

Wixárika Polytheism as Ecology¹

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Over the last decades, the Wixaritari of Western Mexico have been protagonists of several high-profile ecological conflicts. Here I focus on the relationships between Wixaritari and non-indigenous activists. As an “expert” involved in many of these ecological conflicts, I observed that the Multinaturalist Wixaritari understood the activists much better than the activists understood them. On the other hand, I insist that ecologists could benefit from a better understanding of how Wixárika ecology and cosmopolitics work. For the Wixaritari, any political practice begins with the defense of autonomy and indigenous rights. They do not try to “save” the planet, but to build and rebuild it. Doing so, they strive to improve their community organization, and to defend the conditions necessary for continually inventing and creating the world. Frequently, political conflicts arise over “sacred places” who are ancestors and part of the communities even when they do not look like humans, and are located in areas far away from the Wixárika villages. On the other hand, Wixárika sacred geography is not a given, but is envisioned by initiates. In this way, Wixaritari defend the right to permanently reinvent their own ritual system, even when they know that they may be accused of “making up sacred places”.

The attempted murder of two stones

The Wixárika (Plural: Wixaritari, also known as Huichol) of the community of Tuapurie or Santa Catarina Cuexcomatán in Northern Jalisco, Mexico had a sacred site called At the Bear’s Place (Wixárika:

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Hutsetsie), At the Bear's House (Wixárika: Hutsekie) or The Bears' Passway (Spanish: Paso del Oso). Hutse, the Bear, is a Wixárika ancestor deity – also associated with Mestizo or non-Indian populations – who in this case manifests himself in the form of two rather normal stone boulders. The rocks lack special traits, but each of them is a Bear, and they are located on the trail that goes from Xawiepa (Pochotita) and Keuruwit+a (Las Latas), two ceremonial centers of Tuapurie, to the place of Sunrise (literally “Under the Sunrise”, Paritek+a), several hundreds of miles away, in the desert of Wirikuta, a large sacred territory located in the state of San Luis Potosí, where psychotropic, Mescaline containing cactus peyote (*Lophophora williamsii*, Wixárika: *hukuri*) is collected.

In 2008, the Bear's spot was destroyed by workers hired by the Jalisco state government, in order to make way for a paved highway that would connect Northern Jalisco with the Central portion of the same state, without having to pass through territories belonging to the neighboring state of Zacatecas. This was an argument clearly aimed at Jalisco's local patriotism. Besides, the highway was promoted as helping to connect 'backward' Indian territories, and to lure tourists into the beautiful scenery of the Sierra Huichola (Huichol Mountains and canyonlands). So, it was in the name of communication and progress that the Bears were killed.

This type of discourse has been used by Mexican government officials since the late 1920s. As Morris (2020) shows, for Post-Revolutionary times, politicians were baffled to find out that communities did not want teachers to bring them “civilization” and to interfere in their community organization. In 2008 it was surprising that the Tuapuritari, the Wixaritari of Santa Catarina Cuexcomatlán, strictly opposed the road-building project. Apparently their main reason for doing so was just because the community's assembly had not been properly consulted by the state government. When excavation started in their territory they considered it a violation of their communal property. They occupied machinery and sued the Jalisco government. Consequently, the road building was soon stopped by an injunction.

Five anthropologists, Paul Liffman, Regina Lira, Santiago Ruy-Sánchez, César Carrillo Trueba and myself (Liffman et al. 2008), denounced the destruction of the sacred place at Mexico's Instituto de Antropología e Historia (INAH), the government agency in charge for the

preservation of cultural heritage. *Proceso, Informador, La Jornada* and other Mexican newspapers wrote quite extensively about the case, often quoting our report. However, the archaeologists of the Jalisco Regional Center of INAH did not want to intervene. They said the Bears were only shapeless rocks, not artifacts, and, above all, it would be impossible to locate them beneath tons of rubble. Arguing that a simple stone may actually be cultural heritage or even a living being was quite tricky. The situation was not unlike what Povinelli (2013) describes in Northern Australia where a land commissioner could not believe that Old Man Rock could listen, or what Weiner (1999) tells us about the Hindmarsh Island Bridge affair, where Native women presented secret myths and practices never previously reported by any anthropologist in order to stop a big infrastructure project. The Wixaritari were suspected of making it all up, while the anthropologists were accused of manipulating the Indians and making them reject progress.

The blame game started. Jalisco's state governor Emilio González Márquez, rather annoyed, declared that "Occult interests don't want the Huichol region to be well connected" (Juan C. Partida, *La Jornada*, 20/03/2008).² Road building supposedly benefited "the poor and isolated" Wixaritari: ambulances would be able to rescue the sick, jobs would be created, and the overall benefits would be much greater than any possible environmental impacts, which in any case would be minor. Bureaucrats did not understand why the "Indians" would insist on something as abstract as their property rights over a few acres of otherwise useless terrain. The destruction of the Paso del Oso wasn't even perceived as collateral damage in the path towards progress. What was not said, but is the underlying message in such occasions is: Wixárika and other indigenous people have no right for ontological differences. In other words: The Mexican government wants all people to live in exactly the same world.

Somewhat surprisingly the Wixaritari won their lawsuits. The sanctuary of the Bear had to be restored, and only after taking into account the opinions and needs of the Wixárika communities involved, road building would be resumed. After several delays and many more protests, 14 years later all that actually happened, so in 2022 the road

² "Intereses ocultos no quieren que la región huichola esté bien comunicada". (<http://www1.lajornadaguerrero.com.mx/2008/03/20/index.php?section=politica&article=003n1pol>).

was finally finished. The two sacred stones could be identified, and Paso del Oso was re-inaugurated by Wixárika *mara'akate* or shamans.³ The two boulders now sit in a real shrine and road signs inform drivers about the sacred place.

Conflicts between centralized technocratic power and local populations are of course very common in rural Mexico. Often, both ecology and indigenous rights are involved. As an 'expert,' I have been involved in several of those conflicts, trying to mediate between Wixárika communities and often inefficient, uninformed, or corrupt Mexican authorities. Normally, a correct application of established proceedings would be enough to avoid most of those conflicts. After all, 21st century Mexico has advanced legislation that should guarantee environmental protection and indigenous rights. But in order to have all those laws properly enforced, Native populations and Civil Society have to organize protests. And even then, extractivist projects usually prevail, and the only role the government fulfills is helping to repress local movements. In this rather depressing scenario, the Wixárika are a major exception.

The most famous and most mediatized of those conflicts concerned silver and gold mining in Wirikuta, a mountainous, semi-desert region near Real de Catorce, in the state of San Luis Potosí. Hundreds of Wixárika sanctuaries are located in this area. Wixárika peyote-seekers (*bikuritamate*) travel there once a year to, among other things, collect peyote, and to practice what anthropology would call an initiatory vision quest. The peyote rituals of the Wixaritari have been famous, not only among anthropologists, since the 1960s. The area had been granted environmental protection in 1994, not so much because of the Wixaritari, but due to its uniqueness as a habitat of rare and endangered species like peyote. Regardless of this, between 1982 and 2009, the Mexican Federal government issued several concessions for transnational mining-companies to work in the area. Only after several years of protests, led by a coalition of Wixárika communities, NGOs and huge sectors of civil society, did the Mexican government make clear that mining projects affecting the sacred sites of the Wixaritari would not be allowed, at least not for now.⁴

³ *Mara'kame*, Plural *mara'akate*, means "One Who Knows How To Dream". Shamans is a somewhat controversial term to refer to those Wixárika ritual specialists (see Neurath 2021).

⁴ For an overview on recent conflicts involving territories of Wixárika and neighboring indigenous people of Western Mexico see the Special Issue of *Relaciones* (Liffman, ed.,

Not just another fancy theory...

I started with the episode about the attempted murder of two stones, because that was the moment when I really understood that the so called “anthropology of ontologies” is not just another fancy theory; it has an enormous potential as an instrument for anti-colonialist action.

According to Viveiros de Castro (1998) and other ontological anthropologists, Amerindian Multinaturalism and Western (Mono)naturalism⁵ are considered as diametrically opposed: Naturalism holds that only one common world actually exists, although there may be many subjective interpretations of it. While cultural differences tend towards incommensurability, scientists claim the privilege of being able to access universal truth. Multinaturalism, on the other hand, is based on what is often called ‘shared humanity.’ All living beings – or at least the important and relevant ones – share a human interiority, but are distinguished by a multiplicity of exterior natures. Due to the human souls of animals, plants and other beings, it is also possible to talk about Animism. Ritual specialists like shamans have the ability to transform into the “other”.

So, are the Wixárika and Non-Indigenous people “worlds apart”? That incommensurability is somehow one-directional. Clearly, the Wixatitari understand their Naturalist enemies and friends better than the other way round. In Naturalism you can never really know the other, but Animists are usually characterized as open to “the other.” As Viveiros de Castro explains, Multinaturalist epistemology is not centered on the self as opposed to the world, but departs from the knowledge of the perspective of “the other” (Viveiros de Castro 1992; 1998). In Multinaturalism empathy is never an epistemological problem. The ones who have problems understanding their “other” are, above all, the Naturalists. As the Non-Indigenous people (which the Wixaritari call *teimarixi*, “neighbours”) live in a monocosmos, Wixaritari learn how to come and go, and to live between more than one world.

Would it be useful trying to define a Wixárika ecology? Is it possible to conceive ecology without a concept of nature as a “given”? A Latourian framework helps us here. To speak of “modes of existence”, Latour (2013) explains, is to inquire into the existence of things (and thus to ‘do’ ontology), as well as to inquire into all the relations into

2018).

⁵ I use Naturalism and Mononaturalism as synonyms.

which things enter, and the behaviors and values they exhibit in order to exist. In this sense, then, ontology *is* ecology.⁶

But what about the ontological dimensions of environmental activism and conventional ecology? One philosophical point of departure for such activism is usually the critique of economic utilitarianism or “instrumental reason”, as analyzed by Frankfurt school sociologist Horkheimer in *Eclipse of Reason* (1947) and later popularized by authors like Marcuse (1964). Often what environmentalists desire is to develop (or to recover) a more harmonious way of relating to nature. While circular economy and sustainability are concrete projects to be achieved, utilitarianism, consumerism, technocracy and the like are criticized in their disdain of “more natural” emotions, intuitions, and the like. On the other hand, eco-unfriendly attitudes are often just seen as a bad economic strategy and a waste of resources. Nature is seen as a limited good that should not be overexploited, but administered with responsibility.

The problem is that Naturalism, and the Western concept of ‘nature,’ usually remain unquestioned, and are actually reinforced by ecological discourses. Insistence in the immovable truth of the category of nature makes it extremely difficult for them to engage with the Native people, who they see as allies in their struggles and which they usually want to “save” together with the last remains of unspoiled nature. Just in order not to be misunderstood: This is not so much about questioning Western “rationalism”, nor what has been called “reason”, but about taking Indigenous thought at least as seriously as “our” science. Obviously, it is precisely this aspect that makes ontological anthropology such a controversial position for academics. At least in US Anthropology journals, one finds many more articles against the “Ontological Turn” in anthropology than in its favor.⁷ Clearly the main

⁶ See Michael Norton (2013) “Review of *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns* by Bruno Latour (Harvard University Press: 2013)”
(<http://interstitialjournal.files.wordpress.com/2013/10/norton-latour.pdf>)

⁷ Defenders of Western Naturalism and Eurocentrism like to quote the papers by Ramos (2012), and Bessire and Bond (2014). Latin America and Continental Europe’s intellectuals seem to be more open to Ontologist and Cosmopolitical approaches, but in Anglo-American academia, Non-English publications are seldom taken into account, not even by the most enthusiastic defenders of the Ontological Turn in Anthropology (like Holbraad and Pederson 2017). On the other hand, the Anglo-American defenders of the Ontological Turn often try to depoliticize the whole approach, and to maintain it strictly inside the limits of academia, which makes it clearly less interesting and less relevant (Holbraad and Pederson 2017, p. 195).

reason so many academics are against it is because it means to acknowledge — and to approve — the fact that Western Naturalism is beginning to lose its epistemological privilege. Naturalism is just one ontology amongst many others, and therefore ceases to hold the sole interpretive authority.

Most environmentalists are not informed about those tendencies. Their worldview usually combines aspects of Western scientific thought, but also variants of New Age inspired esotericism and spirituality. It is on the basis of such ideas that Indigenous people, like the Wixaritari, are seen as proof that harmonious relations with nature are actually possible. But understanding the Wixaritari as lacking a concept of a single, naturally given physical world, and all the implications of this argument, seem to be beyond most ecologists' epistemological horizons.

Analogist friends, Naturalist enemies?

In the following, I would like not to focus not only on the quite obviously antagonist relations between technocratic government, capitalist private enterprise, and indigenous communities. Many important books have been written about that topic, in the Andes, in Melanesia, and other regions of the world. The political positions anthropologists take oscillate between openly backing the discourses of NGOs (like in Marisol de la Cadena's *Earth Beings*, 2015) or rather relativizing the activists' creeds about the evilness of miners and the innocence of the indigenous people (like in Golub's *Leviathans at the Gold Mine*, 2014). Here, I would like to focus on a different topic: how do Wixaritari and environmentalists get along? During all the years that I have been involved in movements for the defense of sacred sites and territories, I have often observed misunderstandings in the relationship between the Wixaritari and their activist "friends". Even so there is no doubt that the campaigns, like that in defense of Wirikuta, or against illegal road building, have been quite successful.

As an ethnographer I used to believe my job was to find out and to describe how Wixaritari or other native people think. But now I find I also have to take into account how activists think. So I try to learn from my Wixaritari friends how to navigate – epistemologically – in an ontologically diverse assembly of worlds, why it is so difficult for some to communicate with the other. Vivieros de Castro's approach is a bit

less useful when we try to understand the important ontological and epistemological differences between the Wixaritari and their non-Indian backers. Rather it is useful to use some of Descola's *Par-delà nature et culture* (2005), which also includes Analogism.

Analogism might not be an ontology in the same sense as Multinaturalism and Naturalism. But it has been analyzed in contrast to both Mononaturalism and Multinaturalism. According to Descola, Analogists organize the cosmos and put everybody and everything in its place. They have elaborate cosmologies, but their practices are often not as dynamic as the ones of the Multinaturalists. For Analogists, difference is all right, as long as it can be made to fit into structural schemes. Descola reframes Classic approaches to pre-Modern cultures that began with Frank Hamilton Cushing's study of "Zuñi Mytho-Sociologic Organization" (1896) and continued with influential theoretical books like *Primitive Classification* (Durkheim and Mauss 1903) and *Natural Symbols* (Douglas 1970). As shown by Foucault (1966) for European intellectual history, Analogism existed during the centuries before Naturalism, and still dominated during the early phases of the Scientific Revolution. Contemporary forms of spirituality, as practiced by many environmentalists, are often Analogist as well. Moderns desire is to regain harmony with nature and to recover an ecological equilibrium, as it is thought to have prevailed in premodern times. No wonder they are enthusiastic about what is called "indigenous spirituality" or "worldview", because they believe it fits that set of ideas. For example, they really love it when the Wixaritari organize so many things according to the four directions and the five colors of corn. However, people like the Wixaritari are not (just) Analogists, but (also) Multinaturalists.

Analogists really need order, but Multinaturalists rather appreciate difference and multiplicity. For them, contradictions and ambiguity are not a big problem. I would not say cosmic harmony is not relevant, but the absence of it is something that can be managed. This is one reason why people like the Wixárika are able to thrive in the hybrid and confusing modern worlds. While Analogists try hard to produce and maintain order, Multinaturalists specialize in transformation and are quite used to relational complexity. More importantly, they appreciate invention and multiplication of relations, worlds and personhood.

Maybe most Amerindian people are partly Analogist and partly

Multinaturalist. That could turn into a problem for Descola's theory, but should not worry us. For our argument the important point is that while the Wixaritari and other people can be characterized as Multinaturalists with some traits of Analogism (Neurath 2013, 2015), activists and ecologists seem to oscillate between Scientific Naturalism and a kind of New Age Analogist spirituality. One might believe Analogism would be a common ground, but even so, there are many misunderstandings. As I want to argue, it is a pity that activists only see the Analogist aspects of indigenous ritual, and therefore miss the Multinaturalist aspects of Wixárika thought and practice.

Anna Tsing describes a situation where Indigenous people, Indonesian nature lovers, and environmental activists collaborate in a successful way, even while there are a lot of "frictions", misunderstandings, and disagreements based on cultural incompatibility (Tsing 2004). However, for an important reason we cannot use Tsing's anthropology as a model. The Natives of Borneo's Meratus Mountains described by her are political protagonists only on a local level, while predatory businessmen, as well as environmentalists operate globally. The Wixaritari are actually not less globalized as their political antagonists and friends. Their political agenda is well defined, as it is about defending autonomy and communal organization.

However, in the context of working together with NGOs they are forced to adjust their discourse and to play the role of "poor Indians". In order to please their allies, they need to fit the stereotypes about politically weak, marginal, defenseless Indigenous people localized in their remote, unspoiled, tribal territory. This may be called a form of "strategic essentialism" (Spivak 1988). In other contexts, the Wixárika often make fun of all the stereotypes that exist about them among their fans (Neurath 2013). Apparently the Wixaritari don't seem to mind that activists do not understand them, nor take seriously what is their own, communal and autonomist political project.

My point is that, even in a context where collaboration between the Wixaritari and environmentalists is pretty successful, it would be useful for non-Indian activists to have a better understanding of how Wixárika cosmopolitics work. Wixaritari have a perspective on politics and ecology that may be conceptually relevant for environmentalists in order to get their priorities straight. What I mean is that environmentalists should follow ontological anthropologists in starting

to take non-western thought and practices much more seriously. Many of the pressing problems of our time, including climate change and global inequality, are a direct consequence of the cosmology of the Moderns. Understanding that and starting to develop alternative modes of relating to all kinds of beings could actually be an important key to overcoming the current ecological crises.

Ecologists like to quote Jane Fonda's "We treat this world of ours as though we have a spare in the trunk," or they say "There is no Planet B". Their criticism focuses on the inefficiencies of our current variant of extractivist capitalism. Seldomly do ecologists realize that reproducing the naturalist and economic mode of relating to the world and all its beings may be what actually occludes everything environmentalists are fighting for. Maybe even more than capitalism itself. We'll never be able to develop a non-utilitarianist rapport with the world if we do not develop social relations with non-human beings. We could learn that from Indigenous practices. Western Ecology might actually find great inspiration in the idea that there is no anthropocentric "world of ours", but one that we are obliged to share with millions of other beings.

I have the impression that this idea might actually be starting to "sink in." But environmentalists should also listen to their Indigenous friends and learn to appreciate that there might be more than one world. Not in the sense that we can rely on a spare world in the trunk, rather, in the sense that the physical survival on this planet might depend, more than anything else, on the capacity to imagine or even build other worlds, with *other* technologies and with *other* forms of social organization.

Other worlds are possible

Clearly, creativity and invention are wrongly associated with Western modernity. When studying Indigenous knowledge practices (all that anthropology used to call "rituals and myths"), ontological anthropologists are not just describing symbolizations of one given world, but efforts aimed at the production of a multiplicity of natures (Fujigaki 2020). So ethnography may be actually very relevant in translating techniques of inventing and multiplying worlds into idioms non native people may understand.

Otros mundos son posibles has been an important slogan of Mexico's Zapatista movement. It has been understood as a vindication of social utopias as not impossible to somehow become real, but it is also related to claiming the right to be indigenous or nonmodern (or whatever), to produce differences, and to ontological self determination. According to the *Fourth Declaration of the Selva Lacandona*, “El mundo que queremos es uno donde quepan muchos mundos” (EZLN 1996). What the zapatistas want is a world where many worlds can fit in.

Already before the zapatistas, Ayuujk (Mixe) theoretician and activist Floriberto Diaz (2007) stated that an indigenous community based on the concept and practice of comunalidad would be unthinkable without an Animist ontology. The earth, but also rocks, clouds, rain, animals and plants think and speak, and live in social relations with the people.

So, according to the Wixárika, the desert of Wirikuta cannot be seen just as a “natural area” where one goes in order to collect a plant. The desert and the psychotropic cactus used in many Wixárika rituals are *made* by the Wixaritari. Paritek+a is the ‘Place Under the Sunrise’, where the Sun is literally born. After going through a whole range of practices of austerity, purification and “self-sacrifice”, such as fasting, sleep-deprivation and enduring long hikes through the desert, initiates become peyote. They put on special hats featuring peyote-flowers made of white turkey-feathers. Now they are *hikuritamate*, “peyote-people.” As such they perceive the world differently, through peyote’s point of view. They perceive more light, so they are able to envision the sun-rise. Initiates become the first Wixaritari: that is, the community of their own ancestors, their deities who are (and live at) the sacred spots of the ritual landscape. They also envision and become the ‘cloud snakes’, the first rain, and thus the respiration of the world. When they arrive back in their communities they transform into a giant cloud-snake, and as such they appear during a big communal festivity.

Peyote is not seen as a plant that is adapted or maybe even endemic to that particular environment. It grows in the desert – or rather it appears there – for ethical reasons. Peyote, the desert, and the cosmos exist because Wixaritari practice vision quests and shamanic initiation. Moreover, Peyote is not a hallucinogenic nor a psychotropic plant that

contains a substance like mescaline. The cactus acquires *nierika*, the ability to see, due to its ethical behavior and sacrificial practices, and therefore one may be able to learn how to see when ingesting and becoming it.

What we call “sacred places” are ancestors who are living persons and are part of community organization and politics. They are people and places, – their names are “ancestors-toponyms,” as Regina Lira (2014) puts it –, located in geography, but also part of social hierarchy. We might also say that they are “distributed selves” of the Wixaritari obtaining initiatory visions.

The NGOs want to save nature (and the natives) from predatory transnational companies; but even so, indigenous peoples like the Wixaritari are much more worried about their right to autonomy, than about global capitalism in itself. Wixárika cosmopolitics is always focused on the reproduction and strengthening of community organization, *kiekari*, a notion that can be translated as “rancherity”, or Spanish *rancheridad*, but also refers to a shared, Animist humanity and to the whole cosmos (Liffman 2011: p. 115). They do not “save the planet”, but rather build their cosmos, and defend the conditions for continually inventing and creating this cosmos. Consequently, any political practice must begin with the defense of autonomy and indigenous rights. Wouldn't that be an interesting approach for non-Indigenous environmentalists who dream of (re)constructing a more eco friendly society, with less anthropocentric ideology, and organized on the local level?

Ancestors in the courthouse

The Wixárika ritual is actually quite pragmatic. They even developed a legal strategy of using their ancestors as witnesses in court. When they were legally battling mining projects in Wirikuta, Wixaritari presented the ancestors' voices, as enunciated by shamans and perceived by participants during a chanting session, as testimonies in lawsuits. Tracy Barnett published the following account of a ritual the Wixaritari called *peritaje tradicional* (traditional expertise), consulting the assembly of deified ancestors at Wirikuta, in order to obtain their testimonies and file them as proofs in court:

“It was mid-morning before the mara'akate and traditional

leaders of the communities met in the center to discuss, in their native Wixárika tongue, the meaning of the message they had been given. And it was nearly noon before they assembled there on the circle of Tatewari-Ta to share their vision with the world.

“They are sad, and they ask, with tears, weeping and pain, that it not be done, that they not tear out the heart, that they not take out the blood of this sacred mountain,” said Maximino Muñoz, Wixárika leader from Paso de Alicia, Nayarit.

He was translating the words of Mara'akame Eusebio de la Cruz of Santa Catarina, Jalisco, who delivered the message from the deities in his native tongue.

Perhaps more importantly, he said, the gods had entreated them at every ceremony along the way on their pilgrimage, and the same message kept coming back to them. “They asked that all the Wixárika people be united to defend this place. And they asked that all human beings, even the person who invades or destroys this sacred place, be united with us.” (Barnett, 2012) (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tracy-l-barnett/huicholpilgrimage_b_1264495.html)

This was in February 2012, and Mexican positivists started to be truly worried. “The God of Fire cried,” so millions of investments are canceled, wrote the well-known promoter of science and scientific thought, Luis González del Alba in his column in Milenio, a conservative newspaper.⁸

“The Last Peyote Guardians”

For utilitarians like González de Alba, it is obvious that investments are more important than religious “superstitions,” but neither do the ecologists put their priorities in the same order as the Wixaritari. For environmentalists the main goal is “to save the planet.” By doing so, indigenous people who depend for their survival on an intact

⁸ “Como decimos a los católicos que llenan con sus limosnas las inmensas alcancías de la Basílica de Guadalupe: Con su pan se lo coman. Nomás luego no digan que tienen 500 años de abandono: allí está la Real Bonanza y le dicen que no porque “el abuelo fuego solicita con llanto y dolor que no se saque el corazón del cerro Quemado...” ¿Qué es más idiota, eso o la invención de Juan Diego?”

(<http://temibleDani1ga.blogspot.com/2012/02/milenio20120213lc.html>)

ecosystem, are also saved. Environmentalists and conservationists are often uncritical about their ecological version of instrumental reasoning. Kockelman explains in his study of a German NGO defending the cloud forests of Alta Verapaz in Guatemala: “The ultimate value of the ecologists is biodiversity conservation; in other words, these interventions were not humanitarian in the strict sense. That is, while the indigenous populations played a necessary role as a means to the end of biodiversity, they were not an end in themselves” (Kockelman 2016).

Apparently the situation of the Wixaritari is a bit different. *Huicholeros*, fans of the Huichols, and New Age inspired activists want to save the Wixárika, because they see the Wixaritari as among the last few surviving practitioners of an ancient spirituality which aims to maintain the universe in balance. Being *The Last Peyote Guardians*,⁹ they are a bit like quetzales and pandas: an iconic aspect of biocultural diversity. But they are also useful, as they are believed to save us and our world.

This vision is often based on symbolic ethnographies, such as the ones produced by (mostly) American anthropologists in the 1960s and 70s, like Peter T. Furst and his followers, many of whom are still widely read and who insist in emphasizing the unspoiled, quasi-pre-Columbian, and “endangered” character of Wixárika lifeways (Furst 1968; 1972; 1973; 1987; Furst and Myerhoff 1972; Benzi 1972; Schaefer and Furst 1996).

In this tradition of ethnographic writing on the Wixaritari, emphasis is usually put on shamanism and peyote, and occasionally also on analogist practices like reciprocal exchange aimed at maintaining cosmic balance (Powell and Grady 2010). However, among the Wixaritari, as in many Amerindian traditions, relations between humans and ancestral beings tend to be ambivalent and complicated. As we have seen, beings regarded as the ancestors of Wixárika are places in the landscape, but they also may be animals who hunt humans, or even appear as pathogenic agents. To make it even more complicated, ancestors of the community may not be clearly distinguished from the ancestors of non-Indian populations. Those beings belong to the realm of ‘otherness,’ and as such, they are ambiguous and tricky to deal with. Vision quests are about establishing contact with them, and also

⁹ This is the title of a successful documentary produced by NGOs defending Wirikuta, peyote and the Wixaritari.

creating them, but many other aspects of ritual instead focus on domesticating, controlling, manipulating or even destroying them. Alterity is the source of all power, and therefore sought after, but it is also the source of troubles, sickness, and death. Wixárika ritual, like other Indigenous religions, is not based on belief, nor on prayer directed at a benevolent deity, as is Christianity.¹⁰ Moreover, Wixárika cosmopolitics is also about questioning the existence or the authority of deities, not just about affirming their existence. I believe those aspects are important in order to understand polytheistic religions (Neurath 2013, 2020b).

Definitely, eating peyote should not be understood as a sacrament, not even as an “entheogen” in the sense of Wasson, Hofmann and Ruck (1980), that is, a substance that brings you close to god (Znamenski 2007). As we have already said, those models are far too simple. In Wixárika religion people do not always want to be close to the deities.

What I really want to explain is that all this is not a purely academic question raised by scholars and specialists. It has to do with the problems well-intentioned huicholeros have in relating to people who are actually somehow different. In order to understand Wixárika communal politics and ecology it would be useful to understand some of their relational complexity.

Which world is going to end?

Often an important reason why activists decide to back Wixárika political causes is because they believe that, otherwise, the whole world might be doomed. However, in the case of the Wixaritari actually stopping their practice of sacrifices and vision quests, the world would not come to an end, for it would have never been created. This is an observation that German anthropologist Konrad Theodor Preuss first made in 1933 (Preuss 1933: 9).

Instead, only the luminous, celestial, envisioned, Wixárika part of the cosmos might be in danger. According to the Wixaritari, the dark netherworld of silver, money and technology, Mestizos, Americans and Whites, is never really threatened. It belongs to the primordial ocean

¹⁰ In this sense I have to distance myself from the ethnographic cosmopolitics of de la Cadena (2015) which mainly stresses the friendly aspects of the Andean earth-beings. The Wixárika relate to their ancestors more like in the way Gose (2018) describes it for the Andean people and their often rather capricious mountain deities.

that was never created and will always exist. This underworld of Wixárika cosmology is populated by the most ancient creatures, like sea-monsters, goatsuckers, whales and sirens, but also full of big and chaotic cities like Mexico City and Guadalajara, or countries like the United States. Post Apocalyptic cityscapes, everything that we usually call “modernity”, as well as pre-historic monsters not only belong to the same cosmological realm, it is that ancient, rather sinister, but also hypermodern part of the Wixárika space-time, what one might actually call “naturally given” (Neurath 2012). So we (Modernists) might as well keep calm and stop worrying about our future. It is already in the past.¹¹

The more prestigious, luminous half is artificial, because it is dreamt and created by Wixárika peyote-seekers. As Roy Wagner has shown, in non-Western societies it is not uncommon for artificial things to be of higher status than naturally given ones (Wagner 1977; 1981; Golub 2014). The existence of the luminous upper half is a result of vision quest, so it is, above all, about sacrifice. Peyote-seekers are hunters who identify with deer. The noble game animal gives in to the hunters, because they are pure, and it feels sorry for them. At this point we may try to understand why practices of austerity, purification and self-sacrifice are so important. One might say that such practices shape an entire shamanic ethic. Because of its voluntary sacrifice, Older Brother Deer transforms into peyote. Peyote-seekers identify with deer-turned-peyote and experience all this as a vision. After many nights without sleeping and eating peyote they reach a state where dreams and hallucinations intermingle. In this state they learn many things, from healing to shamanic singing, but they also find inspiration for art and music.

Initiation is also about establishing social and cosmological hierarchies. A less perfect sacrifice doesn't allow you to become peyote, only to get silver and money. As Paul Liffman (2018) has pointed out, this is exactly what happens to the ancestors of the non-Indians and to many of the lesser Wixárika ancestor deities. Mining and making money is the ‘plan “B”’ of shamanism. Peyote and silver can coexist, even though they can't be the same. The hierarchy between the two is like that between initiated shamans (*mara'akate*) and common people, or

11 In other texts (Neurath 2012, 2013) I offer more information on the Wixaritari actually considering modernity ancient and pre-modern, while characterizing themselves as being “more advanced”.

between Wixaritari and non-Indian 'neighbors' (*teiwarixi*). This hierarchy structures the whole cosmos, and relations between the two cannot be harmonic. Mestizos, Whites and other non-Indians belong to the world below. They have technology, but their social skills are less developed. They are lazy, disoriented and irresponsible egoists. Their ancestors "got lost," so now they suffer from "dizziness" and walk in circles, while the austere, community-oriented Wixaritari still follow the trails of the ancestors (*yejyari*) that lead them to the Place of Sunrise. In other words, making money reproduces a world of modernity that is already in the past, becoming peyote produces an ancestral world that only exists in Wixárika ritual and, in a way, can never be actually reached.

When practicing peyote initiation it is important not to be an overachiever. In a way, transformation into peyote and ancestors has to remain partial. A complete transformation would be irreversible and cause the initiate's death as a human. Occasionally, peyote seekers actually die during the rituals, and as I was told, such deaths are often understood as a permanent transformation into a deity. Sleep-deprivation is a central aspect of the Huichol vision quest and probably the hardest of all the exercises involved. After several days of consuming *bikuri*, initiates are often unable to sleep, even if they would be allowed to do so. Together with encounters of dangerous deities, road accidents, as well as insolation, dehydration, and exhaustion, such extreme sleep-deprivation can be a serious health threat. So, definitely, participating in peyote initiation has its risks. That's a fact much of the "shamaniac" literature avoids to mention.

As I have argued in other texts (Neurath 2013, 2020a, 2020b), the idea of Wixaritari living in "harmony with nature" does not apply. The Wixaritari's main dualist classifications are based on the contrasts between underworld and sky, ocean and desert, darkness and light, laziness and sacrifice. This relation is full of asymmetries, and is far from balanced. The Wixaritari world often encompasses its cosmopolitical nemesis, but this can't be a stable relationship. In other words, the Wixaritari are not living in a Habermasian pre-modern world, without separation between "lifeworld" and "system," like postulated for traditional small-scale societies by so many scholars (Habermas 1982).

One may talk about a first creation (when the ancestors emerged from

the primordial sea, when sun and peyote were born, and in which shamanism and community organization had its origin), and a second cosmological era (focused on the origin of the family and of corn agriculture), that began when the first had failed. But both creations are imbricated, so it is never entirely clear which era came first. Often both exist simultaneously. What we can say is that one creation story highlights the importance of self-sacrifice and free gift, and characterizes “neighbors” as lazy. The other talks about relations of exchange, including trade with non-Indigenopus people.

What if ecologists knew all this? They want to conserve an environment where Indians are able to live in harmony with nature. But rather than “Balancing the World” (Powell and Grady 2010), the Wixaritari work hard in order to maintain a fragile *status quo* between syncopated worlds, and also permanently reenvisioning the Sunrise, rebuilding the sky, and reinventing ancestral knowledge.

But, as everybody who has ever conducted fieldwork in a Huichol community knows, Wixaritari are even more eager to know about us, than we are about them. For the Wixaritari, knowing how Mestizos and non-Indigenous people think, and knowing how to be a *teimari*, is strategically beneficial. They practice accumulation of contradictory identities in shamanism (Lira 2014), but also in everyday life. For them the alternative is not to be Indian or Mestizo, but Indian or Indian and Mestizo. Being able to alternate between modes of being is what distinguishes a great shaman, but is also a skill that is trained and practiced in everyday interactions with both Indigenous and non-Native people (Neurath 2020b).

Rising the candles of life

Wixaritari strategies of political communication are aimed at translating their ritual practices into notions their backers, friends and admirers are able to understand without effort. For example, when explaining Wirikuta to activists, they often emphasize the need to “renovate the candles of life.” In a recent declaration to his (over two thousand) Facebook friends, “SISTERS AND BROTHERS, FRIENDS, FOLLOWERS AND GENERAL PUBLIC,”¹² Wixárika leader Santos de la Cruz expressed the following:

12 “HERMANAS Y HERMANOS, AMIGAS Y AMIGOS, SEGUIDORES Y EL PÚBLICO EN GENERAL”

Our general objective is to save, protect, and defend the sacred places of the Wixárika people, above all Wirikuta.

Our specific objectives are the following:

To achieve the protection and the effective recognition of the sacred places recognized by the Wixárika people.

To strengthen the entire social tissue between the Wixárika people and the [mestizo] residents of Wirikuta.

To follow traditional practices to continue renewing the candles of life.

(consulted on 21/08/2015)¹³

What does this mean? How is it understood?

As an example of how this is normally understood, I now quote what the activist Facebook page [Salvemos Wirikuta](#) said on [May 29, 2012](#): “Renewing the candles of life. With prayers, ceremonies, and offerings, the Wixáritari renew the candles of life and maintain the cosmic equilibrium.”¹⁴

What Wixáritari refer to when talking about “renovating the candles of life” is a ritual action featuring, among other things, the raising up of the upper half of the cosmos. The luminous, celestial part of the cosmos is ephemeral and has to be sustained by torch-like posts made of Ocote pinewood (*haurite*) that burn down, and thus have to be constantly renovated (Neurath 2002; 2020a). What non-Indians understand is the making of offerings to the gods of Wirikuta, as though they were lighting candles in a Catholic church.

Fighting for the right to invent tradition

Another major problem activists and bureaucrats share when dealing with the Wixáritari, is their insistence on defending the right to permanently reinvent their own tradition and ritual system. Activists

13 “Nuestro objetivo general es salvaguardar, proteger y defender los lugares sagrados del pueblo Wixárika, principalmente el de Wirikuta. Teniendo como objetivos específico: Lograr la protección y reconocimiento efectivo de los lugares sagrados reconocidos por el Pueblo Wixárika. Fortalecer el tejido social cultural entre el Pueblo Wixárika y los habitantes de Wirikuta. Seguir con las prácticas tradicionales para seguir renovando las velas de la vida.”

14 “Renovando las velas de la vida. Con sus rezos, ceremonias y ofrendas, los Wixáritari renuevan las velas de la vida y sostienen el equilibrio del universo.”

have problems understanding how Wixaritari prefer to manage their territoriality, particularly their reluctance (or refusal) to cooperate with projects aimed at mapping sacred geography, in order to exactly define no-go areas for all kinds of constructions and exploitations. They not only defend an already established sacred geography, but one that is in constant expansion.

Wixárika shamans continually discover new ancestor-places that may even exist far beyond their traditional territories. It was probably during the Colonial period that the Wixaritari adopted Wirikuta as a sacred place, when they started to travel to the mining towns of the Mexican Central Highlands – including Real de Catorce – in order to sell salt (Weigand 1992). In recent times, the Wixaritari have adopted several well-known archaeological sites and landmarks as places of their ancestors, like the circular structure of the Pre-Classic site at Cuicuilco, the pyramid of Quetzalcoatl in Teotihuacán, the statue of an Aztec goddess known as ‘Coatlicue’ at the Mexican Museo Nacional de Antropología, and the mural of José Clemente Orozco in Guadalajara, that depicts not Don Miguel Hidalgo but the Wixárika God of Fire. Even Lady Liberty in New York City is, in fact, a Wixárika goddess of the sea associated with Waxiewe, the white stone of San Blas (Neurath 2019).

Once *mará'akate* starts dreaming about such places, and ritual activity begins, those places belong to the ancestral territory and are said to have existed since the beginning of the world. On the other hand, many sacred sites are seldom or never visited, but never totally forgotten. That was probably the case with Hutsekie. Sacred sites can always be reactivated.

As I said before, despite the existence of so many misunderstandings between them, the collaboration between the Wixaritari, NGOs and civil society has been rather successful. With the help of their backers, Wixaritari are often able to save endangered sites, even when this requires confronting transnational mining companies. However, the movement for the preservation of our planet could be much more successful if activists would listen more to people like the Wixaritari about the possibility of both relating to non-human others and also the re-invention of tradition. Until now, environmentalists and other activists are still far too close to the technocrats who are ruining the planet Earth.

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