Return to Paradise: The Peyote Hunt of the Huichol

An example of a key social drama and pilgrimage comes from Barbara Myerhoff’s account of the Huichol peyote hunt, which she called “the central ceremony in the Huichol religious calendar and the pivotal event which unites the Huichols with one another, with their deities, and forges into a single complex the deer, the maize, and the peyote” (1974: 112). Myerhoff described them as a society of some nine thousand members inside Mexico. Each year they conducted a pilgrimage back to their spiritual heartland of Wirikuta, which in the past had taken forty to forty-five days on foot. During her research, the trip took advantage of buses and trains, which diminished its sacredness in no way.

In preparation for the voyage, costumes had to be prepared, washed, and decorated “until the transformation of the tired, dirty, poor group from the city and mountains into properly adorned Huichols was complete” (25). Prior to departure, a number of behavioral restrictions were imposed on the pilgrims, the most severe reserved for the mara’akame or spiritual leader of the society. Each participant or peyotero was also given the name of one of the gods. Finally, each had to publicly confess their sexual misdeeds and be absolved of guilt. By confessing and expurgating these sins, the “peyoteros were now pure, made new. They were no longer mortal. It was from this moment that the pilgrims became and were known to each other as the Ancient Ones” (136). The following morning they set off on their pilgrimage.

Wirikuta was a sacred place, the place of origin for the Huichol; as such, it was full of power and danger. When the troupe arrived at the place called the “Vagina” in Huichol the pilgrims dismounted from their vehicle and were led with eyes downcast by the mara’akame “into the middle of an utterly desolate but holy place” (139). The danger was greatest for the novices, who were making their first pilgrimage;
accordingly, the *mara’akame* prayed over each of them, sweeping them with the sacred plumes which he then swung about in the air. “The *primeros* were especially solemn now, and some tearful, ‘because it is the first time we will see our lives, because we are coming to pay our debts, there in the sacred land’” (140).

Along the way, linguistic and behavioral inversions were practiced. Ramon the *mara’akame* facetiously called himself the Pope and referred to females as males and to adults as children. A sneeze became the subject of laughter, due to the convention of associating the nose with the penis. “The reversals applied to behaviors as much as to people and objects, thus one addressed someone in front of him by turning to the rear and one accepted something from another by telling him, ‘You are welcome,’ so that the giver replied, ‘Thank you’” (147-8) As the leader explained, whenever possible, “everything should be upside down and backward.”

Upon arriving at the sacred country, the party proceeded on foot. They crossed the desert quietly and seriously, walking in single file and staring intently at the ground as if searching for tracks. Myerhoff described the scene:

As they approached the mountains, the *peyoteros*’ pace slackened for peyote was more likely to be found here and the tension mounted. Their behavior was precisely that of stalking an animal. There were no sudden movements, no talking. The pilgrims bent over close to the ground, moved in the brush on tiptoe, gingerly raising a branch or poking under a cactus in hopes of catching sight of the small gray-green peyote plant which is so inconspicuous, growing nearly parallel to the earth’s surface and exactly the same color as the surrounding vegetation in this region.

Finally, Ramon beckoned everyone to his side—he had found peyote, seen the deer. [In Huichol myth, deer and peyote are associated.] Quickly we all gathered behind him as he drew his arrow and readied his bow. We peered down at the barely noticeable round flat-topped plant, two inches in diameter, segregated into eight sections. Everyone prayed quietly as Ramon began to stalk it, moving ever closer until when he was only a few feet away he aimed and shot one arrow at the base of the plant toward the east and crossed it quickly with another arrow pointing north so that the peyote was impaled in the center. The peyote-deer was thus secured and unable to escape. Ramon drew nearer, placing his horns of Kauyumari beside it, to the west of the plant. He cleared the ground all around the plant with his knife and beckoned everyone to come forward to
stand closely around it. From his takwatsi, or sacred basket, he took his plumes and swept downward and over the peyote. This was because the first arrow in penetrating the peyote had caused rays of colors to spurt upward, like a rainbow; the rays had to be stroked and coaxed back into the peyote-deer. The colored rays are the kupuri, soul or life-blood of the deer, the life-blood of hikuri, and must be preserved....

Ramon carefully began to dig out the peyote with his knife, cutting it so as to leave some of the root in the ground, “So that the deer could grow again from his bones” (152-5).

Reference