

# **1999-2000 National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Stipend Program Proposal**

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## **Notions of Contemporary Art and Artistic Identity**

### **vis-a-vis Indigenous Costa Rican Image-Making Practices**

During the summer of 2000, I propose to continue field research with three Central American tribal cultures attending to persistent ambiguities within current Western polemics regarding definitions, categorization, intellectual value, and the respective social roles of art and artist as viewed across the First World&mdash;Third World cultural divide. As an adjunct to interpretive considerations, my Costa Rican research colleague and I will continue, by invitation, a collaborative relationship with Museo Nacional of San José, Costa Rica, culminating in a major exhibition of Cabécar, Bribri and Guaymí (Ngawbe) art.

**Introduction:** Working with Lic. Jorge Luis Acevedo, my Costa Rican ethnomusicologist research colleague of many years, and with the invitation of the prestigious Museo Nacional of San José, Costa Rica, I propose to bring ongoing field work and interpretive analysis among the Cabécar, Bribri and Guaymí indigenous people of Costa Rica to a point sufficient to mount a major exhibition of shamanic art during the summer of 2000. The exhibit will contain artifacts&mdash;much of which is of a nature never exhibited before&mdash;plus related photographs, recorded shamanic music and video. This will be our second collaborative exhibition at Museo Nacional. The first, a general look at contemporary indigenous art of the region entitled *Siwá: Historias que Cantan*, is currently on display through December 1999, composed of 292 pieces from our collection, plus related text and media.

**Research parameters:** The intellectual premise of the proposed study is that indigenous social, spiritual and artistic attitudes are germane to current First World ruminations about the nature of art, signification, and image formation. Of central interest to us is the social role of image-makers in comparison with contemporary postmodern notions of artistic identity and praxis. Such analysis will attend to persistent ambiguities within current Western polemics regarding the categorization, intellectual value, and role of art and artist across various cultural divides. Nowhere is the lack of a coherent notion of global art phenomena more evident than in comparisons of indigenous cultures, which are rapidly disappearing, and international “First World” art, which in turn is rapidly becoming homogenized. I note an upcoming College Art Association panel discussion in New York City in the spring of 2000 is entitled: *The Curse of Sameness: Homogeneity in the Global Art World*. Indeed, current scholarship attending to even multicultural art is typically concerned with artists seeking to bridge between two or more already Westernized cultures. What is given little attention by scholars in the plastic arts, and which may soon be unavailable, is the consideration of distinctly *other* cultural models of “art” and “artists” by indigenous peoples making images charged with significance and made for reasons outside the usual parameters of Western art theory. The three small tribal groups involved in this study, while acculturated in many other ways, have retained a few such plastic art forms and related practices.

Since 1986 my colleague and I have attended to the integrated art, music and ritual of indigenous peoples of the region (Terraba, Boruca, Guaymí, Bribri, Cabécar, and Maleku).

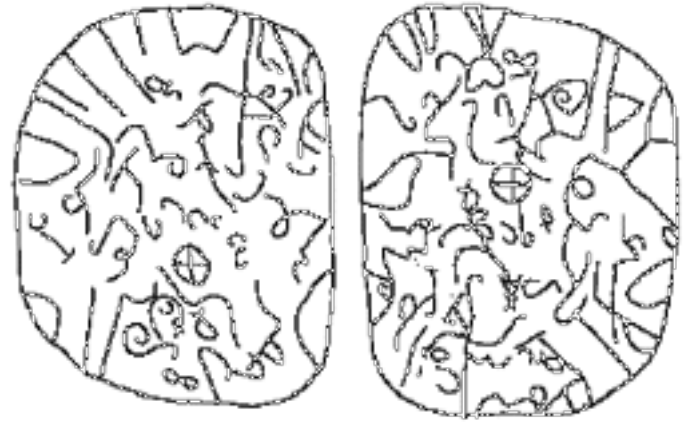
Summer 2000 we would like to focus on several specific shamanic art forms, including the *ulú* balsa sticks, onto which are drawn deities, medicinal plants and



totemic animals, used in healing practices of the Cabécar and Bribri tribes of the high Talamanca Mountains of Costa Rica, and Guaymí cosmological drawings and carved art forms related to animistic thought and the cult of *Mama Chi*.

An essential aspect of the proposed study is that analysis and interpretation be grounded in actual field work. To the extent that art historian

s, critics and philosophers of art have dealt with indigenous art, particularly that of Central America, it has rarely been grounded in field work and even more rarely has it been considered in the wider context of tribal life in transition. Most often it has been dealt with from a strictly formal aesthetic point of view, discussed relative to First World appropriations



by contemporary artists (Gablik, Lippard), or relative to what we in the so-called First World do with indigenous artifacts as commodities (Price). Though Gablik argues persuasively in very general terms about what we might learn from alternative notions of art and artists, her work is not grounded in field work, and is not focused on existing indigenous models. Similarly, existing anthropological surveys have not dealt with the changing artistic function of the shaman or the influence of the wider sociopolitical and economic system on indigenous imagery and art praxis. Therefore, an interdisciplinary approach beginning with field work continues to be the most viable means of joining philosophic interpretation with insights gained from salvage anthropology.

At this time little is known or well-documented about the specializations of the *jawá* shamanic hierarchy. Even less is known about other shamanic art forms such as a necklace *setée collar* composed of bits of animal and vegetable material used in healing; spiritual and animistic beliefs such as the *otro yo*—the other me or alter ego of which they speak and to which they attribute inspiration—the ability to heal, and other magical abilities. Other issues which remain incompletely understood include the symbolism associated with initiation rites of young Cabécar shamans, details of burial practices, animal imagery associated with illnesses and clan identification, and the special written and oral languages used by shamans in healing, singing, storytelling and the recounting of myths. Though the latter may seem far afield in a study of the image-making practices, we have found that images are associated with chants, chants with deities and animals, animals with disease, etc.

Though we are interested in recording specific ethnographic details and iconography, as artist-scholars we are also interested in issues pertaining to the *jawá* shaman's

integrated identity as artist, image-creator, storyteller, poet and musician. We are also interested in how the image-laden objects themselves are regarded once their magical function has been utilized, or once they have become contaminated with illness, as is the case with the *ulú* canes. We are especially interested in learning more about matriarchal clans such as the tkberiwak, kó suak, sá Lwak, and suLitsuwak. From these groups arise many of the *jawapa* and *awapa* (shamans) that travel between the otherwise isolated groups of Bribri and Cabécar tribes living along the cordillera of the Talamanca Mountains.

Our experience has been that indigenous thought and logic is tightly integrated and layered, often binding together in one conversation issues belonging to several Western disciplines including comparative religion, mythology, linguistics, ethnobotany, ethnography, medicine etc. We feel increasingly confident that our synthetic mode of research and reporting—which is necessarily interpretive—uses art forms as points of entry into these wholly other systems of thought is valuable to the humanities and the social sciences alike. This work, I hasten to add, is not being done by others in this region, even as these tribal cultures dwindle. As artists and academics, we feel that such study offers opportunities to profoundly rethink what it means to be artists, including questions of social responsibility, healing, spirituality and intellectual integration.

**The Project in Context:** 1987-88 and again in 1994-95, I was a Senior Fulbright Researcher in Costa Rica working on the general issue of indigenous concepts of art, in part in preparation to paint two ethnographic murals. In 1996 I was awarded an Oregon Council for the Humanities Summer Research Grant for continuing work in this general area. During the summer of 1999, with support from my home institution, my colleague and I made repeated excursions into the Talamanca mountains to reinforce contacts and expand the base of study, particularly with the Cabécar peoples. I wish to intensify and bring this work to a point of relative conclusion during the summer of 2000 by revisiting the Cabécar and Bribri with fresh questions about similarities and differences between their drawn healing canes and those of the Cabécar. Though the material is nearly inexhaustible, we feel that we are close to having gathered sufficient new material for significant analysis and display.

**Study Plan:** During late June, July and August we expect to travel with the Cabécar between two seasonal camps, one in the San Marcos area along the Pacuáre River, and one higher in the Talamanca near Chirripo. Travel will be on foot on steep rain forest mountain trails with pack animals carrying our gear. Interviews will be conducted in Spanish (sometimes translated from the indigenous language into Spanish by our bilingual hosts) and be recorded on video and audio tape. Lines of inquiry will grow out of anthropologist Eugenia Bozzoli's earlier field work on Talamanca shamanism,

provided to us by her as an unpublished manuscript.

Goals of the proposed study include (a) finishing documentation of the four-night healing process which involves creating the *ulú* healing cane and *setée* collars, (b) completing an inventory of the lexicon of symbolic forms employed in the drawing of the *ulú*, (c) tape interviews about the practical use of the *ulú* and related articles and their place within the larger context of tribal life (d) pursue Guaymí studies into Panama concerning imagery related to priestly journal drawings (e) write text and edit electronic documentation and display material in collaboration with Museo Nacional (f) seek opportunities to bring the material to the United States for a major exhibition.



**Dissemination:** My research colleague and I have a long history of sharing the fruits of our research, including an extensive web site on the work <[www.linfield.edu/~rmills](http://www.linfield.edu/~rmills)>. As a result, I receive many e-mails from scholars and students in the field seeking help, references and collaboration. During the summer of 1999, my research colleague and I responded to an invitation from Museo Nacional in San José, Costa Rica to loan and curate 292 objects from our collection for a five-month exhibition entitled *Siwá, Historias que Cantan*, augmented with textual material, video and photography. This initial collaboration has resulted in plans to continue with additional field research (such as I am here proposing), the development of collections and exhibitions. We shall soon mount a show of shamanic drawings at my home institution, the third such show of aspects of the collection. Past forms of dissemination include exhibitions and related lectures at several U.S. colleges, including Linfield College, Willamette University, Claremont Graduate University, Otis Art Institute, Golden West College, the German Culture Center of the Goethe Institute in Costa Rica (1995, 1996, 1988), Colombia (1997) and Germany (1997), a large exhibition and set of lectures at the Museo de Jade in Costa Rica (1996) and the Casa de la Cultura in Cuenca, Ecuador (1997). Lectures, video and photographic material from our studies were presented by my research associate in 1992 by invitation before the 1992 Congreso de la Sociedad Internacional de Musicología in Madrid, Spain. I presented a paper on this general subject in Mysore, India at *Convergence*, an international conference on cross-cultural issues in the arts the text of which was later published by the Idaho State University Journal of Arts and Letters.

Though much of our text material has been published in Spanish, a comprehensive manuscript is now being edited and translated into English. We are in hopes that with

the proposed study accomplished, and with the intellectual backing of Museo Nacional we will be ready to seek publishers for well illustrated book and related CD on indigenous art and culture.

**Conclusion:** Logistical aspects of the plan are in place. Key contacts have already been established and collaboration secured with the most prestigious archeological research institution in the region. The intellectual approach is clear, the topic is relevant to contemporary polemics in the humanities, and the material is fresh and compelling. The project, as described, can and will be accomplished.

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