowed-out tree-trunk dressed in a deerskin, whose trunk or body is painted with a series of drawings graphically depicting the mythical journey of that ancestor to the land of peyote, a trip that at the same time is materialized in the journey the children are making.

Usually, the paintings in yellow *uxa* on the drum include a combination of abstract and realist figures, among which can be distinguished the silhouettes of deer, peyote plants, stylized flowers, and dotted lines. Together, they depict the mythical journey of the deer ancestor Tamatsi Kauyumari to the Wirikuta desert, as well as his experience at the first dawn, where his tracks became peyote and he was initiated. Clearly, these are scenes and not individual, independent drawings; they are events that occurred in mythical times but are also occurring during the ritual itself.

Once they have arrived to Wirikuta, just like the drum, the children's bodies are painted with *uxa*, a dye extracted for a thorny bush (also called *uxa*) that grows in the high plateau of San Luis Potosí. It is yellow, the dye of Tayau, the father Sun, that leaves the mark of his rays on the face of the pilgrims who have traveled to the desert.

After the flight of their souls, with their faces painted, the children return to the community. However, their designs are less elaborate than the paintings on the drum; they are not like those of the adult *peyoteros*, or peyote-eaters, people with ritual responsibilities, who physically make pilgrimages



Peyote plants.



*Uxa*, a root used in ritual painting.



Deer track.

Face-painting of the children is not only a graphical and numerical indicator of the journeys their souls have taken, but also an abstract view of the Huichol universe.



Children's faces painted with *uxa*, representing peyote.



to the desert where they consume peyote in order to be initiated and have visions, which they will later paint on their own faces, as did the ancestors in the primeval times.

Usually, stains or dots of yellow color can be seen on the faces of the little ones, depending on the number of times they have participated. This means that babies only have a single dot on their faces, whereas older children or those who have participated in several fiestas, may have up to five.

Despite the big differences between the images on the cylindrical drum and the adults' face paintings, the yellow dots on the children's faces do achieve a certain degree of complexity, above all in the composition of the five points, distributed starting on the tip of the nose, the two cheekbones, the forehead, and the chin. This is an image that only

children who have gone to five fiestas can wear. This design is related to the symbolism of the *tsik+ri*, a diamond-shaped cross that can be more clearly seen if you draw the imaginary lines between all the points, going for one extreme to the other through a center (which, in this case, would be the tip of the nose), and uniting all the external dots. The *tsik+ri* is a complex symbol that alludes to the directions of the universe; it is a three-dimensional design that not only marks a center and four edges, but also an upper and a lower plane. During the drum fiesta, it also appears as a woven cross hanging from a string, from which the cotton balls or children's souls also hang and through which they move.

Face-painting of the children is not only a graphical and numerical indicator of the fiestas and journeys that their souls

## GLOSSARY

Wixarika, Wixaritari	The name the Huichol call themselves
Wirikuta	Place of worship in the San Luis Potosí desert, where peyote grows on the skirts of the Sierra de Catorce Mountains
<i>wainurite</i>	Wings of small children, described as invisible for most people
<i>Tatei Neixa</i>	Fiesta or ritual: “The Dance of Our Mother,” also known as the Drum Festival
Tatei Niwetsika	Our Mother of the Corn, feminine deity and mythical ancestress
Tatei Werika Wimari	Our Mother the Young Eagle, feminine deity and mythical ancestress
<i>iyari</i>	Soul, heart, center, interior
<i>iyarite</i>	Souls (plural)
<i>mara’akame</i>	“Dreamer,” shaman, healer, singer
Tamatsi Kauyumari	Our Older Brother the Deer, masculine deity, mythical ancestor
<i>tepo</i>	Vertical drum with a tripod base, used in rituals
<i>uxa</i>	Plant or bush that grows in the highland desert of San Luis Potosí, from whose root a yellow dye of the same name is extracted to use in rituals; with it the bodies of human beings, animals, plants and all manner of artifacts used in ceremonies are painted.
Tayau	Our Father the Sun, masculine deity, mythical ancestor
<i>tsik+ri</i>	Geometric design in the form of a diamond, which symbolizes mainly the cardinal points of the universe and appears repeatedly in rituals and even in crafts as a yarn cross held up by two sticks or poles



Design in *uxa* using dotted lines on cheeks and nose.

have taken, but also an abstract view of the Huichol universe, or world view, represented in a geometric figure in the form of the *tsik+ri* painted in the yellow dye of the Father Sun on their faces. An ephemerally painted, diamond-shaped cross that legitimizes the children’s journey through the places and abodes that their ancestors inhabit, and that disappears when they return to the community, washed off with water before they go to sleep. Ritual and art, an indivisible pair on the road to initiation. **MM**

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Johannes Neurath, *La vida de las imágenes. Arte huichol* (Mexico City: *Artes de México/Conaculta*, 2013), p. 125.
- <sup>2</sup> Ricardo Claudio Pacheco, “Ambivalencia y escisión en el concepto de persona *wixarika* (huichol): el ritual mortuorio y su búsqueda para lograr invisibilidad,” master’s thesis in Meso-American studies (Mexico City: UNAM-IIF, 2010); “Centros anímicos y pintura corporal en rituales *wixaritari* (huicholes),” *Revista Estudios Mesoamericanos* 13 (2013), pp. 67-74; and “La navegación del tambor y el vuelo de los niños: complejidad ritual” (Mexico City: UNAM-IIF, 2016).
- <sup>3</sup> Philippe Descola, *La selva culta. Simbología y praxis en la ecología de los achuar* (Quito, Ecuador: Abyayala, 1996).
- <sup>4</sup> Fernando Santos-Granero, *The Occult Side of Things. Native Amazonian Theories of Materiality and Personhood* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2009).