Chapter 6

Strategies for Resistance and the Negotiation of Cultural Goods in Wixaritari Shamanism: Processes of Articulation

Alejandra Aguilar Ros

Introduction

One of the most attractive ideas of the new era or New Age, is the promise of personal access to sacred experience (Heelas, 1996). It offers an easy way in to non-visible reality, and an easy way out, should it be required. The sensibility of the New Age has democratic elements, with an emphasis on the search for techniques and spiritual development through individual endeavour. For some authors such as Heelas (1996), these individual efforts form the basis of spiritual growth. Other writers however, do not agree, as beliefs can always be changed to suit the practitioner’s taste without the need to go any deeper into a religious tradition (Clark, 2006: 34–37).

Although New Age practices appear at first sight to be very eclectic, for those who join in and live them, what matters is their complementary nature. What is sought is a transformation of consciousness in order to perceive realities beyond the material world, a transformation that it is not too hard to gain access to and one which practitioners can approach by distinguishing ‘ego’ from the ‘real being’—of inner, pure or non-material energy—and detaching themselves from desire (Clark, 2006: 30–31). The objective is also another form of knowledge, which is not necessarily based on scientific reasoning, but can be helped by it. This way of knowing is one that questions science and the scientific way of explaining the world, while offering certainties that have to do with immaterial realities.

In Mexico in particular, practices related to the New Age are related to an exaltation of subjectivities in the sense of finding individuation through cultivating a sense of one’s own spirituality, but this is done within relatively

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2 A term derived from transpersonal psychology, from which many practitioners take up pieces.
stable community organizations, which is very important. While examples of personal spiritual development are important, New Age practices are also anchored in groups with an alternative emphasis on community, as in the case of Mexicanism. Movements such as this aim to bring back to life the Pre-Hispanic culture of Anáhuac in central Mexico, recreating what they consider to be ancient Aztec dances and seeking for a cultural reconnection with the Mexica past. Some of them incorporate into the philosophical base of Mexicanism a search for roots, hence for ritual contact with indigenous people in order to broaden their knowledge and experiences of the Indian world. To this end, they seek out indigenous subjects whom they consider to be authentic—either because their parents were indigenous or because they live in Indian communities, or because they speak a native language—thus rooting their quest for the spiritual Indian in concrete traditions.3

The Huichol or Wixaritari4 are one of the indigenous groups in Mexico most strongly fixed in the national imagination as ‘untouched’ Indians. Their religious specialists, the mara’akate, are thought of as authentic transmitters of a millenarian cosmological and healing tradition, who have kept up an ethnic identity linked to a mythology and religious practices of their own, in spite of Catholic evangelization. Because of this image of isolation and authenticity, and with the popularization of New Age practices in Mexico, encouraged especially by Mexicanist groups, the Wixaritari are now in great demand on the part of spiritual seekers and it is important to document the way in which relations between the Wixaritari and the seekers have transformed both parts. This concern is expressed in the context of a larger study5 that I have participated in, in an attempt to understand the way in which the Wixaritari seek to

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3 Here I will be using the term ‘spiritual Indian’ or ‘mystic’ to refer to the representations and imaginaries of the original peoples, that are held by groups and individuals who wish to exalt them as examples of spirituality, of union with and care for the earth, of community forms of organization and above all, of people holding native rituals. This type of representation tends to blur the differences between ethnic groups, and the conflicts within them, linking indigenous people to a kind of common wisdom that manages to stay in harmony with its surroundings, and places them in the position of being non-violent and not materialistic (Sarrazin, 2008).

4 In the last few years, the preferred policy of the Wixaritari has been to call themselves Wixaritari (pronounced Wirráritari); I will therefore try to keep to this name, changing back to ‘Huichol’ when giving the point of the view of the dancers or of others who still call them by that name, without any unfavorable connotation.

5 First, in the project ‘Translocalización y relocalización de lo religioso (México, Cuba, Colombia)’ (2006–2008) and then in a macro-project entitled ‘Tansnacionalización y relocalización de las religiones indo y afro americanas’, financed by CONACYT from 2009.