

# 1994-95 COUNCIL FOR THE INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE OF SCHOLARS

## Central American Republics Research Program

**Name of Applicant:** Professor Ronald DeWitt Mills

**Countries:** Costa Rica with some field work in Nicaragua and Panama.

**Award Code:** #4004, lecture/research

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**I. Project Title:** Research in concepts of art among indigenous peoples of Central America resulting an ethnographic mural and interdisciplinary lectures at the University of Costa Rica at San Ramón.

**II. Abstract:** This project is to continue interdisciplinary ethno-aesthetic research of the Bribri, Cabécar, Boruca, Térraba, and Guaymí of the Talamanca and Coto Brus regions of Costa Rica, Panama, and Nicaragua with noted Costa Rican field ethnomusicologist Jorge Luis Acevedo in association with the University of Costa Rica at San Ramón and Museo San Ramón. The study will attend to the special social and creative behavior of shaman/caciques as image-makers within the broader context of contemporary art theory and praxis. I will give interdisciplinary lectures and seminars about the field work and produce a substantial ethnographic mural in consultation with art, history and anthropological specialists from the University and associated institutions.

Lecturing and artistic activity at the University of Costa Rica at San Ramón: In addition to the continuing promise of collaboration with former dean of fine arts and professor Lic. Jorge Luis Acevedo, I have secured solid and enthusiastic institutional support from the University of Costa Rica in San Ramón and Museo San Ramón. [I attach three letters. Dr. Luis E. Garita, Rector Universidad de Costa Rica may also be sending an additional letter of support after deadline.] I am formally invited to lecture to anthropology, philosophy and art students about such field work as is described in the proposal, and to paint a permanent mural on site in San Ramón. July 15 I met with don Oscar Montanaro Meza, Director, Sede de Occidente de la Universidad de Costa Rica, Professor Esteban Coto, Director, Sección de Artes Plásticas, and don Fransisco Guido, Director de Acción Social de la Universidad, as well as four fine art professors and, in a later meeting, with anthropologist Silvia Castro Sánchez, Directora del Museo San Ramón. The meetings were comprehensive and detailed with reference to benefits of the project to the University, community, and Museum. The discussions also dealt with existing resources that would facilitate the success of the proposed project. Already Silvia Castro has provided me with archeological literature about the immediate area, and has promised access to archives and help with research. All concerned indicated considerable interest in using my proposed project to underscore the value of interdisciplinary studies, especially indigenous investigations, to which they are presently giving special curricular emphasis. The attached letters of invitation underscore their enthusiasm for the proposed lecture/research project. They express

special interest in the proposed mural, and I am honored that they would like it in the vestibule of the Museum of San Ramón, housed in a historic building in the heart of a university town in the hills an hour from San José. San Ramón is an especially appropriate for this lecture/research project because it has long been known as a center of Costa Rican literary, intellectual and artistic life. Though the mural would serve didactic purposes insofar as it would contain specific ethnographic and historical references and be informed by attitudes and practices of indigenous peoples, its essential purpose would be synthetic and aesthetic. Because of its important location in the community, the development of the mural would require considerable consultation with a wide variety of people from the academic community

**III. Detailed Statement:** Existing anthropological surveys of these indigenous groups have not dealt with the changing artistic function of the shaman nor the influence of the wider socio-political and economic system on indigenous imagery and art praxis. An interdisciplinary investigation is necessary to find correspondences between indigenous notions and those of postmodern multi-cultural aesthetic theory. My former Fulbright grant to teach at the Escuela de Artes Plásticas of the University of Costa Rica in 1987 revealed a great deal of rumination, much of it confused, about how to think about contemporary art and at the same time remain in touch with indigenous art and closely related spiritual practices. More recent contact with the art community and academic circles in Costa Rica shows that this situation remains largely unchanged. Irreversible social changes are imminent as indigenous groups become more tightly integrated into the surrounding Latino culture. The urgency of the task results from the fact that many groups are losing their native language, traditional knowledge of songs, mythology, cosmology, crafts, and rituals as well as a detailed understanding of the integral role of art in such traditional tribal social systems.

The wider significance of this project will be found in the analysis of elemental issues of imagery, social responsibility, and creative methodology in relationship to contemporary postmodern aesthetics, including persistent ambiguities within current polemics regarding the categorization, intellectual value, and role of the art of traditional societies. Central to this study will be the identification of traditional attitudes concerning the meaning and role of art as outside values are introduced. Earlier field work shows that economic pressures and media exposure are encouraging the production of traditional decorative crafts as commodities, thus altering their significance. To a lesser extent the ritual objects and sacred art forms have undergone the loss of detail and cultural significance. Indigenous spiritual-social-artistic attitudes are germane to current ruminations about the nature of art, signification, and image formation. The persistent modernist notion of the artist at the spiritual vanguard of society finds interesting contrasts with traditional ideas. Insights gleaned from indigenous studies raise serious questions pertinent to polemics within post-vanguard postmodern aesthetic ideology. Such insights, though perhaps generically valid, are frequently taken from general and often romanticized notions about tribal mentality, shamanism, and social structure. This study seeks to ground the effort in actual field work, and to later apply it to a mural in the vestibule of Museo de San Ramón.

The research stage of the proposed project is to consolidate and bring to maturity a six-year investigation of the social position and artistic praxis of the shaman-curandero within several groups of indigenous peoples of Costa Rica in

collaboration with Lic. Jorge Luis Acevedo. Though we are interested in and record specific ethnographic details and iconography, as artist-scholars, we are somewhat more interested in issues pertaining to the shaman's fulfillment of an integrated role as artist, image-creator, storyteller, poet and musician. We are fortunate in having the enthusiastic assistance of some of the most noted anthropologists and archeologists in Costa Rica, including Rodolfo Tenorio, head archeologist at Guayabo, and Professors Emeritus Eugenia Bozzoli and Carlos Aguilar. Such interdisciplinary support is crucial in the proposed work.. Available anthropological research has not dealt with the integrated roles of the shaman and associated issues of artistic and spiritual motivation. Previous attempts to revive traditional art forms without such an integrated understanding have proven ineffective.

Thus far, our field work has concentrated on three groups in southwest Costa Rica reflecting varying degrees of Latino cultural influence. Most recently, in the fall of 1991 we were guests of the Térraba, Guaymí and Boruca, and were able to interview and videotape rituals, music, and art production. Existing contacts are sufficiently friendly to insure continuing access to seldom studied aspects of these cultures. Material from our past work, some of which has been published, includes slides, diagrams, charts, and computer studies of area petroglyphs, face painting, and mystical drawings associated with divination and healing, as well as many hours of videotaped mask festivals of the Boruca, specifically Los Diablitos and Los Negritos festivals. We also have gathered several interviews with Guaymí, Térraba and Boruca artists, political-religious leaders, and shaman-caciques.

Earlier work between 1987-93 involved befriending an elderly and nearly blind Guaymí shaman/cacique, Pedro Bejarano. Acevedo has cultivated this important and articulate contact in his work as an ethnomusicologist during 15 years of ethnomusicological research. Though we were eventually permitted to glimpse his highly guarded sacred notebook (*cuaderno sagrado*) of supernatural drawings and symbolic language of poetry and music, we were not allowed to photograph the leaves until 1991, when he finally blessed us, sang, and played the flute as well as the *dru magata* (hornet's wax whistle ocarina), and *licuado* (tortoise shell). Contact in the fall of 1991 with other Guaymí spiritual leaders revealed significant information regarding the context and content of the Bejarano supernatural drawings of the Guaymí as they relate to such diverse things as face painting; sacred images of the cult of *Mama Chi* ; aspects of Guaymí cosmology; and ecological notions of a clean and bountiful "America Libre" in a mythic time of pre-conquest harmony "without the boundary between Panama and Costa Rica, and without divisions between tribes.

Though we will be returning to visit the Térrabas, Borucas and Guaymís with fresh questions, the next phase of the study will concentrate on one or more Bribri and Cabécar shamans from the high and remote Talamanca rainforest, and others of the same tribes from the low coastal populations of Costa Rica. (Brief field work in adjacent communities in Panama and Nicaragua may be useful.) These shamans are considered by the other indigenous peoples to have retained healing skills as well as have the power of "future sight" and the ability to cast *hechizos* (spells or curses.). Such a curse from a Bribri shaman is feared throughout the region, and many legends explain epidemics, deaths, and failed crops as the result of displeasing a Bribri *awá*. A specific art form unique to these two groups is the balsa wood *bastones de poder*, or staffs of power, used in healing rites, on the surface of which

are symbolic glyph forms whose mystical significance is known only to the shaman.

The specific dates of the visits will be coordinated with my collaborator to coincide with the seasonal movements of the Bribri and Cabécar from January to July, and the dry season. These groups remain largely hunters with swidden horticulture, passing from rancho to rancho along the Atlantic slope of the cordillera of the Talamanca mountains, extending into Panama and Nicaragua, as well as within the Valle de la Estrella inland from Cahuita in the province of Limón on the Caribbean coast. The variations between kinds of shamans associated with healing, music and the plastic arts requires working with at least two from each group. It is important to compare the higher and lower populations of the transient groups due to differing degrees of contact with contemporary Costa Rican culture. Acevedo has the necessary contacts to insure access, as he has pursued ethnomusicological research among these peoples in the past. We hope to travel with them between at least two seasonal camps, and have a period of weeks in residence to conduct our work. Though we have some notion of their remaining art, music and craft forms, the social and spiritual context and exact nature of artistic practice has not been reported in detail by anthropologists. We are especially interested in learning more about such matriarchal clans as the tkberiwak, kósuak, sáLwak, and suLitsuwak. From these groups arise many of the sukias that travel between the otherwise isolated groups of Bribri and Cabécar, and are responsible for preserving the ancient oral, musical and symbolic forms. At this time little is known about the specialization of the various sukia types beyond the healers, singer/poets and dancers, and even less about the specific art forms and spiritual and animistic beliefs such as "the other" of which they speak and to which they attribute inspiration. Issues which remain incompletely understood include the symbolism associated with initiation rites of young shamans and the origin of animal imagery associated with specific groups, as well as the special written and oral languages used by shamans in healing, singing, storytelling and recounting myths.

**Application and dissemination of research:** This present proposal is best seen as part of a pattern linking scholarly and artistic activity. In 1987 I completed a large ethnographic mural at the University of Costa Rica in San Pedro on the theme of indigenous life and ritual entitled *El Espíritu de la Música Indígena* (see slides). In May of 1993 I completed another large mural on the theme of the Spanish-speaking world at Linfield College, McMinnville, Oregon entitled *From the Pyrenees to Patagonia: an emblematic history of conquest and resistance in the Spanish speaking world*(see slides) . An article related to this work appeared in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in June of 1993. In addition to lecturing and teaching in English and Spanish about these projects, in 1992 a fine arts magazine of Teatro Nacional de Costa Rica published two pieces I wrote pertaining to earlier aspects of this general study. I will be writing additional and more inclusive articles directed toward journals such as *Latin American Art*, and *Pensamiento Centroamericano*. Recent discussions with the publishers of both hold promise. The text material will also be published by Editorial Universitaria of the University of Costa Rica, as they have published other collaborative and individual works by Mills and Acevedo. The editor of *Libro Libre* of San José, Costa Rica, Xavier Savala, published a suite of my illustrations in 1987 and has also expressed interest in publishing aspects of the ethno-aesthetic study in book form. While Professor Avevedo was in residence at my home institution in the spring of 1993 a project was initiated with Linfield College professor Violeta Ramsay to translate our collected papers for bilingual

publication in the United States. Video and photographic material I produced in the fall of 1991 has already been edited and presented by Acevedo in April of 1992 by invitation before the Congreso de la Sociedad Internacional de Musicología in Madrid, Spain, and by myself in Oregon.

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