

HUICHOL ETHNOGRAPHY AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

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Introduction

The Huichol Indians of western Mexico inhabit one of the most isolated and inaccessible areas of Middle America (Fig.1). This isolation has meant that their aboriginal culture has survived with relatively few major modifications since the period of first contact with Western culture. This situation offers a unique opportunity to the anthropologist searching for ways to better understand native culture in this area of Mesoamerica. Huichol culture has often been used as an ethnographic model for analogy to aid in archaeological interpretation (see, for example, Furst, 1974).

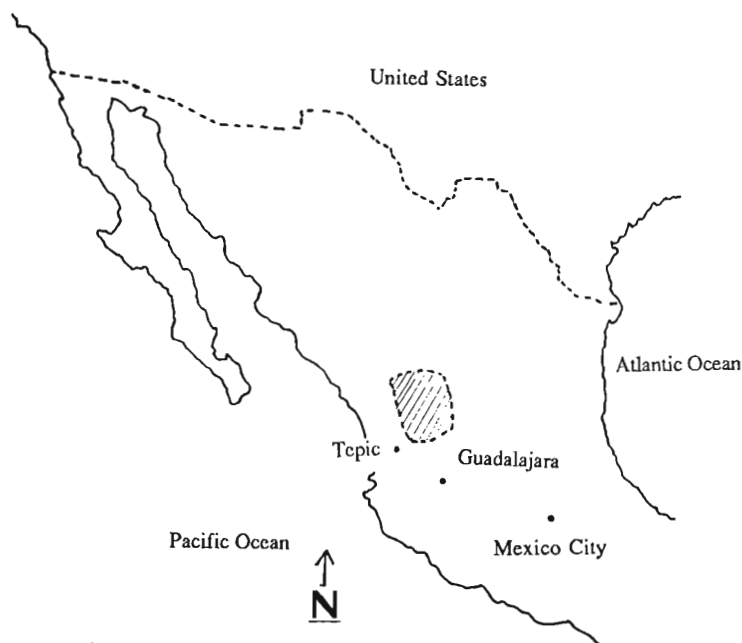


Fig. 1 Map showing approximate area of Huichol territory

In a recent study of the Prehispanic stone sculpture of West Mexico, this author (Williams, in press) has made extensive use of analogy with the Huichol and other Indian groups of Mesoamerica and elsewhere to derive an interpretation of a vast and diverse corpus of Prehispanic art. What follows is a brief account of the problems encountered while carrying out this research, as well as an outline of its conclusions and implications for future research.

The original study on which this paper is based consisted of the analysis and classification of the stone sculpture of ancient West Mexico (Williams, in press). The main problem faced by the author was the lack of archaeological context for virtually all of the sculptures studied. Without the possibility of a contextual analysis, other avenues of research had to be found in which to contribute something meaningful and worthwhile from the data at hand. This problem was solved by the application of ethnographic analogy to the interpretation of several classes of sculpture. This analysis resulted in the interpretation of several iconographic themes present in the sculptural tradition under study, and also offered valuable ideas on the possible use and meaning of these artefacts within the context of Mesoamerican culture. In addition to ethnographic information, ethnohistoric sources from West Mexico and other areas were also used in this study.

Ethnographic analogy and archaeological interpretation

One of the most difficult problems faced by the archaeologist is the decoding of the archaeological record, particularly when this consists of complex images used as symbols in ancient times. Artefacts do not hold in themselves the answers to the questions that might interest us as archaeologists, so the proper approach has to be found to fill the gap between material culture and interpretation. (Binford, 1983, 19-20).

In the case of Mesoamerican art, there is still debate among scholars on whether or not one can use ethnographic data as a basis for interpretation:

There has been an assumption that strong continuities connect Teotihuacán with Aztec art and with early colonial records, . . . The easiest and most seductive historical patterns are those which assume simple continuity of happening. . . . it is apparent that only biological and ecological occurrences are continuous, while events in the domain of symbolic experience show a much greater instability and are more susceptible to transformation. It is axiomatic that history is more discontinuous than biology (Kubler, 1967,11).

There is, however, a strong case for continuity of meaning in Mesoamerica, in spite of Kubler's view, which could be considered to be an extreme view, to say the least. Mesoamerica was a unified culture area, a region inhabited by peoples sharing a common cultural tradition. Although of course there was a great degree of linguistic and cultural variation within its sometimes ill-defined and shifting boundaries, Mesoamerica was a world-system with a common, unifying world-view.

According to Gordon Willey (1973,153-4), three assumptions are basic to the understanding of Mesoamerican cultural (and artistic) traditions: 1) Ancient Mesoamerica can be viewed as a unified cultural tradition, a culture area-with-time depth. The component cultures within its boundaries were more closely related to each other than anyone of them was to cultures outside these boundaries; 2) There was

within this Mesoamerican cultural system a unified ideological system, subsuming all religion and abstract intellectual thought; 3) There was an integrity of belief and communication within this Mesoamerican ideological system that permits us, in archaeological retrospect, to ascribe similar meanings to similar signs or symbols.

Clearly, then, there exist at least two schools of thought regarding interpretation of images and symbols in Mesoamerica. The first one, espoused by Kubler and others, is staunchly against the use of historical or ethnographic models for interpretation of prehistoric artistic traditions. The opposing school of thought, which incidentally is the one claiming more supporters in the field of Mesoamerican studies, holds that continuity exists, therefore prehistoric forms can find their meaning in historical or even contemporary, ethnographic sources.

For the purposes of the present study continuity between Prehispanic and early post-Conquest native cultures in Mesoamerica is assumed to be a valid proposition. Also of great importance is the continuity of ancient cultural patterns documented for such contemporary indigenous groups as the Huichol of Nayarit and Jalisco. Although the problems of interpretation are great and no easy generalizations are warranted, historical and ethnographic analogy are valuable tools for culture-historical interpretation.

In the case of West Mexico, conflicting views have been taken by various scholars on the validity of ethnographic data as a source of interpretive material to complement or explain the archaeological record. Taylor (1970,166), for example, has said the following:

When we turn to the task of interpreting the religious significance of the archaeological materials derived from the western Mexican shaft tomb tradition, the necessity for extreme caution seems quite evident. On the most elementary level, the link to the ethnographic and/or documentary data is tenuous since the shaft-tomb tradition seems to have come to an end not later than the fifth century A.D. - approximately a thousand years removed from the pertinent ethnographic sources . . . The only approach which seems justified, in light of our present level of knowledge, is to operate on the level of broad generalized statement of probability as to the religious function of observed archaeological features in nonhistoric cultures.

Taylor's view however, seems as extreme as that of Kubler cited above. While some of Taylor's statements are true, if we were to follow his advice, a whole range of anthropological information would have to be discarded when looking for ways to better understand the meaning implicit in West Mexico's archaeological record, in particular its artistic traditions. Ethnographic analogy is in some cases the only approach that can help give some meaning to the fragments of matter that comprise the archaeological record, and West Mexico is certainly no exception to this situation.

The strongest case for continuity of meaning as well as for the use of ethnographic analogy in West Mexico is perhaps that made by Peter Furst in the following terms:

The ideological universe of ancient Mexico was a very different one from our own - one that more closely resembles that of the Huichol or the Hopi than it

does the one on which we have been drawing for the interpretation of West Mexican art. It seems obvious, therefore, that at least for some West Mexican art the explanations must be sought on a different plane if we are ever to move beyond seriation and description in West Mexican culture history. But this requires something more than merely examining what seems obvious or logical within our ken. It requires knowledge of and insight into the shared symbolic world of the American Indian, prehistoric and contemporary, and more appreciation of the astonishing durability of this ancient ideological universe through time than some of us are evidently ready to grant (Furst, 1974,134).

The Huichol Indians of Jalisco and Nayarit currently inhabit an isolated region of the Sierra Madre Occidental, the major orographic feature in West Mexico. This isolation has permitted the Huichol to retain much of their aboriginal culture unchanged. The Huichol, in fact, "represent the only Mesoamerican population whose aboriginal ideological universe has remained basically unaltered by Christian influence" (Furst, 1972,7). Furthermore, recently it has been pointed out (Fikes, 1985,87-8) that all available archaeological evidence points to a long *in situ* development of Huichol culture. Both temple architecture and maize agriculture in the Huichol area have been dated to about A.D. 200. "The popular view that Huichols were originally desert-dwelling hunters who arrived rather recently in their present homeland now appears untenable" (Fikes, 1985, 88). This archaeological evidence is supported by glottochronological data supporting the notion of long Huichol settlement in the area (Fikes, 1985, 90). According to a recent study by Weigand,

For the eastern Nayarita [i.e., Huichol], the archaeological evidence strongly suggests a long, *in situ* development, with major Mesoamerican influences coming in from the north (the Chalchihuites culture), the east (the Malpaso, and perhaps, Juchipila valleys), the south (the Teuchitlán tradition, the Ixtlán del Río zone), and the west (the Amapa-Peñitas-Ixcuintla-Centispac zone) . . . The Huicholes are a composite group who probably assimilated many elements of these surrounding cultural patterns during the long periods of synthesis after the arrival of the Spanish. However, there are many general resemblances of a shared world view between some Huichol motifs (as reported by Lumholtz) and those found on the ceramics of the Classic period Chalchihuites culture of Zacatecas. Kelley (1971) believes that the Huicholes might be in some way descended from or related to the village agriculturalists of the Loma San Gabriel culture, which was both contemporary with and followed the heavily Mesoamericanized Chalchihuites development in time and which was partly derived from them. In summary, it seems that the groups today called Huicholes shared a long *in situ* development as a Loma San Gabriel-like culture . . . However, the degree and character of the post-Spanish contact period and the synthesis among the eastern Nayarita and their neighbors remain to be more fully evaluated (Weigand, 1985, 154, 157).

However traditional and conservative they may be, it would not be accurate to state that the Huichol remain a totally non-Western, "native" culture. This group

has been subjected to a long process of acculturation with the Hispanic Mexican culture that surrounds and dominates them:

We must also acknowledge that however "traditional" or non-Christian it may appear to be, the subsystem that comprises world view, religion, sacred traditions, and ritual is also a product of history, recent as well as ancient. It reflects not only actual pre-Conquest survivals but also their successive reformulation and reinterpretation. One would expect these to have occurred at different times and in different places - and with different degrees of intensity - both before and after the Conquest (Furst, 1978, 22).

We are left with a complex situation in which not everything Huichol can be readily accepted as a remnant from ancient times. Extreme care should be taken when using Huichol ethnographic models to "explain" the archaeological record, particularly when we are dealing with the realm of ritual or religion. No simple relationships between Huichol and Prehispanic thought and culture are assumed in this study, only those aspects of the Huichol cultural system that seem upon closer scrutiny to be ancient in origin are used to complement the archaeological record.

Huichol ceremonialism and stone sculpture

The first step in the formulation of the present research was to look for references in the literature of the use of stone sculptures or other similar objects by the Huichol as part of their ceremonial and religious life. One of the most important and informative sources on Huichol culture is Carl Lumholtz, a Norwegian explorer who visited the Huichol area early this century and left us a valuable account of their culture. His writings served as the basis for much of the interpretation of the cultural material under study.

The use of stone sculptures as objects of worship has survived among some indigenous cultures of West Mexico. The best-known example of this practice comes from the Huichol Indians. Stone figures have been used until very recent times as an important part of ritual activity, and for all we know they may still be part of the ritual paraphernalia in the most remote Indian communities. (Indeed, Hers [1982] shows a photograph of a small anthropomorphic stone figure inside a Huichol temple). Some of these objects are anthropomorphic representations of gods, or depictions of ritually important animals, such as the deer (Simoni-Abbat, 1963, Figs. 19-21).

When Lumholtz visited several Huichol communities at the turn of the century, he was able to document an important cult centered on the worship of the sun, rain, the deer and other natural phenomena. He was one of the first outsiders to have full access to most Huichol sanctuaries in the area he visited. Here he observed, photographed and collected ethnographic material, including stone "idols". Of these he made the following remarks:

In the temples of the Huichols no idols are to be seen, as they are kept in secret places, often in some remote cave. In the temple of Santa Catarina, according to the Indians, there is an excavation underneath the fireplace, in which an idol of the god of fire stands, surrounded by numerous ceremonial objects. The Indians state that such a cavity is a feature of every temple, and

its special god or some sacred object may be placed in it. I saw, however, that in two diminutive temples erected for the god of fire for a special purpose, there were idols standing above ground, besides the ones in the cavities below. Images of gods are still made among the Huichols according to the orders of the shaman; and their purpose is to prevent a drought, or to drive off some serious disease or other tribal misfortune. The images are carved out of solidified volcanic ash, or sometimes out of wood, and in rare instances they are molded from clay . . . Images of animals belonging to particular gods are also made in various ways. They are deposited in the particular place of worship of the god, together with ceremonial chairs and other symbolic objects (Lumholtz, 1900,24).

According to Lumholtz, one of the most important deities among the Huichol was the god of fire, so his image was more frequent than those of other gods. "In the district of Santa Catarina, where he is the ruling god, I know of six of his images, which accordingly must be considered as so many impersonations or incarnations of the god of fire. There may be even more" (Lumholtz, 1900, 25). This god resided in all these images, but his principal abode was the principal image, which was found in the little temple at Teaka'ta. Sometimes the god of fire was represented not by one, but by two images: one would stand above ground, and the other in a cavity underneath it. The latter was the smaller and the older of the two, and was regarded to be closely associated with the sun after it has set, that is, the sun of the underworld. The upper image was associated with the sun of daytime, or of the upperworld (Lumholtz, 1900, 25).

By his own account, Lumholtz was the first white man to visit with the consent of the Indians the cave of Great-grandmother Nakawé, the Mother of the Gods and Vegetation. His account of this unique experience is worth quoting at length, together with his information regarding other sacred places in the same area (Lumholtz, 1902, 159-170):

The cave of Great-grandmother Nakawé, the mother of the gods and vegetation . . . right in the midst of the path is an outcropping stone, around which the Indians, with their machetes, commenced to clear away grass and bushes, that I might see it distinctly. 'This is no stone', they said; 'it is one of the ancient people, or gods'. This rock, the indians told me, is a blind god . . . Inside [another] cave, a small temple contains a representation of the god of fire, a little stone statue that stood on a disk of tuff. Below this disk was a circular aperture about two feet deep. In it was another image of the same god. It was only eight inches high, and, like the one above, made of solidified volcanic ash. In front of it had been placed a few ceremonial arrows with symbolic attachments, a votive bowl, and a small tuff disk, on which the god's food is offered, such as grains of corn, bread, chocolate, tesvino, etc. . . . The idol was very dirty and smeared with blood, but in its right side was a hole showing the natural white colour of the material, contrasting strangely with the dusky appearance of the rest of the figure. This hole owes its existence to the belief that the power of healing and the knowledge of mysterious things are acquired by eating a little of the god's holy body, which the people thus threaten to absorb ultimately into themselves. Curing shamans come to visit the place,

and, having deposited different kinds of food . . . scrape off with their fingernails particles of the god's body and eat them.

Other stone images of gods described by Lumholtz (1900,34, 42) are "Grandfather Deer Tail", which differed very little from the image of Grandfather Fire. The front and back of this figure were decorated with paintings in yellow and red. Another god was "Elder Brother", which represented wind or air and *hi'kuli* (peyote). This god's image could be identified by a prominence under each arm representing the peyote seeker's tobacco gourd. On the face on both sides were longitudinal stripes, alternately red and yellow. These signified rain, according to Lumholtz's Huichol informants.

The figures described by Lumholtz are relatively small, crude human or animal images carved in volcanic rock. They were held in awe by the people not so much for their appearance as for the religious myths and traditions woven around them. In some cases these figures seem to be the possessors of real *mana*, or some type of super-human power, as in the case of the image being consumed ritually by its worshippers, who acquired some of its power in the act of devouring it.

In other instances, gods were represented by small pebbles of some curious shape or colour, which were kept in the god-houses carefully wrapped up in rags. Thus, at Teaka'ta "the sun may be seen in his god-house as a round red stone, once produced by the magic of the shaman's plumes" (Lumholtz, 1900, 62). Rock crystals were also held in high esteem by the Huichol, as they were thought to represent deities or ancestors:

Rock crystals are objects about which the Indians have singular belief. Two large specimens, secured in Santa Catarina, each about two centimetres long, are supposed to be hailstones belonging to the Corn Mother, the clouds of this deity having been changed into this form. Small rock crystals, supposed to be produced by the shamans, are thought to be dead or even living people . . . Such a rock crystal is called *tevali*, or 'grandfather' - the same name given to the majority of the gods. But it may, however, represent any person or relative, in accordance with the directions of the shaman. The crystal, like the small stones which represent gods, is kept carefully wrapped in rags, and is put away in a secluded part of the house, often inside a basket. A stranger would not be likely to discover one except by accident (Lumholtz, 1900, 63).

An historical source from the second half of the eighteenth century gives an interesting - though perhaps not very plausible - explanation for the use of unmodified stones instead of properly carved images as gods:

Because in times past all idols were taken away from the Nayeritas [by the Spanish friars], and they were left with no relics . . . they worship in these arrows, beads and rags the representation of their gods, which are not physically there, but are remembered with these objects (Vicente Cañaverl Ponce de León [1768] cited in Hers, 1977, 24).

It is significant to note that this custom of using small stones as objects of worship or ritual paraphernalia was not confined to the Huichol culture. Preuss (1968,

214) visited Nahuatl-speaking communities in the Western Sierra Madre in the first decade of the twentieth century, and he tells us that each *ranchito* (rural settlement) had its own cave, where he found ritual arrows dedicated to newly-born boys and girls. Also present were the medicinal arrows of shamans or curers who had died.

The use of rock-crystal "charm stones" is of course not limited to West Mexico; it is a widespread practice of shamanism in the New World. There is an interesting parallel between the Huichol and some groups of native Californians for the use of these objects in magical practices. Levi (1978) documents the use of rock crystals as "power objects" among several Yuman groups in northern Baja California and southern Alta California. According to this author,

A *wii'ipay* (rock crystal) is one of the most powerful objects in the supernatural universe. Its unique vitality, its efficacy for individual gain, and its potency in malevolent magic all make it a paranormal force that is regarded with the utmost fear. Clearly, it is one of the most potent and distinctive objects in the witches' paraphernalia. Only in the hands of the properly trained can the otherwise unpredictable power of *wii'ipay* be manipulated for specific goals and then only if the necessary precautions have been taken (Levi, 1978, 44-6).

Obviously this parallel between Huichol and Yuman ethnography serves to illustrate the antiquity of shamanic traits in the New World, rather than Prehispanic contact between both areas. Another example comes from an area that is more closely related culturally to Mesoamerica, the American Southwest. The Pueblo Indians are animists; to them "not only are night and day, wind, clouds, and trees possessed of personality, but even articles of human manufacture . . . are alive and sentient" (Parsons, 1939, 197). This animistic and "fetishistic" philosophy is extended to sacred stones (Parsons, 1939, 329-30).

In Mesoamerica many examples can be found in which rocks and stones were considered sacred. For example, according to the *Anales de Xahíl* obsidian was a "talking stone", which we may interpret as referring to an oracle. According to this same document, this black "stone" (technically a volcanic glass, not a stone) was deified, considered the "heart of the earth" (Heyden, 1988, 220). Among the Zapotecs of Oaxaca, obsidian was considered divine, and it was worshipped in the form of a great knife in the temple (*Ibid.*).

Conclusions

The Prehispanic stone sculpture of West Mexico has been analysed using analogy with the Huichol Indians and other native groups of Middle and North America (Williams, in press). Sculptures among the Huichol are regarded as representations of their deities, with supernatural properties and a force of their own. In some cases the stone itself of which the image is made is regarded as something sacred, imbued with a vital essence. This is linked with beliefs widely held in native America which confer supernatural power to such objects as rocks or rock crystals. It is thought that these ideas are ancient in origin, and may therefore contribute to the interpretation by analogy of an artistic tradition that would otherwise be totally alien and mute to us.

Confronted with a corpus of Prehispanic artefacts without archaeological context, the archaeologist is forced to look for novel ways to tackle the problem of interpretation. Information derived from ethnography can more often than not offer insights that allow for cultural reconstruction, as we have seen in the present paper. However, one should always bear in mind that the Huichol and other native groups have a long history of contact and interaction with the Western world, which has produced a synthesis of traditional culture and modern values and attitudes. It is the task of the anthropologist to assess this situation and to evaluate to what extent archaeological data of a particular kind are compatible with an ethnographic model for interpretation.

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