

*H*uichole Peyote Dance and the Inspiration for Biosphere 2



By John Allen

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John Allen conceived and organized the building of the Biosphere 2 project in Arizona, the most ambitious environmental experiment of our time. Biosphere 2 is a miniature Earth under glass and the world's largest laboratory for global ecology ever built. His memoir *Me and the Biospheres* was recently published by Synergetic Press. (This Spring Synergetic Press will also be publishing a new book by Ralph Metzner and Ram Dass called *Birth of Psychedelic Culture*.) To find out more about John's work see: www.synergeticpress.com

An incredible unification of lifestyle and metaphysics occurs during the annual peyote dance ceremonies of the Huichole Indians in the Sierra Madre mountains of Northwestern Mexico. I was allowed to participate in the annual ceremonies of this remote group that recur in a stone-enclosed sacred area, which features two stone buildings. One building is for a fire that is kept going 'eternally' (said by some to have been going for five thousand years) by banking over the coals between the ceremonial times. The other one is for a great collection of eagle feathers (under whose pervasive dream enhancing influence I was allowed to sleep).

Most of the hundred or so observing Huichole who attended the dancing came from some distance away, though a few lived in the immediate area with some dry land subsistence farming. Now the young men mostly work far away, often on the coast. Collecting the peyote buttons requires a long walking expedition by the participating dancers over rugged mountains and into the central Mexican plateau, their ancestral lands. This journey links them intimately with their history and extended bioregion. I was told by several natives of their historic battle of 1738, when they won rights

from the conquerors to continue their way of life and metaphysical contact with the universe.

I met this high morale purposeful party--after making a two day walk and mule ride with my two extraordinary guides--under a great oak tree a couple of kilometers outside the ceremonial center, just as they returned from this expedition. They had rested and were changing into their dancing costumes. They cut a few branches from the mighty tree to provide fuel for an economical but steady fire in the central ceremonial building. The dancers had been trained in a highly complex fast-beat choreography by the three dance masters, who had prepared themselves to direct this amazing performance for several months by certain ascetic practices.

After full costuming, this returning party made a joyous procession into the stone-walled enclosure. The army had killed the deer throughout a vast area recently, in an attempt to stop these events, but a courageous Mexican had managed to restore some of the regions' deer population. However, it was still small, so calves were substituted for the actual sacrifice. The deer had been maintained and revered for millennia by this culture as a key component of their ecosystem

and ceremonies.

The dance continued for three days and nights. The dancers rested at intervals of about two hours. Buckets of peyote juice hung in strategic locations and everyone imbibed as they wished. The dance of forty or so dancers, plus some musicians, were not only complex (beyond Broadway) but astoundingly beautiful; they demanded maximum skill and endurance.

Dust is prevalent in this bioregion, and one aim of the dancers is to raise as much dust as possible. The three marakame sat still on their handmade stools in the center. At first I couldn't figure out how anyone breathed, but then my doors of perception swung wide open and I saw pockets of air drifting. Of course! Our universe is discontinuous and miracles occur in its intervals. What a teaching; what a way transmit it. The marakame and dancers were adepts in breathing in as a pocket of air floated by and breathing out as the dust swirled. Impeccable rhythms of everyone's breathing, dust clouds, pulsating music, blood beat dancing, alternating day and night with rests staring into the fire, brilliant entrances of stars or sunshine when the dancers rested from raising up a storm of dust, produced a gorgeous substantiation of this way of life. This was not 'a trip'; as the days passed it became clear that it was, like the Eleusinian Mysteries must have been, a revelation of a mystery: a workable standard of how to live a life.

Those who had gone to work as labor on the coast, disguised heroes, visibly reintegrated during the three days with their bioregion, kin, and initiates. Weariness, wariness, and grimness visible disappeared from their faces. From standing around as somewhat disillusioned observers they became part of an active psychic-physical network of response.

One complete regression to a psychotic state occurred in the sacred building, but three alert guardians and their commanding 'war chief' quickly and brilliantly integrated unraveling a death hold on a young woman into a real life dance of deliverance and redemption. This was a dangerous, brilliantly detailed, conscious action that even a Paracelsus would have found difficult to emulate. All participants acted as if Husserl's bracketing and Gurdjieff's self-observation with non-reacting were part of their normal state; in no way did their great work stop its presence and its revealing bodily, bioregional, and cosmic truths in the midst of this happening. It was integrated into this all inclusive reality.

This event--as well as one in the Amazon, and one in the high deserts of New Mexico, under similar masters



Photo of Biosphere 2 by Gonzalo Arcila.
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and with similar level of participants--gave me a physical and emotional feeling for the biosphere to match and augment my intellectual and scientific vision gained from Vernadsky's Biogeochemistry and Historical Geology that had led me to starting the Biosphere 2 adventure. Here also existed Biospheric teachers of equal majesty and truth. The Marakame understood Biosphere 2 and asked for a small model to store with their sacred treasures, each denoting some particularized understanding of the epiphanic wholeness in which we are privileged to play a part.

Could this be achieved without peyote or equivalent real-time sacrament to raise the human organism to its capacity to make a workable synergy of reason, feeling, sensation, and will that coordinates its life with bioregion and cosmos? Frankly, I don't think so. However, accomplishing this takes individual masters and a collective, history rich culture that exalts creating a dynamic harmony through dance, vision, and music, to integrate these faculties into life-enhancing and intellect-clarifying experiences; then they clearly can be transmissible for millennia. I don't think any medical model can accomplish this total result though, as already proved in practice, properly formulated and practiced, they produce much good

in individual cases of repression and frustration. My best wishes certainly go with MAPS and its brave and thorough efforts to accomplish this needed work.

Nor have I seen that a religious model for using these plants based on a Western European-Middle East system can do as much as the Amerindian way, though certainly experiences in Brazil and the United States demonstrate that a goodly amount of harmony and improved relation to bioregion can be transmitted in such synthetic faiths under a master leader.

My admiration for the AmerIndian masters is profound, and for the tribes who have supported the leaders at great cost to themselves in a material-political sense. It will take a world of much more existential freedom than now exists in the ruling political structures for the century of hard, informed, and impeccable experiencing and experimenting to take place, needed to create an equally thorough and effective tradition around the planet in some modern technical surroundings. Although I never got the chance to participate in the Harvard and New York experiments in this direction, Timothy Leary's accounts in *High Priest* and *Flashbacks*--which were based on physio-psychological science--show a promising start in this direction, but that work was forcibly cut off before it had a real chance to develop. •