

# A Poisoned Culture: the case of the Indigenous Huichol Farm Workers

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Photo: Patricia Diaz-Romo

*Huichol children working in the tobacco fields.*



## Migrant workers and pesticides

The exposure to pesticides is one of the greatest risks that Indigenous migrant workers face. In Mexico, the tobacco companies with agroindustrial cultivation use enormous quantities of these dangerous agrochemical products without complying with the international legal restrictions designed to protect human life. The Indigenous workers are especially vulnerable to the pernicious effects of the pesticides for diverse reasons, among them the fact that they lack information regarding the dangers of exposure, because the contractors do not provide them with safety equipment, and because the conditions in which they live and work in the agroindustrial fields prevents them, for example, from bathing and from washing their clothes after being in contact with pesticides recently applied or with residual pesticides.

The cases of poisoning and death from pesticides count among the most

serious indicators of the situation which migrant workers encounter. In 1993 it was estimated that in each planting season approximately 170,000 field workers arrive in the valleys of Sinaloa. An average of 5,000 agricultural workers suffer from toxic poisoning as a result of the handling of, or prolonged exposure to, pesticides that are used in cultivation. Of the 35,000 agricultural laborers that worked in the San Quintin Valley of Baja California in 1996, 70% were Indigenous. Article 20 of the ILO Convention 169 emphatically calls for signatory governments to do everything possible to prevent workers from being subject to contractual working conditions dangerous to their health, particularly "as a consequence of their exposure to pesticides or other dangerous substances".

According to researchers, the majority of the Indigenous migrant workers who work in the agroindustrial fields in northern Mexico are: Mixtecos, Triquis, and

Zapotecs from Oaxaca, Nahuas, Mixtecos and Tlapenecos from Guerrero and Purh'epchas from Michoacan. The demographic data indicates a extremely serious situation. According to Estela Guzmán Ayala, women (34%) and children under 12 years of age (32%) constitute 66% of the Indigenous labor force in the agricultural regions in northern Mexico. Ruth Franco, a doctor specializing in work-related health and the coordinator of the Program for Day Laborers of the IMSS delegation in Sinaloa, estimates that 25% of the 200,000 workers in the Sinaloa valleys during the 1995-1996 season were children between the ages of 5 and 14. Of the children from southern Mexico, 63% are hired by intermediaries in their place of origin and the rest in the state of Sinaloa. Forty four percent of these child laborers are female and fifty six percent male. 55% of the child farm workers have been working in the fields for 1 to 5 years and 14% for over 5 years. At the conclusion of the agricultural season, 72% return with their families to their respective states, 20% remain in Sinaloa, and 9% continue along the migrant worker route to other destinations.

The extent of the indiscriminate use of pesticides has been frequently exposed and denounced in the Mexican press. It is estimated that thousands of used containers and toxic residues that are generated by the annual use of upwards of 8 million tons of pesticides are criminally disposed of in ad hoc trash bins, channels, drains, incinerators, and recycled to store drinking water. The harmful effects of pesticides on human health and on the environment have been clearly documented.



## Huicholes and pesticides

The Huicholes speak a language belonging to the uto-azteca linguistic family that also includes: Nahuatl, Hopi, Shoshone, Comenche and many other languages in a vast region that extends northward to the United States and southward into central Mexico. Some studies estimate that between 15 and 20 thousand Huicholes inhabit the mountains of the Sierra Madre Occidental within a territory that comprises parts of the Mexican states of Jalisco, Nayarit, Durango, and Zacatecas.

Year after year, approximately 40% of all Huichole families leave their communities in the dry season to find employment, poorly paid and dangerous, in the tobacco fields of the Nayarit coast. The causes of this temporary migration stem from the socioeconomic situation of the Indigenous people and from their ritual calendar.

In the rainy season, the Huicholes traditionally cultivated a combination of corn, chile, beans, squash, and amaranth. Unfortunately, the Mexican government promotes exactly the opposite: monocultural planting-by distributing hybrid seeds of corn that require the use of pesticides and artificial fertilizers, replacing the mixed seeds that were traditionally used by Huicholes and other Indigenous agricultural peoples. Monoculture agriculture and other modern developments break down

**THE "VALUABLE AND APPRECIATED" HUMAN MERCHANDISE INCLUDES PREGNANT WOMEN AND BABIES INCAPABLE OF CRYING, MUTE FROM PAIN, WHO HAVE RECENTLY BEEN BORN TO MALNOURISHED MOTHERS**

the Indigenous traditions of cooperation in the communal agricultural work and increase, at an alarming rate, the incidence of malnutrition and alcoholism. The introduction of herbicides like Paraquat and 2,4-D gradually destroys communal farm practices, puts the health of cultivators and their families in danger,

and deteriorates farming that typically occurs on hillsides.

With increasingly fewer opportunities to survive in the mountains, the Huicholes feel forced to migrate in search of work in the tobacco fields in the coastal plantations of Nayarit. The Huicholes also migrate for cultural reasons. Negrin claims that "they have the religious necessity to visit the ocean, an ancestral female figure associated with fertility and the earth. Once they reach the coast however, they find that if they don't work in the tobacco plantations, they cannot return home to the mountains."

Tabacco has been grown in Nayarit since long before the arrival of the Spanish, but it was in the 1940's when the tobacco market took off as a result of the Second World War. The municipality of Santiago Ixcuintla in Nayarit is the Mexican capital of tobacco production. Every year, local landowners meet in their town plazas to hire the Huichole workers and subcontract them as a cheap labor force. Huichole workers are appreciated because their work with the tobacco leaves (hanging and bundling) is practically an art.

The Huicholes make the journey from the sierras under subhuman conditions, arriving at the tobacco fields hungry, thirsty and exhausted. The "valuable and appreciated" human merchandise includes pregnant women and babies incapable of crying, mute from pain, who have recently been born to malnourished mothers or mothers with tuberculosis. Vulnerable elders and even the "strong" men arrive at these centers in weak condition.

The negotiations between the

Huicholes and the local landowners — the latter acting as intermediaries between the labor force and the big tobacco capital — usually takes place in the plazas of the communities, on the main highways, or in the houses of the employers. Sometimes the Huicholes ask, hesitantly, for some "extras": a certain quantity of tortillas a day per family or some ration of purified water. Few workers are granted these "extras". For those who succeed, it is a great accomplishment. The rest will have to drink water from the irrigation channels deriving from the Santiago River, one of the most contaminated in Mexico, or from the wells of the region, which are also contaminated in that, owing to the intensive use of pesticides in the zone, the dangerous agrochemicals have leached into the aquifer.



Huichol migrant workers make their temporary homes under the pesticide laden tobacco leaves.

One of the reasons that the Huicholes contract to work in the cutting and stringing of tobacco, and not in other agricultural work, is because these operations are done in the late afternoon or morning, when the temperature is more agreeable compared with the heat of the middle of the day. During the hanging and bundling of the leaves one stays under the shade of the "branches." The apparent advantage of working in the shade becomes a health threat when the Huicholes are cutting the moist leaves and they become wet from head to toe. Moist skin absorbs pesticides more easily. The very nicotine in tobacco causes skin irritations and hives, symptoms which, in the United States, have been identified as Green Tobacco Sickness.

The children, who actively participate in the cutting of the leaves, are particularly susceptible to the harmful effects of the



pesticides and the nicotine. It is considered "easy" for them to work in the first phase of the cutting because they can gather the leaves at the base of the plants. As they work along the furrows, cutting the leaves, their bodies are smeared with the sticky gum and resin that covers the tobacco. At the same time, they inhale and absorb the residues of the toxic pesticides that have been applied to the plants.

The families live and sleep in boxes, or under blankets or plastic, beneath the strings of tobacco leaves that are drying. In their makeshift shelters, they try to protect themselves from the inclement sun during the day and from the wet cold at night, exposing themselves in the process to the toxic substances that cover the leaves. There is no potable water, drainage, nor any latrines. Even the food is cooked beneath the hanging strings of tobacco. Occasionally the Huicholes use the empty pesticide containers to carry their drinking water, without paying notice to the grave dangers that this represents, since the majority cannot read the instructions on the labels which may be written in English. Other times they bring these containers back home to the mountains as "practical souvenirs".



Pesticides are poisons specifically designed to kill. They are toxins that contaminate and degrade everything with which they come into contact; there are no remedies or cures against them and, contrary to their manufacturers' claims, they are destroying the cycles of life and the ecosystem of the planet and its inhabitants.

**Urgent need for an investigation**

Neither the national and transnational companies that manufacture pesticides, nor the tobacco producers, nor the

Mexican government's health and environmental institutions have taken the necessary measures to protect the health of the workers that handle these toxic substances. The endemic malnutrition that the Huichole population suffers becomes more acute with the rise in alcoholism, which increases during the working season on the coast. This in turn aggravates the toxicological problem.

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Children under the age of 12 constitute 32% of the Indigenous labor force in the agricultural regions of Northern Mexico.

Indigenous and mestizo workers designed in coordination with the Pesticide Education Center of San Francisco, California and includes collaboration from the University of Guadalajara and the Autonomous University of Nayarit. The study began in 1995 and includes performing two blood analyses to determine the levels of erythrocyte cholinesterase. The pesticides inhibit the activity of this neurotransmitter, producing various effects on one's health, including death. As of this writing the study is at the stage of data analysis in collaboration with important Mexican non-governmental organizations dedicated to the epidemiological investigation.

Between 1996 and 1997, the team working on the Huicholes and Pesticides project produced various informational workshops on the human rights of

migrant workers, in the Indigenous communities of the Huichole sierra, as well as in the principle municipalities of the tobacco zone in the coast of Nayarit. In these workshops they showed, in both Huichola and Spanish, the video Huicholes and Pesticides, which includes the testimonies of Indigenous and mestizo farm workers who have suffered from problems of pesticide poisoning.

There is no doubt that, with the massive use of pesticides in the agroindustrial fields, the large pharmaceutical companies and tobacco growers are violating rights to information and health and, in the process, are polluting land, rivers, aquifers, and finally the ocean, whom the Huicholes call "Our Mother of the Sea" Haramara.

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