

Huichol Center's founder discusses its impact on local culture

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by: [Philip Burnham](#) / Indian Country Today



Photo by Philip Burnham -- Susana Valadez

HUEJUQUILLA EL ALTO, Mexico - Susana Valadez, founder of the Huichol Center, recently spoke with Indian Country Today in Jalisco state about the center's vision of Huichol culture.

Indian Country Today: The Huichol are known as the "people of the peyote." What role does peyote play in the culture?

Susana Valadez: The peyote speaks to humans through the visual imagery, and the Huichols use art to record the imagery and the knowledge of ancestors and the spirit world. I call this room my "Huichol university" because within the four walls of this very small office are symbols of what could be years of learning for people who want to follow the shamanic path. The imagery on all of these masks has transmitted to people what they need to do in order to become healers or, as we say, technicians of the sacred, the highest shamans, the most well-versed in the knowledge of the spirit world.

The shaman, or someone else who took peyote, would have beaded the mask. Only the artist knows what the personal message was from the spirit world, what they have to do to trade off for the knowledge they received. They call these *niericas*, "telephones to the spirit world."

ICT: How strong are Native healing traditions today?

Valadez: The population in the Huichol communities is steadily declining for economic reasons as more and more people leave all the time. And because of the level of poverty and health care, and the push of the government to accept Western medicine, when they have this Native healing tradition, people don't know what to do anymore. They'll get their box of pink little pills for a sore throat, and if the baby starts to have stomach cramps, they'll give the pills for anything. Their lack of knowledge about Western medicine sometimes makes things worse. And the traditional healing isn't getting passed on. In order to become shamans and have that healing knowledge, you have to be thoroughly involved in the Native religion and the ceremonial cycles, a long apprenticeship. Now that the government has schools there, that knowledge isn't being passed down. The shamans are dying off. The age-old process of the link in the chain is now broken. This generation I call the lost generation.

ICT: What is the Huichol Center doing to restore that link?

Valadez: I'm a hands-on anthropologist. What I do isn't very popular among the purists, marrying into the tribe and interfering in their lives the way I do. But you see enough people carrying babies to the cemetery, and know in your heart, "I can change that, I can do something about that. I don't have to be a millionaire." I started actively training people so they could survive as artists, and now it's inter-generational. Some of the old people that I worked with, their kids were suckling at their breast; now they're successful artists with their own kids.

All of this is a multipronged strategy toward cultural survival. There are so many issues facing the Huichol. If I want to bring artists in, they come with families; and families have illnesses and nutritional needs. They need education. You can't just close your eyes to the other aspects of Huichol life; you have to focus on the whole picture. That's why the Huichol Center has the organic garden, the soy project, the school lunch program.

ICT: What do you see as your own role?

Valadez: I feel that I've come into this culture with the function of being a guardian of the symbols. The symbols were reproduced in the art, the clothing, the weaving, the embroidery, the bags, the votive art bowls, the yarn paintings. Everything we see in Huichol art has a religious context. Except if you see Mickey Mouse or McDonald's golden arches - that's new. I'd see this beautiful, exquisite hand-embroidered clothing - and then I'd see little Volkswagens on them and think, "What's wrong with this picture?"

I started seeing the corrosion of the traditional symbols being replaced with the new ones. So my first massive effort in the culture was to record the embroidery patterns, and I have an enormous collection of embroidery samples and samples that have actually been graphed out on paper. That's what got me interested in being a recorder of the symbols. It was a vocation I took on.

ICT: Why the commitment to modern technology?

Valadez: I think educators will agree that when you learn something in your maternal language, that's what sticks in your mind and that really identifies who you are as a person. And that's not happening with the Huichol children in the modern-day schools. So the center focus is to provide this visual stimulus where they're taught with their own icons and symbols, as well as giving them the literacy mold - not in Spanish, but in their maternal language. The computers are allowing us to do this. We have kids 4 and 5 years old sitting at computers here, coloring a Huichol peyote button or a gourd bowl.

ICT: Does the center have relevance beyond the Huichol homeland?

Valadez: I'm sure that at one point the cultural traditions of the Huichol and many of their belief systems originated from tribes in the U.S. - the Hopi, Pima, Utes, the Uto-Aztecan tribes. I think those people would be thrilled to know how this culture has evolved and managed to keep some of the basic premises of the religious tradition going all these centuries, incubating this knowledge.

Huichol Center is a treasure in the Sierra Madre

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Photos by Philip Burnham -- The Huichol Center is spearheading efforts to preserve the Huichol culture by cataloguing images, teaching computer skills, creating language CDs and running a craft center. (Bottom) Maurilio Moreno Montoya translated a yarn painting from his Huichol culture into a permanent, electronic "book of color."

HUEJUQUILLA EL ALTO, Mexico - Five hundred years after it started, the Spanish Conquest has finally reached the Huichol.

In this Mexican city perched high in the Sierra Madre, a small band of people is urgently recording native Huichol traditions, like monks preparing for the onset of a modern Dark Ages.

Using computers and cutting-edge software, the Huichol Center is spearheading an effort to preserve a culture thousands of years old - cataloguing images, teaching computer skills, burning language CDs and running a bustling crafts center to underwrite a shoestring budget.

Center founder Susana Valadez calls what's happening to the Huichol - one of the most remote Native groups in Mexico - a "modern-day conquest." A core population of 10,000 people lives in isolated communities increasingly encircled by the electronic grid. So the center has taken up the fight by using the tools of the conqueror - to achieve different ends.

"If they're going to be able to be at the helm of their lives, not be victims, they're going to have a broad range of computer skills," Valadez said, pointing to a 13-year-old Huichol girl in the next office working away contentedly in Photoshop.

The center has a larger mission, she explained: "The practical level of my work is to save the language and save the art so the Huichol people have it available to them."

The Huichol of central Mexico have fiercely resisted all invaders. Neither Toltecs nor Aztecs could penetrate their mountain redoubts. The Spanish built missions, later abandoned for lack of use. Even now, most Huichol communities in Jalisco state live without modern conveniences like electricity.

But people are migrating out for lack of work. Roads and power lines are becoming more common. Even the language is endangered in mestizo towns like Huejuquilla. So the center has made conservation a priority,

especially the thousands of Huichol paintings and masks whose images, inspired by peyote visions, have created a web of ancient and elegant symbols.

Maurilio Moreno Montoya, a Huichol from nearby San Andreas, has worked at the center for several years. His job is to translate colorful yarn paintings, the artistic product of shamanistic dreams, into electronic "books of color." Montoya converts the paintings into black and white line drawings on screen before coloring them with sophisticated graphics programs like Flash. The paintings are then annotated with text from scholarly books and recorded interviews with elders and shamans.

"The primary objective is to rescue and save the images and symbols as a way to support the young people who leave the area," said Montoya, a University of Guadalajara graduate. Many Huichol young people migrate to Huejuquilla permanently and never go back to the communities. "They don't know how to celebrate the fiestas anymore; some girls don't even know how to make tortillas."

Montoya, who won a national competition in 2004 for an essay on preserving Huichol culture, knows that many Native schools lack computers and may never be able to see the fruit of his labor. "My objective is to publish this work and get it into the schools and communities where it can be taught to children in Huichol."

A printing press is the center's abiding dream. "It's like they have this treasure chest, but nobody really knows about it because it hasn't been recorded or distributed in large amounts," Valadez said. "A large volume of these publications would bring a lot of people back into the realization that their cultural heritage is their best asset and their best tool for survival in the modern world."

A staff of 40, two-thirds of them Huichol, work at the center. Some are busy computing and word processing; others are producing arts and crafts, soymilk, copal, incense, blue corn and amaranth for local and regional markets.

Nonprofits have kicked in some funding, and the municipal government has given land for a future museum. But it costs \$4,000 a week, Valadez said, just to keep the center running.

The Mexican government "puts more money toward the preservation of sea turtles than they do towards keeping a fascinating Native culture that survived against all odds into the 21st century," Valadez said. She holds out hope that universities north of the border will become partners in a project racing against time to anchor the Huichol past.

The center also runs a day care facility and school for children ages 4 - 12. At the end of a normal school day, kids come to learn how to read their mother tongue in an environment far removed from the mestizo culture of the streets.

Valadez married her husband, Mariano, a renowned Huichol yarn painter, and together they founded the center in Nayarit state some 30 years ago. Later divorced, she moved the operation to Huejuquilla in the 1990s.

"If in 2055 some Huichol working in Mexico City says, 'You know, I can remember we used to make the peyote pilgrimage and I have these dreams I can't explain,' they can actually go back to the archives and find a road map to recovering this amazing tradition," Valadez said.