

Defeating Hearsay in Research on Divine Kieri and Huichol Shamans
by Jay Courtney Fikes, Ph.D.

In my latest book, *Beyond Peyote: Kieri and the Huichol Deer Shaman* (Fikes 2020) I substantiate the divinity of Kieri (i.e., two psychoactive species in the genus *Solandra*) among Huichol, citing information I collected from my fourth Huichol shaman-mentor Jesús González, as well as from two *kawiterutsixi* (elderly ritual orators) from Santa Catarina, Cuexcomatlán. My primary goal now is to reevaluate the qualifications of Robert Zingg's sole informant to provide accurate information regarding Kieri, and then elucidate comparative passages from my 1991 interview, presented below, with Ramón Medina Silva's widow, Guadalupe Rios.

Guadalupe's statements about Kieri lead us into an anthropological enigma: why was Zingg's claim that Kieri was a species of *Datura* unconditionally accepted by Drs. Peter Furst and Barbara Myerhoff? Why did Furst & Myerhoff perpetuate Zingg's untenable defamation of Kieri as "evil" (2004, 16-20) despite the fact that their informant, Ramón Medina, was apparently consecrated to Kieri by his mother, as Guadalupe informed me in my 1991 interview with her? Probing these questions will help scholars gain insights essential to doing accurate research on Kieri, thereby avoiding momentous mistakes Zingg, Furst and Myerhoff inserted into the ethnographic record about the Huichol (Fikes 2020, 171-179).

In my doctoral dissertation (Fikes 1985, 35-39, 53) I commented on numerous examples of conspicuous acculturation to Catholic beliefs and practices evident in Zingg's description of Tuxpan de Bolaños in 1934. One such example involved Huichol *maestros*, Huichol men who were "native lay-readers ... prepared by the missionaries" (Zingg 2004, 274). In contrast, there were no *maestros* whatsoever in Santa Catarina in 1976, when I first arrived there. My recent examination of all available evidence makes me suspect that Robert Zingg's sole informant on

Huichol mythology in 1934, a layman from Tuxpan de Bolaños named Juan Real, was, or was soon to become, a *maestro*.

Zingg confessed that he would have preferred collecting myths dictated by a “singer” (1938, *li*), (usually called a ‘singing shaman’ or *mara’akame*) while defending Real as a deeply religious Huichol who, “served in the important role in the Holy Week ceremonies of leading the procession that encircled the church” (1938, *lii*).⁽¹⁾ In addition to leading that procession around the Nine Stations of the Cross on Good Friday, Juan Real recited the Lord’s Prayer in Spanish (Zingg 1938, 100-101; 2004, 239). According to Zingg, Real, “was sufficiently marginal to Huichol culture to speak Spanish fluently and to be at home in Mexican villages” (1938, *liv*). Real’s fluent Spanish and assimilation of Catholic doctrine presumably enhanced his ability to dictate Catholic, missionary-derived myths to Zingg (2004, 187-232) while simultaneously inducing Real’s misrepresentation of Kieri as the evil patron of sorcerers (Zingg 2004, 16-20). By 1985 I recognized that the Real-Zingg caricature of Kieri was strange, given the reverence that Kieri inspired among all Santa Catarina Huichol who spoke to me about it, and given their ritual use of Kieri pollen as an aid in deer hunting (Fikes 1985, 216; 2011).

Not long after publishing data about Kieri provided by my mentor from Tuxpan de Bolaños, Jesús González (Fikes 2020), I reread Zingg’s characterization of Juan Real and Kieri. After scrutinizing all available data I concluded that Real was far more influenced by Catholicism than by Huichol tradition in his portrayal of Kieri.

My recent rereading of Zingg confirms that he made two important errors. First, he failed to cross-check Real’s myth about Kieri with any Huichol shaman or *kawiteru* qualified to describe Kieri’s divine status and diverse benefits (Fikes 2020). Second, Zingg neglected to visit a specific Kieri, which led him to declare it was a species of *Datura*, or Jimson weed, a plant that

has long been associated with sorcery and danger for virtually all Euro-Americans, a fact which aligns with Real's obvious Catholicism (Fikes 1993).

Zingg's first error resulted, because he waited far too long to record Huichol myths, as he admitted (1938, *xxi*), and therefore didn't have an opportunity to cross-check Real's information.(2) To be clear, this error occurred because Zingg relied solely on hearsay, i.e., only on Real's inaccurate statements in which he defamed Kieri as evil and the shamans using it as harmful and deceitful (Zingg 2004, 16-17). It is worth noting that Zingg committed a comparable error in 1941, by coauthoring and endorsing unverified allegations (hearsay) about Amala and Kamala, the "wolf-children" of India (Zingg 2004, 233).(3) Zingg's second error was to rely entirely on whatever he already knew about *Datura*'s visionary or psychoactive powers, instead of asking Real to take him to see a Kieri, perhaps one which some other Huichols had identified as divine, as evidenced by depositing offerings to a specific named plant such as Awatusa (Lilly 2018, Fikes 2020).

Zingg's unwarranted certainty that Kieri was *Datura* meant he never bothered to investigate what Huichol recognize, that Kieri typically grows near boulders or in rocky terrain (Fikes 2020). In the narrative Real dictated to Zingg (2004, 16-20) he repeatedly implied that Kieri grew on rocks, "Jimson weed lives near the rocks" (Zingg 2004, 19). This evidence indicated that Real knew where Kieri typically grew, even if he was never motivated to solicit favors from it as an adult, nor consecrated to Kieri as a child, as was Ramón Medina.

Ramón Medina Silva's Veneration of Kieri

The following excerpts are my English translations of portions of my March 22, 1991 interviews, conducted in Spanish with Guadalupe Rios at her home in Santa Maria del Oro, Nayarit. I

inserted my own words, added to clarify both my questions and her answers to them, in brackets []. Readers should bear in mind that Guadalupe was clear when telling me that she did not accompany Ramón Medina on the day he allegedly guided Peter Furst and Barbara Myerhoff to a Kieri growing around boulders near the small Mexican town of Paso de Guadalupe (just north of Guadalajara on Highway 54). She told me that Ramón took a votive arrow with him that day, in order to prevent the Kieri from making them go crazy. She correctly stated that this was because anybody visiting a Kieri should deposit an offering, even if they are only going to view it.

JF: In what manner did the Tree of Wind, the Kieri, aid Ramón?

GR: It helped him when he touched it. It has a powder [pollen], correct? ... When one touches it, one obtains the pollen from that Kieri. Those persons who already know that [may] take it. The person who does not know, well, they become insane. ... This is what I believe: that Ramón only had to obtain that pollen and that was the way that Kieri taught him [because Huichol regard pollen as a conduit to the Kieri, their Elder Brother, Tamatsi].

JF: Who taught Ramón how to approach [communicate with] the Kieri?

GR: His mother taught him that, because his mother was a great shaman. She taught him.

JF: Was Ramón going often to leave offerings for the Kieri?

GR: When he was very young his mother was taking him [to the Kieri]. But when he was an adult, when he was living with me, he only went once..... his mother already had consecrated him [to the Kieri]. That is why it was not difficult for him.

JF: So Ramón's mother was the one who taught him? More precisely, perhaps she consecrated him to the Kieri when he was young?

GR: Ramón was being sent by God to do something. His memory [spiritual ability] was exceptional from birth. It improved because of his mother's help. That is the reason he advanced so much, because he was already gifted. ...and that is why he learned rapidly. His mother had to remain by his side, to prevent him from stumbling [breaking his vows], in order for him to learn well. (4)

JF: Was Ramón involved in a pact with the wolves, the kam+kite?

GR: He was not, but his mother was. That is why she was telling him everything. She was turning herself into one of those wolves.

JF: In what way did Ramón learn to sing? Who helped him?

GR: His mother helped him. Because his mother was already knowledgeable, she taught him. He learned [from her]. Sometime later, after Ramón had gained his guardian spirits, they were teaching him to sing. That is why he was knowledgeable.

JF: Was don José Matsua [aka José Rios--Guadalupe's father] also allied with the Kieri?

GR: Yes, he was too but his [Kieri] was at the Mesa del Nayar. His first-class benefactor was [living] over there... (5)

JF: So you mean that it is very demanding or dangerous to visit the Kieri? Why is that?

GR: It is very dangerous, because the Kieri does not like a person who has sinned a lot. The Kieri wants one's thoughts to be righteous, free of deceit. But if someone goes [to solicit favors from a Kieri] and soon after that states; "I am not going", then this is what happens to that person: It makes that person drunk [disoriented] and carries that person away so that nobody knows where that person is.

JF: What would happen to a non-Huichol who visited the Kieri for no good reason?

GR: That all depends on that person, on the thinking [intention] that person brings when going over there [to the Kieri]. One may go to ask for some favor, if one goes with a sincere purpose. But if one does not, then it is just like I say; that person gets drunk [disoriented] and gets lost.

JF: So the shaman, *mara'akame*, must connect with the Kieri in order to gain more wisdom. Why is that so important?

GR: Yes. The shamans (*mara'akate*) are able to arrive properly and stay awake all night there, [in order] to ask the Kieri for greater knowledge. During that night [vigil] the shaman, *mara'akame*, must be alert to see what he gets and receives [from the Kieri] in order to learn more.

JF: Does Kieri know how to decipher or read the thoughts of the persons that visit with it?

GR: I believe so. Kieri knows very well the thoughts one brings. It must know everything. It is going to see [through] me right away, what thoughts I bring. If I think something [while infected] with fear, or if I lack commitment, in that case [for that reason] the Kieri will also say: "*All right then! If you lack commitment, then for what reason did you come?*" That is why it is better to be resolute.

JF: Here is something more serious. The way of using Kieri, when one carries its pollen inside a reed tube; does that help those who are hunting deer? For what is its pollen used? What is your opinion, Guadalupe?

GR: That is true. One saves the pollen of the Kieri inside a small reed tube; which is well sealed. Then one places it inside the *takwatsi*,⁽⁶⁾ in order that it may assist one for any purpose. It is to summon the deer, to go hunting for them. Then the deer come closer [to the hunters]. One does not go searching for them. The hunter only sits down somewhere, on a little hill, and the deer arrive [on their own] and then they are captured.

JF: So it is used to disorient them; to prevent them from escaping from the hunters?

GR: I believe that is correct. It disorients them and therefore they approach all by themselves, in order that the hunters don't [need to] walk much. They come closer by themselves and then the hunters can catch them, [just standing] nearby.(7) When the shaman wants to work to achieve a healing, he/she removes it [Kieri pollen] in order to gain its aid. That is the only way it is used but not for other things.(8)

JF: It has also been reported that Kieri assists someone who wishes to improve their violin playing, is that correct?

GR: That is also true, because many people have visited the Kieri to learn how to play the violin and it gives them help. At that place [where Kieri is] they learn to play very well and for that purpose the Kieri is beneficial.

JF: A *kawiteru* told me that there is a *mara 'akame*, whom one may visit and leave offerings, at a lagoon called *Ha 'kwepa*. What is that about?

GR: Yes indeed, my husband was going there to *Ha 'kwepa*. He was going to pay his debt [leave the required offerings], because that is also the place he learned how to play the violin, with that ancestor-deity who plays there during the night. Over there [*Ha 'kwepa*] at about midnight that ancestor-deity plays, that Kieri plays. That is the reason why he went there, to plead for the favor of learning how to play well. Yes, his request was granted and he was skilled at playing [the violin]. (9)

My questions to Guadalupe were obviously based on my prior knowledge of Kieri's benefits: that children were consecrated to it, that it was helpful in deer hunting and for enhancing one's ability to sing and play the violin. Her responses clearly demonstrated she was already aware of such benefits. She even suggested something quite logical but unverified; that Kieri pollen was

involved in healing (see note 8). What stands out about Guadalupe's esteem for Kieri pollen is that she prizes it in a way consistent with her declaration that Ramón Medina's mother had consecrated him to the Kieri when he was a child. This and other positive comments Guadalupe made about Kieri supplement details that Ramón Medina revealed about Kieri teaching him violin playing and songs (Benítez 1968a: 285-86). Ramón's reverence for Kieri was also evident in comments that Myerhoff claimed Ramón had made about the Kieri flower to a priest: "that Kieri flower was the sacred flower which protected the *mara'akame*, while peyote was used by sorcerers" (Myerhoff 1968, 19; Furst & Myerhoff 1966, 7; Fikes 1993, 150). This wholly benevolent image of Kieri proclaimed repeatedly by both Guadalupe and Ramón fundamentally contradicts the evil portrait of Kieri Ramón Medina painted, perhaps only for Furst and Myerhoff.

Did Ramón Medina take Peter Furst and Barbara Myerhoff to see a Kieri?

JF: Did Peter Furst, Barbara [Myerhoff] and Diego Delgado ever go to see the Tree of Wind, which is called Kieri in *Wixarika* [Huichol]?

GR: One time Ramón took them to meet it, but that was it. Only those three, along with Barbara [went]. I did not go with them. There were four of them who went.

JF: Where did he take them?

GR: I believe that particular Kieri was at the Paso de Guadalupe. There is one Kieri over there, around some boulders. He took them over there, but I don't know exactly where.

JF: Did they deposit offerings and stay awake all night? What were they doing? Did Ramón ever tell you?

GR: No. He was simply taking a votive arrow in order to leave it there, to prevent them from going crazy. Every time, what a person should do when they go there is make a payment (offering), merely by going to see it. (10)

JF: Did Carlos Castaneda get there, to visit that Kieri?

GR: I don't think so, he did not get excited. He was always fearful. He was not motivated. Only Peter [Furst], Barbara [Myerhoff] and Ramón approached close enough to see it.

Guadalupe's claim, that Ramón Medina led Furst and Myerhoff (but not Diego Delgado or Carlos Castaneda) to a Kieri growing near Paso de Guadalupe, made me uncertain about whether she was lying, or was relying only on hearsay. With respect to that particular claim about Ramón leading Furst and Myerhoff to that particular Kieri, I did not sense she was lying. Instead, I concluded she was relying only on hearsay. If her assertion that Furst and Myerhoff visited that Kieri near Paso de Guadalupe is true, the obvious question is why they followed in Zingg's footsteps, by claiming it was a *Datura* (Furst and Myerhoff 1966). If that Kieri was not a *Datura*, then why didn't Furst and Myerhoff photograph it, for the sake of science? My own experiences upon seeing Kieri plants – including both of the two species of *Solandra* that Huichol revere (Fikes 2020) – enabled me to immediately recognize that Kieri was quite distinct from Jimson weed, a plant I had frequently seen while growing up in southern California.

It appears unlikely that Furst or Myerhoff ever visited a divine Kieri (one such as Awatusa, with a special name and offerings), either within Huichol territory or near the Paso de Guadalupe. In another publication I will discuss possible explanations for their misidentification of Kieri as *Datura*. At that time, I will interpret relevant evidence in Furst and Myerhoff's publications about Kieri; in order to ascertain what best explains why they duplicated the defamatory position

toward Kieri prominent in Real's narrative (Zingg 2004, 16-20). For now, the primary lesson is that Myerhoff and Furst's faith in Zingg's caricature of Kieri as evil appears especially odd in light of all that Guadalupe Rios and her husband, Ramón Medina, actually knew about Kieri's various virtues.

ENDNOTES

1. Elsewhere Zingg (1938, 7-10) remarked, rightly, that in 1934 there was only a foundation for a Catholic church present at Tuxpan de Bolaños. He also reported that the government house ("Casa Real") served not simply to discuss urgent issues of concern to the entire community, but was also the venue for performing both Catholic-inspired and aboriginal Huichol rituals (1938, 10). In 1996, after I first arrived in Tuxpan de Bolaños, I verified that both Zingg's observations (pertaining to the church's foundations and the Casa Real's functions) were accurate (Fikes 1985, 35-39; 2020, 9-10, 202). In 1934 Zingg discovered that acculturation in Tuxpan de Bolaños was exacerbated because of the violence of the Mexican revolution (1910-1917), which was soon followed by the Cristero rebellion (Zingg 2004, Fikes 2020) According to Zingg, in 1934 Tuxpan Huichols had been, "exiled by revolution for years from the sierra." Some of them had, "maintained themselves ... herding for the Mexicans," while others took refuge in the Mexican mining town of Bolaños (Fikes 1985, 36). Juan Real had accumulated enough money by the end of 1934 to, "finance himself on a peyote pilgrimage for which he was most enthusiastic," but Real could not go because other Tuxpan Huichols did not have enough money (Zingg 1938, *Lii*). Their poverty presumably explains why in 1938 a photographer visiting Tuxpan observed that "there had been no peyote pilgrimage from the Tuxpan section for about seven years" (Myers 1938).

2. My conclusion, that Robert Zingg completed 12 months of fieldwork (Fikes 1985, 35; Zingg 2004, xxx-xxi), was based on my understanding of Zingg's summary of his research, done during three four-month long phases, which together constituted all of his field research (1938, xxi). Zingg essentially apologized for not living more than one year in Tuxpan, by writing that: "There should have been a fourth [phase]. It would have been highly desirable to have spent another four months checking information more completely ... Unfortunately time and money were too short... (1938, xxi-xxii). I emphasize Zingg's confession here because Dr. Peter Furst misrepresented my focus on the one year of fieldwork Zingg did; probably to justify adding information he imagined was more relevant (Furst 2007). Furst was repeating what Zingg wrote (1938, xi) when stating that he did another nine months (from January 1, 1935, through September, 1935) of work, which consisted mostly of preparing annotations for the huge Huichol artifact collection he deposited at the Laboratory of Anthropology in Santa Fe (Zingg 1938, xi). But Zingg's nine months of archival work in New Mexico could not have helped him correct deficiencies in his analysis of Real's "myth" about Kieri, as dictated to him in 1934 (during the final stage of his fieldwork in Tuxpan). Nor would such archival work have aided Zingg in interpreting numerous other anomalies I identified in his Tuxpan myths (Fikes 1985, 35-39,53). My point here is that Zingg's legacy could have been improved had he actually visited a Kieri and obtained accurate information about its benefits from a Huichol consecrated to or allied with it (Fikes 2020). For Zingg to complete either of those tasks essential for collecting accurate data on divine Kieri, his 1935 archival work was entirely irrelevant.

3. Zingg co-authored a book, *Wolf-Children and Feral Man* (1942) with Reverend Singh, in whose orphanage the two girls (Amala and Kamala) lived after allegedly being raised by a female wolf near the village of Godamuri, India. Zingg never personally observed those two

girls. Instead he relied only on hearsay repeated by Reverend Singh. Thus Zingg did not pursue alternative explanations (e.g., autism, mental illness or some other pathology) to explain the supposedly more wolf-like than human behavior Singh claimed the two girls exhibited. Some anthropologists, including Ashley Montagu, were not persuaded by the wolf-child theory touted by Zingg and Singh (Zingg 2004, 233). As Montagu rightly remarked, even if, “we might be inclined to put our trust in Mr. Singh’s word, no scientist can accept as true any statement ... until it has been independently confirmed by others” (Montagu 1974, 22). Montagu’s warning about the obligation scientists have to do independent verification clearly applies to Furst and Myerhoff’s “blind” faith in what we now recognize as Zingg’s twin errors (discussed above), caused by his failure to independently investigate whether Kieri was a species of *Datura*, and whether it was truly considered evil by Huichol.

4. Guadalupe said in Spanish: “*Su madre tuvo que estar junto con el (Ramón) para que no pisara mal (para que no haga delitos),*” which I translated as “Ramón’s mother had to remain by his side, to prevent him from stumbling (breaking his vows).” In our interview Guadalupe mentioned breaking vows (“stumbling”) once more. The second context in which she repeated ‘stumbling’ ... led me to translate “*para que no haga delitos,*” as to prevent him from breaking his vows. For now, we will only take note of strikingly similar language in Furst and Myerhoff’s 1966 article (1966, 21). Myerhoff reiterated this Huichol cultural meme again in her 1968 doctoral dissertation (1968, 98). Preparing readers to understand fundamental requirements for aspiring Huichol shamans requires extensive elucidation of shamanic initiation and exegesis of Furst and Myerhoff’s misinterpretation thereof. Accurate interpretation of the meaning implicit in this analogy, between ‘stepping off the path’ (“stumbling”) and ‘breaking one’s vows’ is essential to comprehend the parameters of Huichol shamanic initiation. The word (offense)

“delito” in these contexts means an offense to the Ancestor Deities is caused by a Huichol breaking his/her vows. I will provide detailed comments on this issue in another publication.

5. A narrative provided by a Huichol from San Andrés Cohamiata celebrates the power of a divine Kieri growing near the Mesa del Nayar. Because a careless Huichol hunter failed to provide that Kieri, named “Reutari,” with all prescribed offerings, it punished him with some sort of episodic mental disorientation (Fikes 2020, 173-174). Of course we will never know if Reutari was the same Kieri venerated by Guadalupe’s father, although that is plausible due to the scarcity of *Solandra* plants actively venerated by Chapalagana Huichol.

6. Made of palm fiber, this oblong-shaped basket with its matching cover contains sacred stones and paraphernalia such as *muwierite* (feathers attached to a brazil-wood or pine handle) used by shamans for healing and performing rituals (Fikes 1985, 347).

7. Guadalupe Rios's confirmation that Kieri pollen is useful to deer hunters was presumably something she learned from her father, José Rios, and/or her second husband, Ramón Medina Silva. My kawiteru-mentors at Santa Catarina explained to me, sometime before 1985, that Kieri pollen was central to properly perform their deer hunting rituals (Fikes 1985: 214-217). Before 1985 I had also read narratives several Huichol had dictated to Fernando Benítez. Those texts indicated that Kieri was essential for deer hunting (Benítez 1968a, 280-83; 1968b, 101) and for learning to play the violin (1968a, 284). Narratives Ramón Medina dictated to Benítez (1968a, 285-86; 1968b, 251) reveal that Ramon identified Kieri as “the Tree of Wind,” and knew Huichol solicited its aid in violin playing and he recognized that its flowers and pollen were holy.

After recording, translating, and analyzing Jesús González’s saga in which a pollinated blue Kieri flower was acknowledged as the source for Tamatsi, the first Deer Shaman (Fikes 2011;

2020, 51), it became obvious to me that this non-sexual source for Tamatsi's birth established the rule for sexual propriety still followed by Huichol deer and peyote hunters and aspiring shamans. Guadalupe Rios admitted in our 1991 interview that she had never visited any Kieri. Even so, she declared that Kieri taught Ramón Medina to become a shaman after he obtained its pollen. Careful reading of the detailed narrative that Ramón Medina dictated to Benítez (1968a: 285-86) convinced me that Ramón comprehended, probably from first-hand experience, how to solicit aid from the Kieri spirit as he did in order to play the violin more skillfully and learn songs.

8. After Guadalupe Rios confirmed what I already knew, that Huichol deer hunters use Kieri pollen in their rituals, she added information which in 1991 was unknown to anthropologists, including me. Using Kieri pollen for healing is consistent with the divine status Kieri had for my deceased shaman-mentor, Jesús González. I now regret not having asked González to comment on Guadalupe's claim that Kieri pollen is used for healing. In stark contrast, Real told Zingg that the Kieri shaman used its pollen to harm the Huichol, their corn, and their livestock (Zingg 2004, 16-17).

9. Sometime around 1981 my adopted grandfather, a *kawiteru* at Santa Catarina, told me that an aspiring shaman can make a pilgrimage to contact the divine spirit (*mará'akame*) residing at Ha'kwepa, a sacred lagoon located in the southern part of Huichol territory. Because I have never been there, I am uncertain whether that spirit was manifested in a Kieri or in some other psychoactive plant. Guadalupe Rios told me that her *señor* (which in this context was best translated as husband) made pilgrimages to Ha'kwepa to learn how to play the violin. I never asked her whether the husband soliciting favors at Ha'kwepa was her first husband, who died sometime before she married Ramón Medina, or was Ramón Medina.

10. As a result of making several pilgrimages to Huichol sacred sites, including to a Kieri (*Solandra guttata*) in 1986 (Fikes 2020), I learned that offerings must be deposited when one visits the abode of an Ancestor Deity. Kieri, being the incarnation of Tamatsi – the first Huichol Deer Shaman – is regarded as especially sensitive and exacting. Guadalupe obviously believed that also, given her remarks about the obligation that supplicants have to be resolute, free from deceit, and to deposit offerings when approaching a divine Kieri.

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