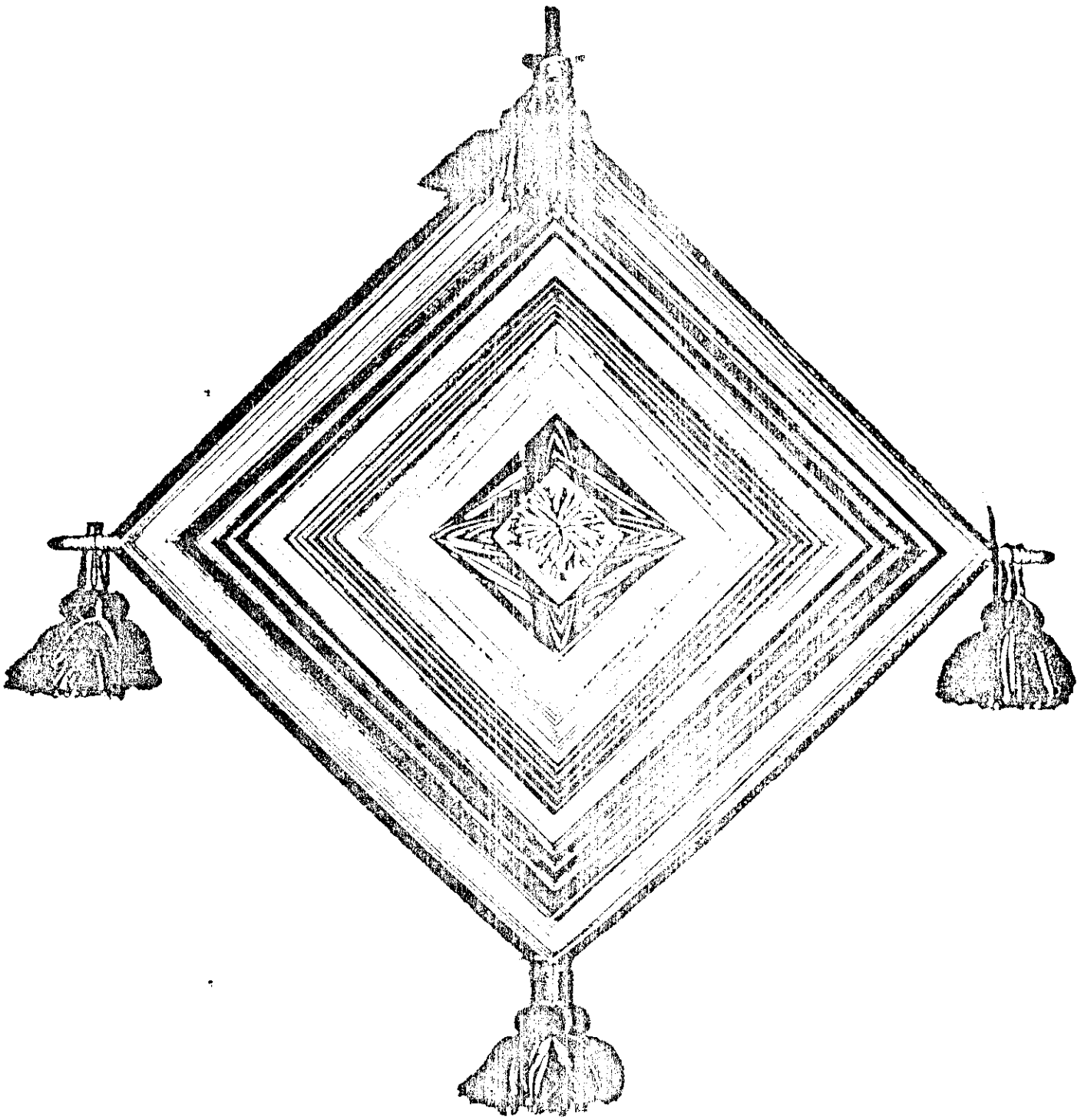
OJOS DE DIOS

WHAT THEY ARE. . .
HOW TO MAKE THEM



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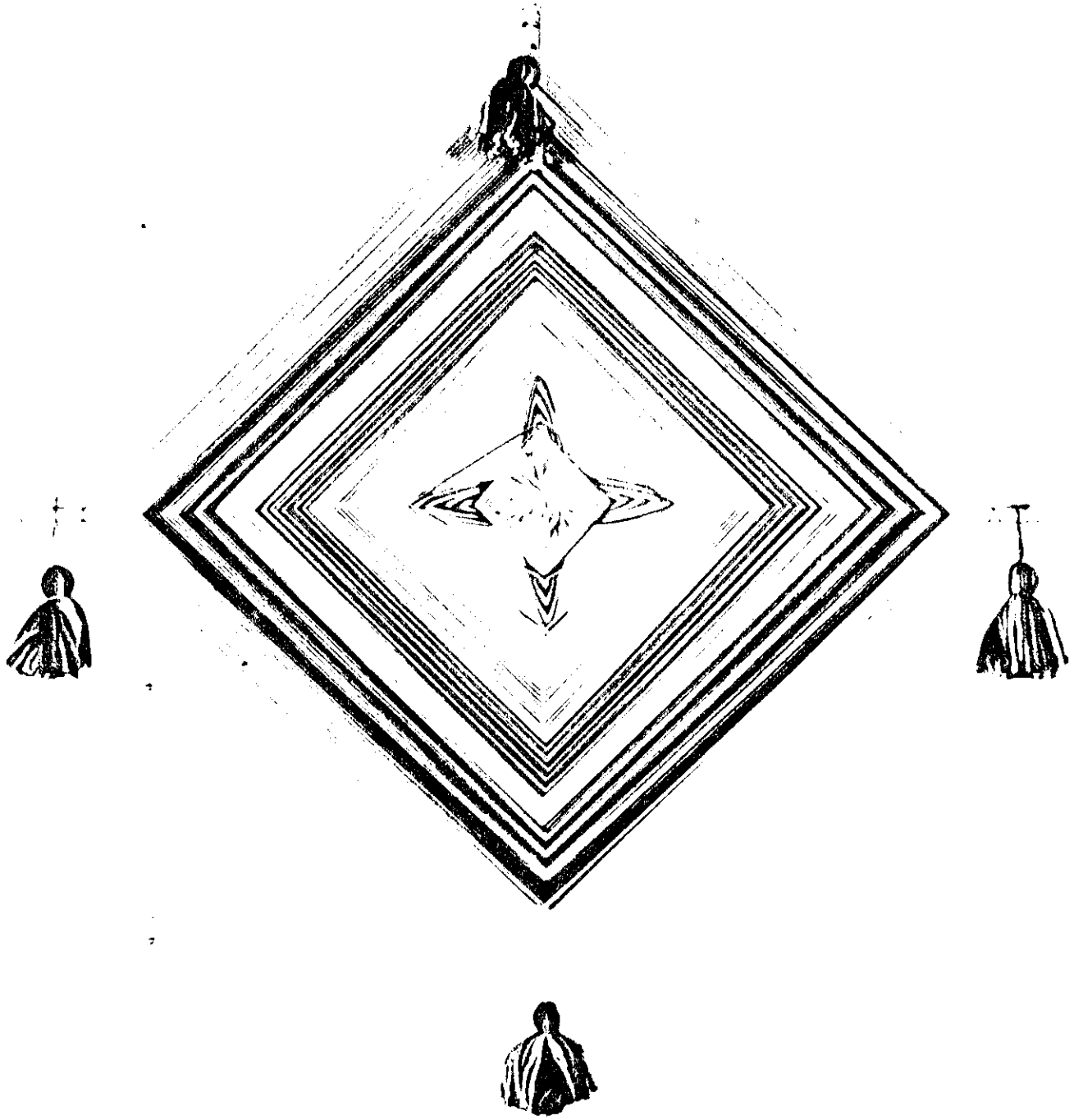
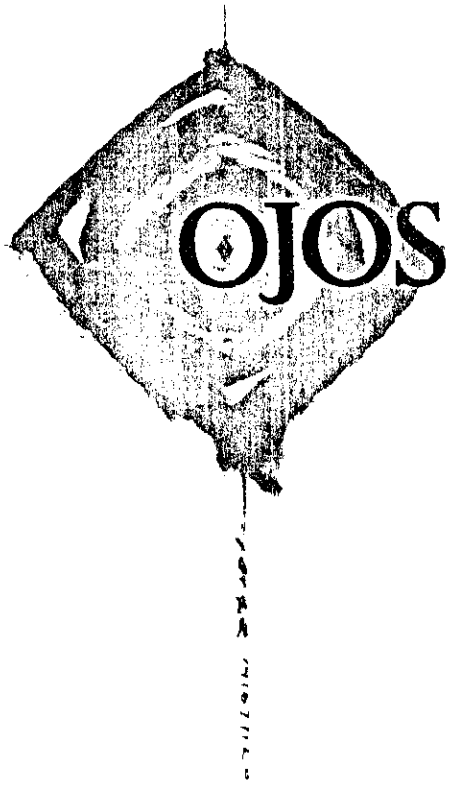


Star-centered ojo by Isaac Romero. (Courtesy La Fonda Shop)



OJOS de DIOS

By Evelyn Ely, with Illustrations by Phyllis Hughes

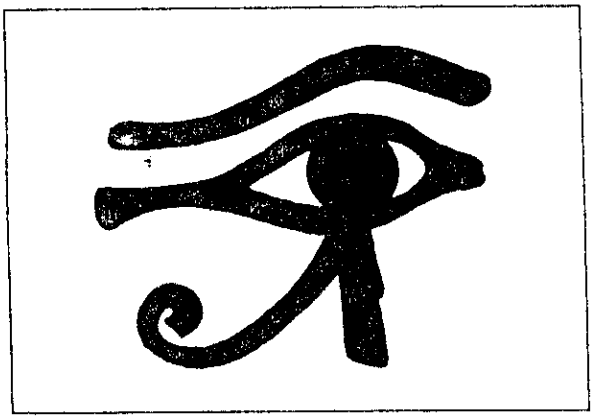
In Spanish they are called *ojos de dios,* which translates as *eyes of god.* They are most often referred to as *ojos,* (oh'-hos), and are especially popular in New Mexico now, although they are not native to the area nor were they common there until quite recently.

They are usually simple square- or diamond-shaped objects made of crossed sticks wound with yarn, and with the brilliant new dyes they are often very colorful. They can be seen everywhere - over the mantels of Southwestern-style fireplaces or hanging from *vigas* or other types of roof beams, adorning the walls of offices and shops or, in miniature, in the passenger compartments of automobiles and trucks. They also are used extensively as Christmas tree ornaments.

Visitors to New Mexico and the Southwest become aware of ojos almost from the moment they arrive. Museum of New Mexico attendants say they are questioned constantly about ojos—what they are, where they came from, what they are used for, and how to make them. Because they possess almost infinite possibilities for decoration they have captured the imagination of amateur and professional craftsman alike.

It is easy to find the inspiration for New Mexico's contemporary ojos in the ritual objects made by some Indian groups of north-central Mexico. But then the problem becomes knottier, for we do not know if the ojo was conceived of independently by these Indians (the evidence seems to indicate otherwise) or whether the idea was transmitted to them by other peoples. Certainly the all-seeing eye, with some nuance of meaning but in remarkably similar form, is a recurrent theme throughout the world. The literature on this subject is not well organized, but there is more than enough evidence to show that the eye as a

Huichol ojo tipped with wax and cotton. White, black and red



Egyptian symbol of Ra, the sun god

magico-religious symbol has been used for thousands of years.

The sacred eye of *Ra*, the Egyptian sun god, is familiar to most of us, as typified in the drawing shown here. And in the Bible, the eye symbolizes the omniscience of God; because of the many scriptural references to the eye of God it has come to represent the all-knowing and ever-present deity.

In symbolic art the eye is the emblem of watchfulness and therefore of divine power. In early Christian works the eye stood for the Providence which sees all things. In Renaissance iconography the all-seeing eye is the attribute of justice and the symbol of vigilance.

Apotropaic eyes, those designed to turn aside evil, are found on archaic Greek vases, and were sometimes painted on the prows of their ships.

The symbolic eye is used frequently in our own culture. Take, for example, the Great Seal of the United States of America, as seen on the reverse side of a dollar bill: Among the symbols is an unfinished pyramid and above it an eye inside a triangle, representing the eternal eye of God.

Occasionally a symbolic eye is found carved on early American gravestones.

Devices involving the supernatural eye are also found in aboriginal Australia, in Ireland, Scandinavia, Tibet and Thailand, among other places. But the contemporary New Mexico ojo can be traced directly to the Indians of north-central Mexico, notably the Huichol (Wee'-chohl) tribe and nearby groups.

Ojos have no place in Spanish-Colonial tradition; they were relatively unknown in New Mexico until the 1950s. In that decade artists and collectors returned with them from Mexico and their appearance in exhibits attracted the attention of craftsmen, decorators, hobbyists and gift dealers. Even earlier, in 1935, the ethnologist Robert M. Zingg brought back a collection of Huichol ceremonial art, including many god's eyes, which is now at the Laboratory of Anthropology in Santa Fe. Zingg's studies among the *Huicholes* was sponsored in part by the Laboratory.

The god eyes of the Huicholes were first reported on by the ethnologist Carl Lumholtz, who studied these Indians around the turn of the century in their homeland in the states of Jalisco, Nayarit and Zacatecas. He also mentioned the presence of various forms of ojos among the neighboring Cora, Tepehuane and Tarahumara Indians, adding that the ritual objects have a wide distribution along the western coast of North America.

Among the Huicholes the god's eye is a benevolent instrument. It brings divine attention to the successful performance of specific tasks, as well as a general

Detail of Great Seal, from U.S. currency

blessing. Lumholtz writes:

> A symbolic object of deep interest is the god's eye (sikuli). It is made by interweaving a small cross of bamboo sticks with variously colored crewel or twine in the form of a square set diagonally, like an ace of diamonds. The idea is that the eye of the god may rest on the supplicant and keep him in health and life. (*Unknown Mexico*, Vol. 2, pp. 209-210)

As an example Lumholtz cites the case of a woman about to start a weaving project. She might attach a god's eye to a small piece of textile fabric as an offering to a deity. This would indicate a prayer had been made that the god would look after her and help her in carrying out her purpose. Or an eye might be attached to a small piece of embroidered cloth and thus express the prayer that the seamstress be successful in learning to embroider.

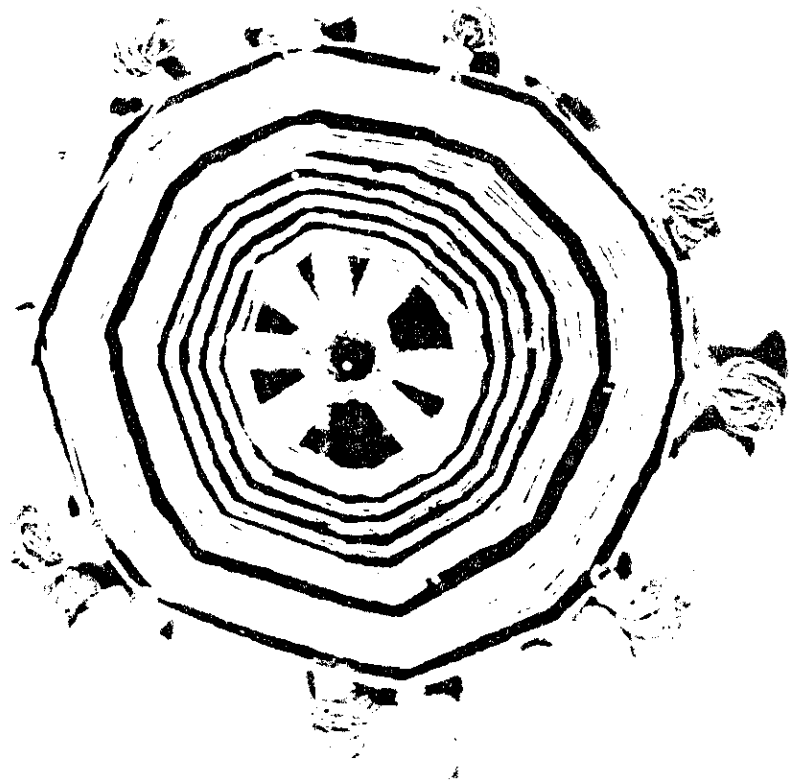
Zingg describes the October Ceremony of the First Fruits (also called the Feast of the Green Squashes), held especially for the children, who are dressed in their best finery:

> Around the little heads of children new, hand-woven ribbons are tied. Into these ribbons at each side of the head at least one shaman's plume and one "god-eye" is stuck. The plumes mark the children as engaged on sacred business, the "god-eye" serving as the special symbol of long life and good health for children.

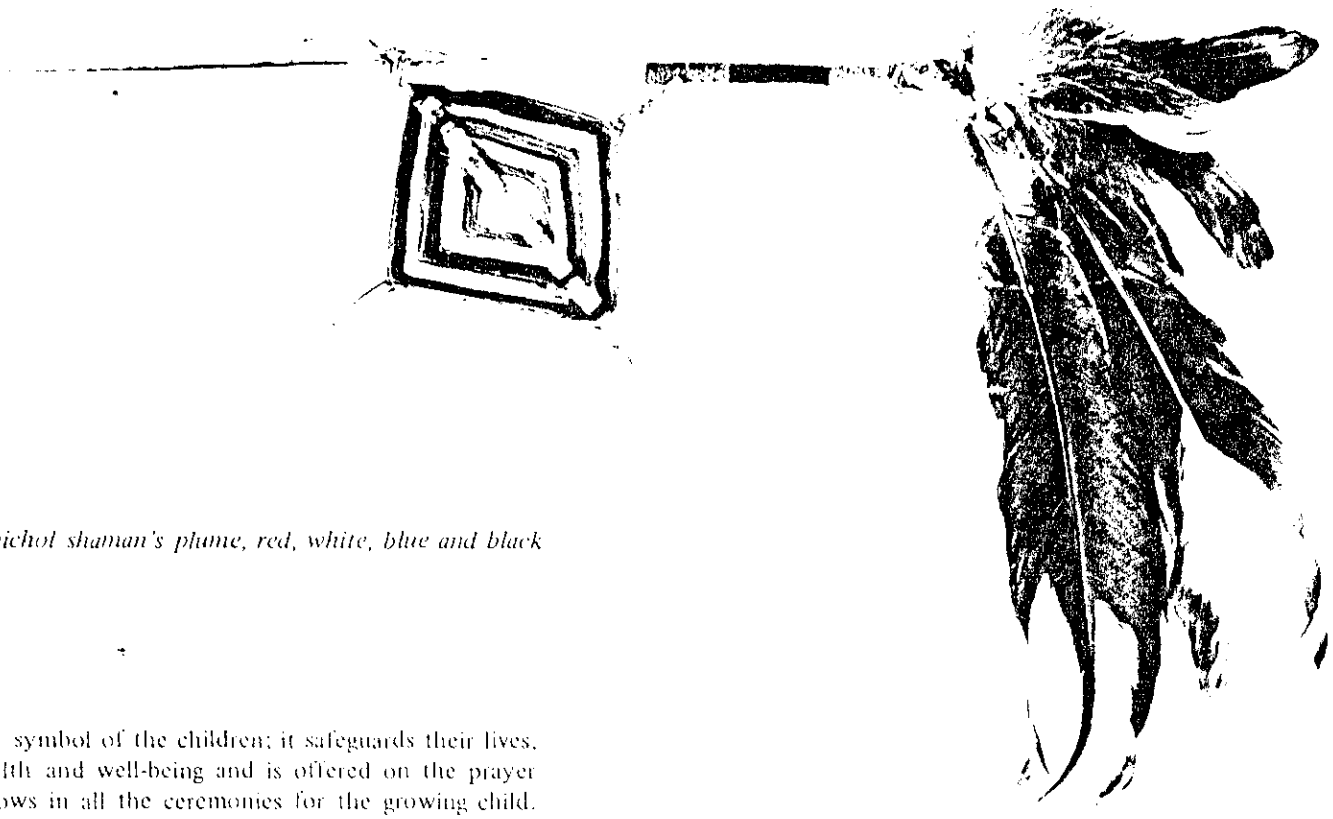
During the ceremony, the mystic relationship between the god's eyes, children and the green squashes is symbolically expressed on the altar by ojos which duplicate those on the heads of the children whom the shaman holds up to the view of the Sun-Father.

Zingg writes of the "complicated and beautiful symbolism" of objects referred to by Lumholtz as god-eyes and which the Huicholes call "tsikuli, the male squash blossom. This lovely little diamond shaped weaving over a cruciform stick can properly be described as a 'god-eye.'"

Zingg verified Lumholtz' statement from a Huichol informant that "the prayer expressed by this symbolic object is that the eye of the god may rest upon the supplicant." The god's eye is thus the spe-



Top: Eight-sided Huichol front shield (Nealika) *ojo, dark brown and white. Bottom: Cora Indian twelve-sided front shield ojo, red, white and brown with blue-glass center.*



Huichol shaman's plume, red, white, blue and black

cial symbol of the children; it safeguards their lives, health and well-being and is offered on the prayer arrows in all the ceremonies for the growing child.

These arrows are considered as a kind of messenger to the gods. A small eye is attached to the shaft and the arrow is then stuck in the roof of a house or placed in a special shrine. Or the father of a newborn baby might hang eyes on votive arrows and take them to the caves of the birth goddess where they would be offered in payment for sacred water taken from the cave and used in a special ritual.

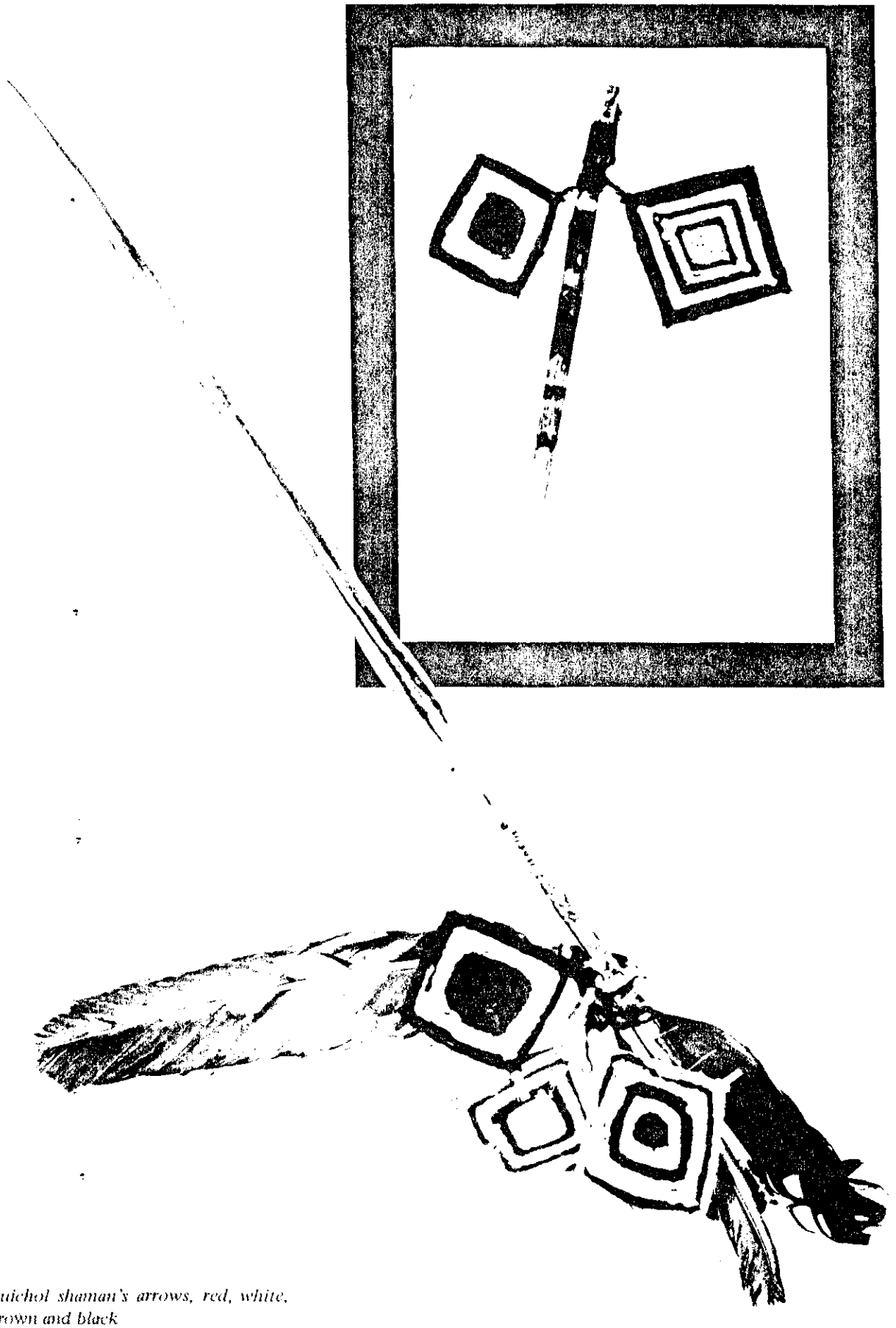
Among the Tarahumara Indians of north-central Mexico, Lumholtz says, the ojo was sometimes attached to a long bamboo stick which the shaman waved back and forth to ward off disease. The Tepehuanes used the ojo in the medicine lodge, suspended from the arms of a cross. The Cora used it as a prayer for health and life, but the efficacy of the plea was lost if the person for whom it was intended was not sitting next to the shaman who made it.

Prehistorically, Lumholtz reports the presence of ojos in Peruvian burials, where they were placed on the false heads of mummy bundles, to serve as eyes.

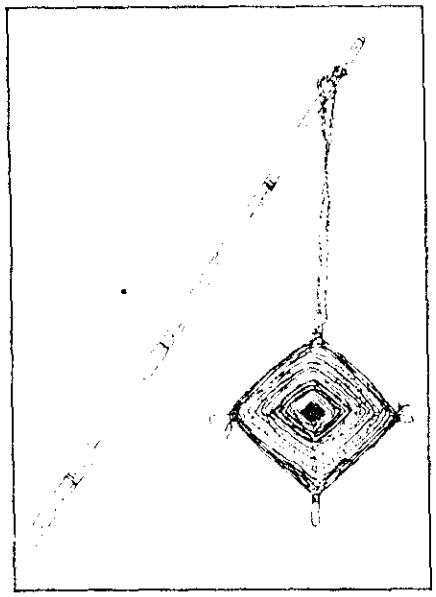
In 1919 the archaeologists Kidder and Guernsey recorded the presence of an ojo-like object among artifacts taken from an Anasazi cliff dwelling in northeastern Arizona, dating from 1150 to 1300 A.D. The ojo was about three inches across the points and made of plant fiber rather than thread or yarn.

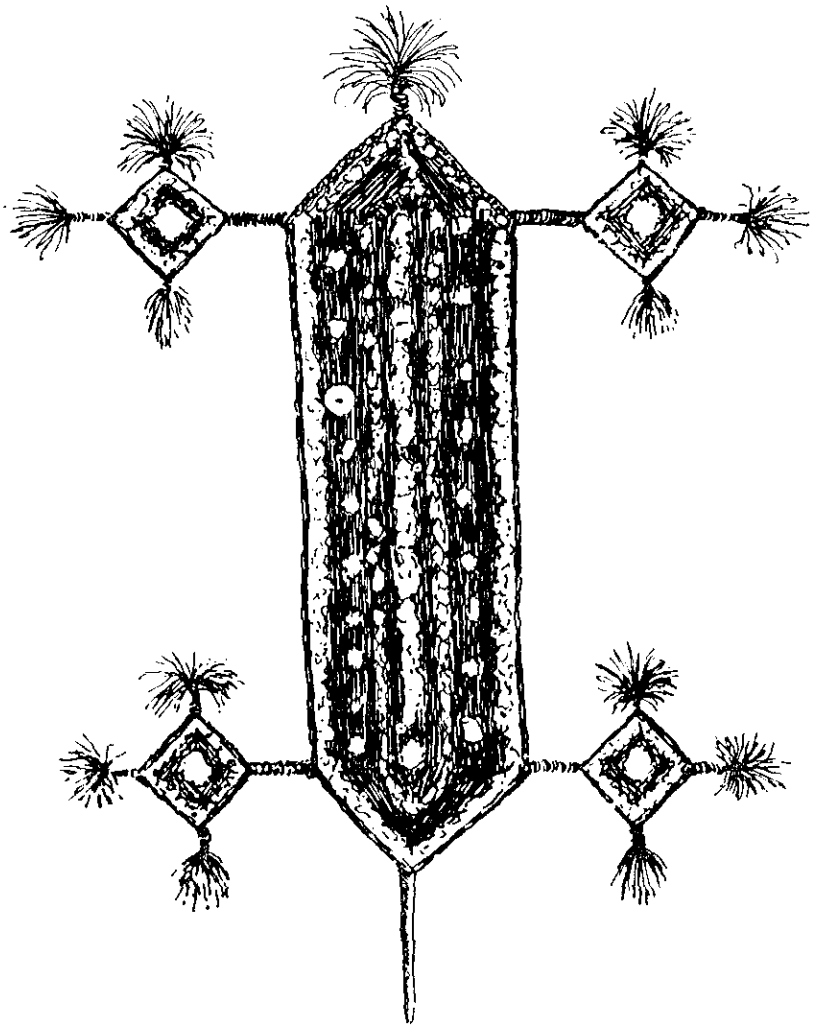
Almost identical objects were reported among the Navajo, illustrated in the Franciscan Fathers' *Ethnologic Dictionary of the Navajo Language* (page 495). These are described as owl bugaboos, which formerly were used to frighten misbehaving children into more tractable ways; if they didn't behave, the children were told, the owl would carry them away.

This is by no means a comprehensive survey of the god-eye in the Western Hemisphere, but it indicates that the ojo has been present in North and South America since prehistoric times. Its function in prehistory cannot be guessed at, but among surviving ethnic groups it has ranged from a disciplinary role with the Navajos to a benevolent child-symbol among the Huicholes and from there to a sometimes commercial, always decorative usage in the United States. But not, perhaps, purely decorative; no amount of embarrassed laughter can conceal that its owners consider the ojo "a good-luck charm" for the home and its occupants.



Huichol shaman's arrows, red, white, brown and black





Left: Tarahumara good-health charm (wishina *or* tey'ike). *Right: Australian totemic symbol*

Among certain tribes of aborigines in central and northern Australia, sacred objects are found which represent the totems of the clans performing a certain ceremony. These *waninga,* as they are called, consist of vertical supports with one or two transverse bars. (See illustration above) The twine, or winding material, may be made of human hair with white down attached to form definite patterns. These are widely distributed in central Australia, the Northern Territory, and the Kimberleys. They may be carried in the hand, set in the ground, or worn on the head.

In Ireland, square-shaped objects are called St. Brigid's Crosses. On St. Brigid's Eve, the last day of January, the children gather rushes, and the family gets together and makes crosses of various patterns. These are hung over doors and beds, to bring good luck, or to protect the house and livestock from harm. (See illustration on next page)

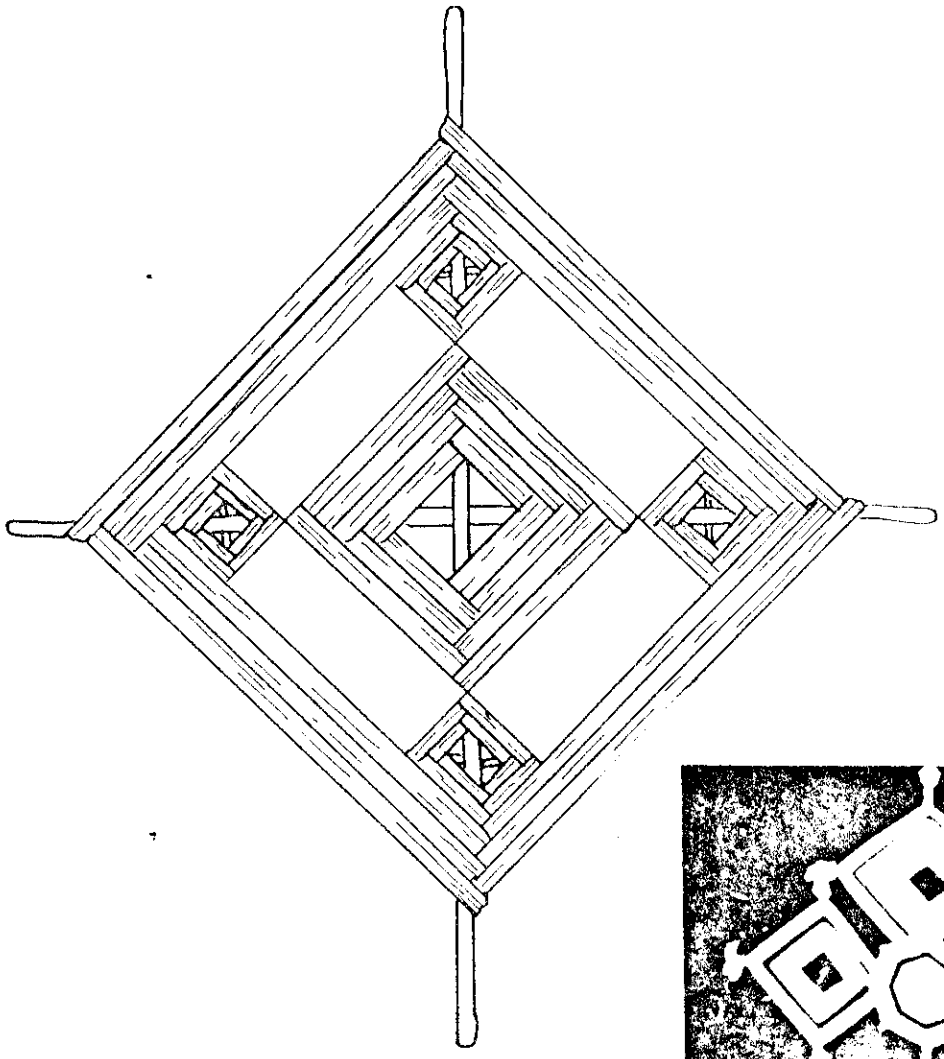
In Scandinavia, a hanging "crown," used as a Christmas decoration, is made of a number of little squares which have been woven of straw. Sometimes they are made in the more common four-sided shape; at other times they are made into a six-sided form by using three sticks in place of two for the foundation.

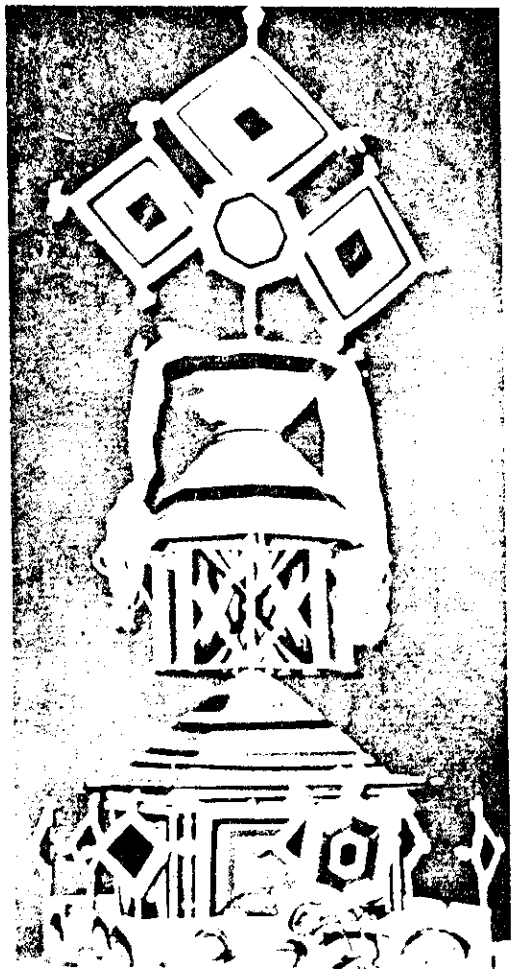
In Tibet, the yarn-stick figures form a part of a complicated device used as a ghost trap, or mDos, according to the Field Museum of Natural History.

The trap in the photograph is 185 cm high. In pre-communist times it was used in curing illnesses which were "believed to be caused by an errant unhappy ghost which had entered the patient's body." A lama or monk was called upon to perform a ritual to entice the ghost or spirit to leave its abode and enter the trap, which was then carried to a crossroad and abandoned. Hopefully, the ghost was by then so entangled that it was unable to find its way back to the sick person. When the mDos was placed at the crossroad, small quantities of at least five kinds of food—barley, *tsamba,* tea, butter and dried meat—were left on the ground within the snare.

The traps could be assembled only by wizards, monks or lamas, who followed directions found in a special book of instructions.

From this same part of the world come other reports of these yarn-stick figures or thread crosses, as they also are called. One of these accounts contains numerous photographs of the crosses in actual use.





Top: St. Brigid's cross, Ireland. Bottom: Tibetan ghost trap (Photo courtesy Field Museum of Natural History)

This is "Das Fadenkreuz, Sein Zweck Und Seine Bedeutung (The Thread-cross, Its Purpose and Its Meaning)" by Hans E. Kauffmann which appeared in *Ethnologica,* a German publication.

In Thailand the yarn-and-stick thread crosses are placed on graves to serve as ladders which help the dead reach heaven. As is shown in the drawing, sometimes a very elaborate arrangement of 19 crosses is suspended from a pole which is then placed on the grave. The crosses (as they would look if laid out on a flat surface) are attached to each other in such a way that they form a free-hanging pattern when hung from a bamboo pole. This is accomplished by using several different sizes of crosses hung from the center cross, which is larger than the others.

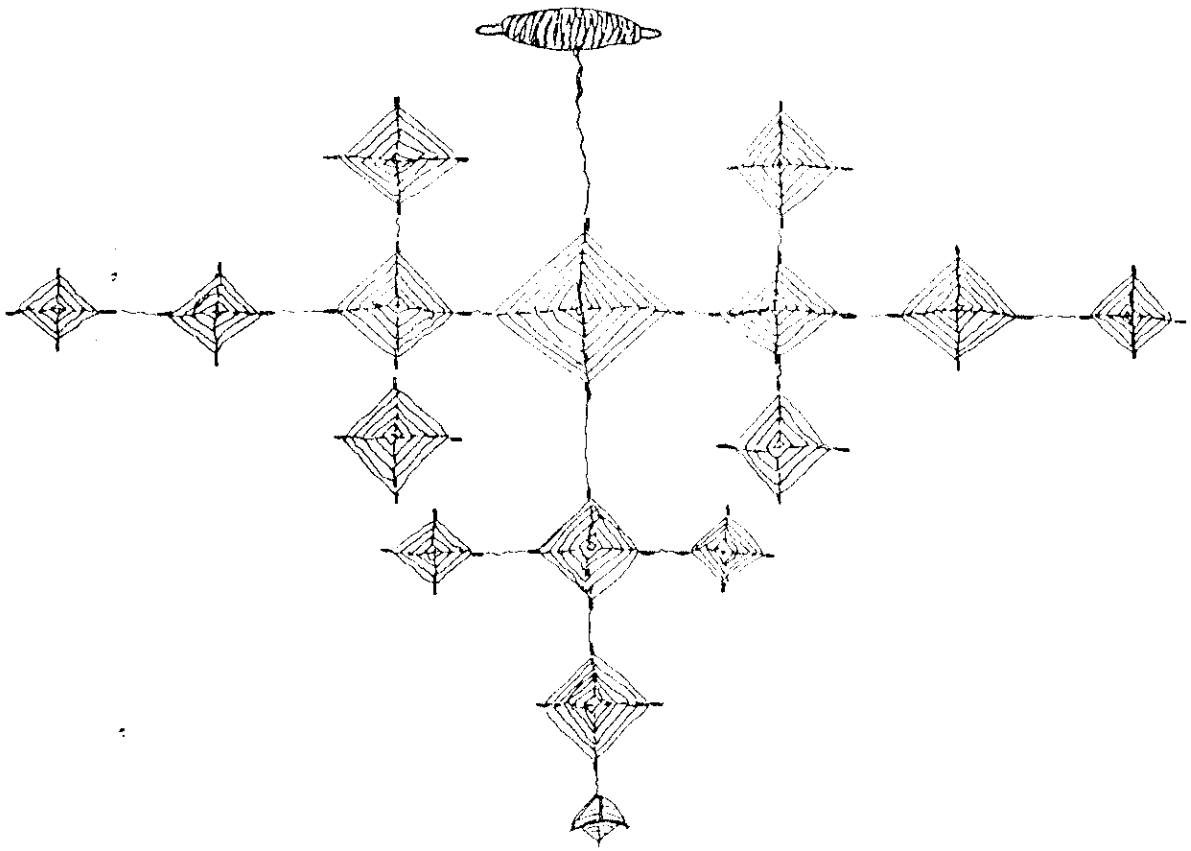
In Laos, thread-cross cubes are formed by using six crosses, each about three inches in size, tied together at the corners. These are hung on ghost altars placed on graves.

In Burma, it is customary for the relatives of the dead to build a small death house for the soul, thus making it immortal. Memorial posts are decorated with thread crosses, and horizontal bamboo rings in diminishing sizes are hung with these crosses which must be made with unbroken lengths of thread.

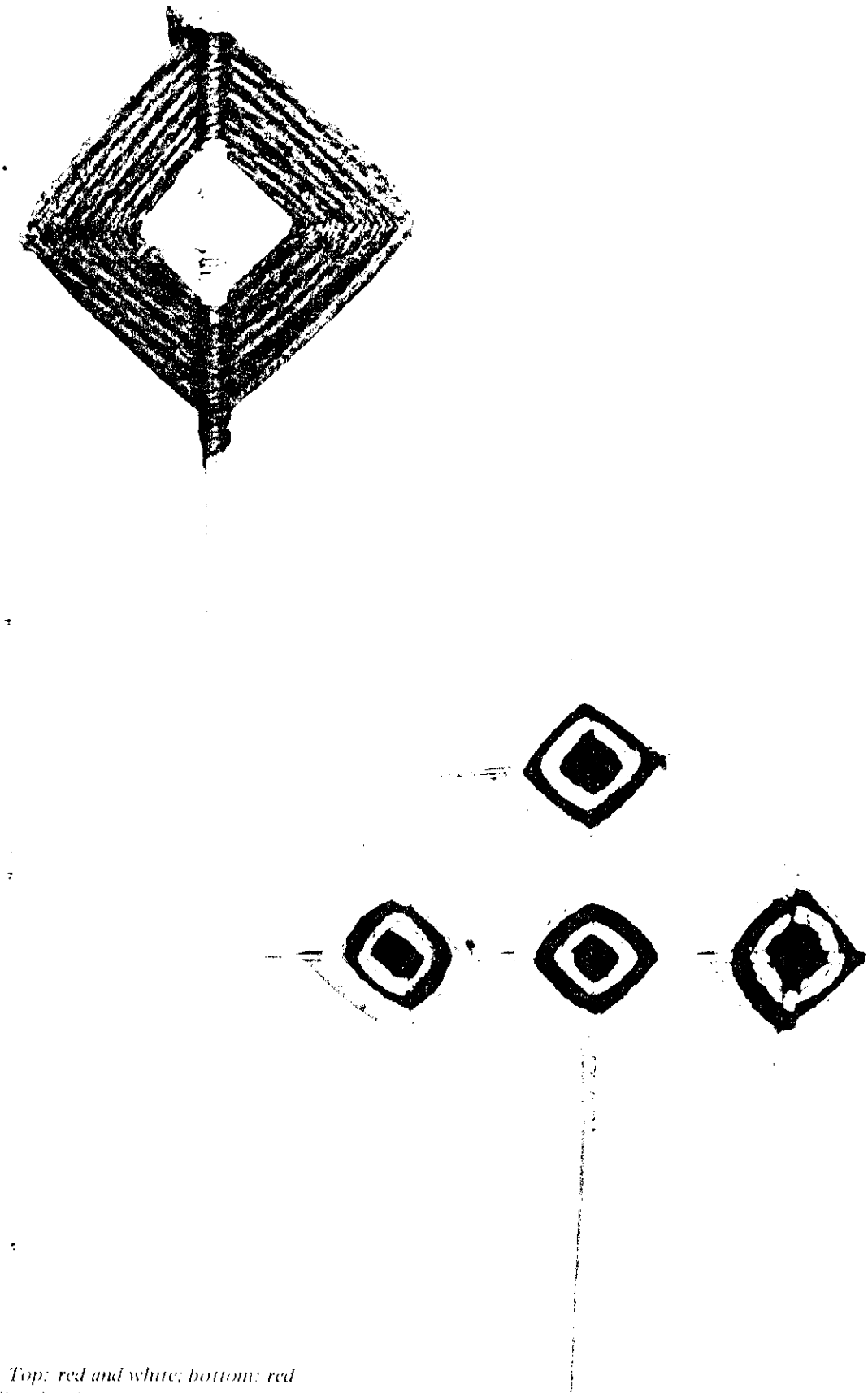
Also in Laos, Buddhist spinning flags or banners are made by hanging twenty or so thread crosses vertically on a pole, each thread cross slightly smaller than the one above it.

To the serious researcher the present study raises far more questions than it answers. It is intriguing that such remarkably similar symbolic objects appear in so many cultures so widely separated in space and time. To those who believe that, generally, a thing is invented only once and is spread by people-to-people encounters, the ojo bespeaks a vast and ancient global communication. To those who think that if something can be invented once it can be invented again, the god's eye suggests itself as being one of the most basic of archetypal symbols.

In any event, the ojo de dios represents a ceremonial object which originated unknown centuries ago and which has become secularized in its adoption by a new and highly sophisticated culture.



Thai thread crosses



Huichol ojos. Top: red and white; bottom: red and blue (aniline dyes)

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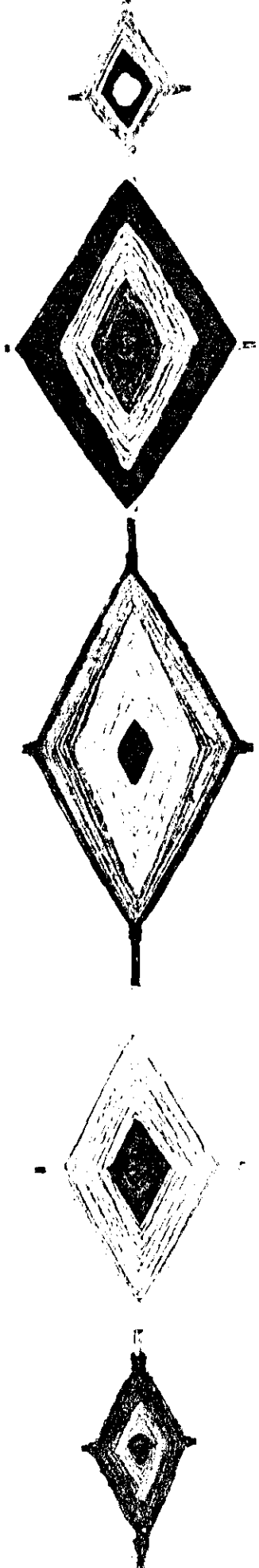
Contemporary ojo by L. Walker, Taos (Courtesy Artes Shop)



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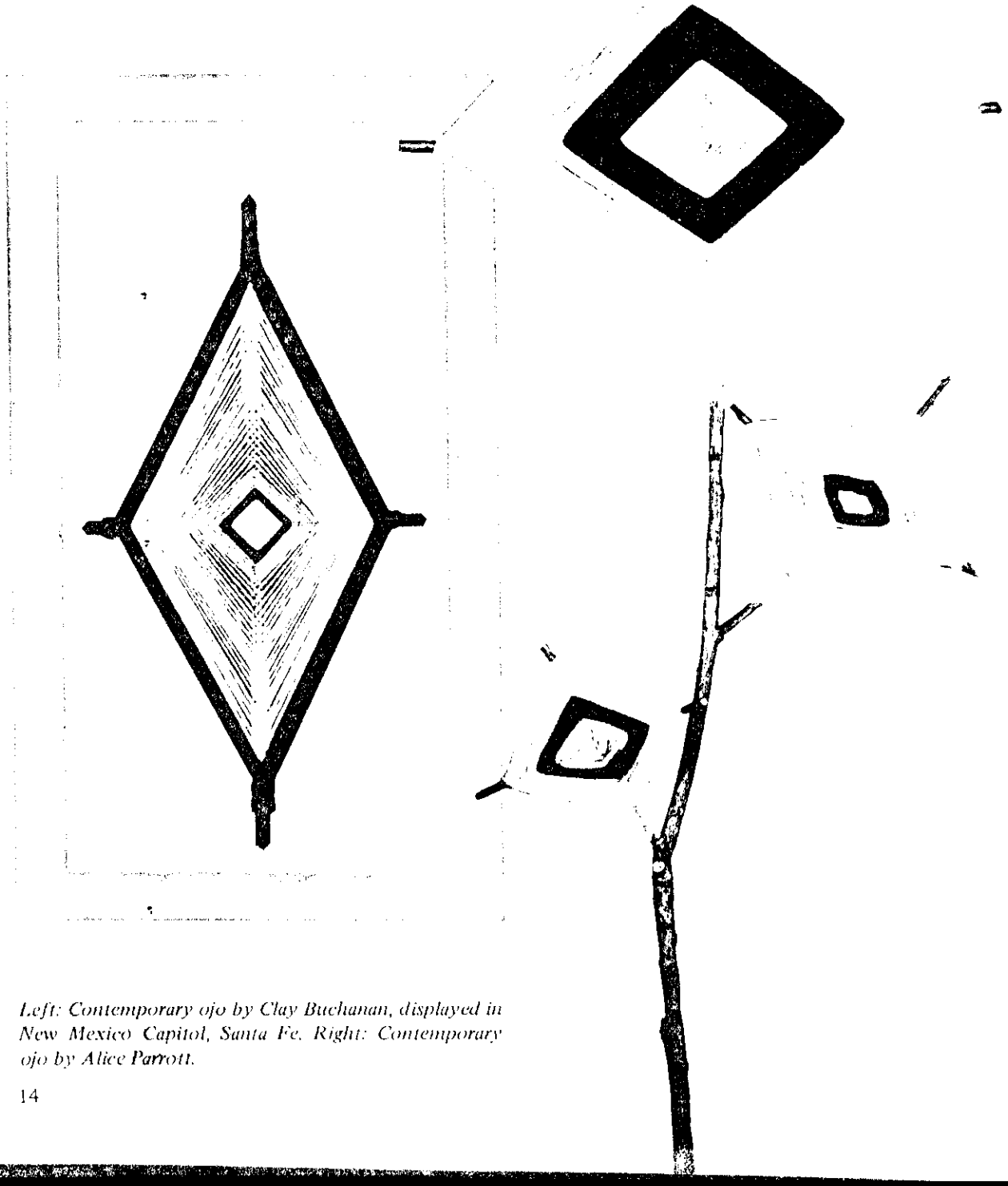


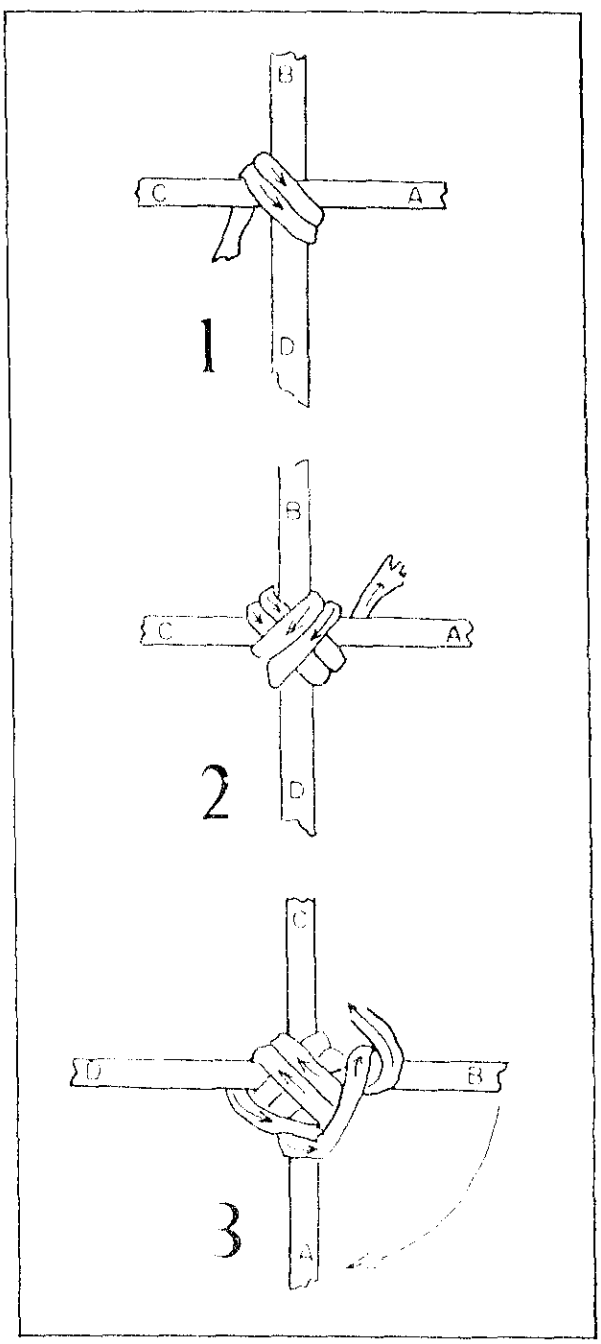
Left: Contemporary ojo by Clay Buchanan, displayed in New Mexico Capitol, Santa Fe. Right: Contemporary ojo by Alice Parrott.

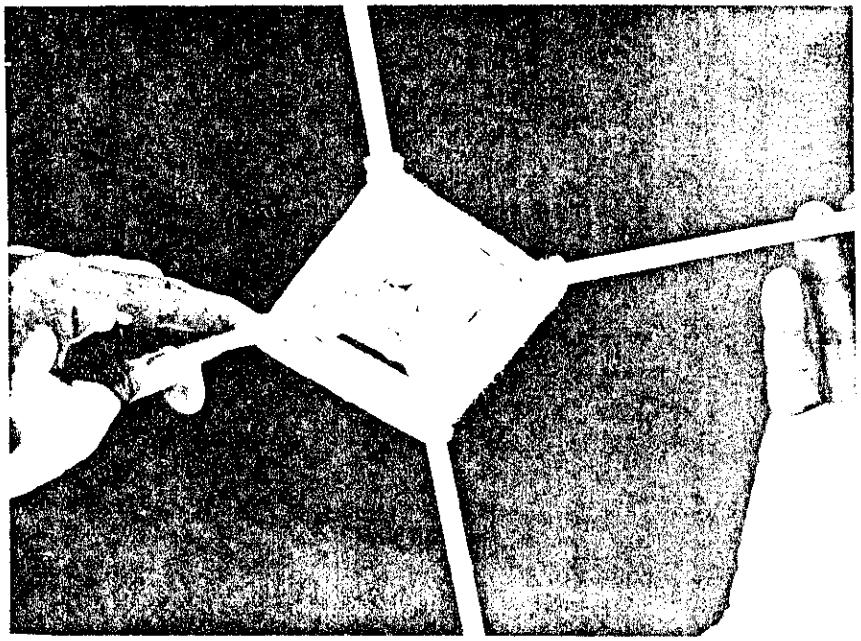
How to make an Ojo

By Evelyn Ely, with Illustrations by Phyllis Hughes

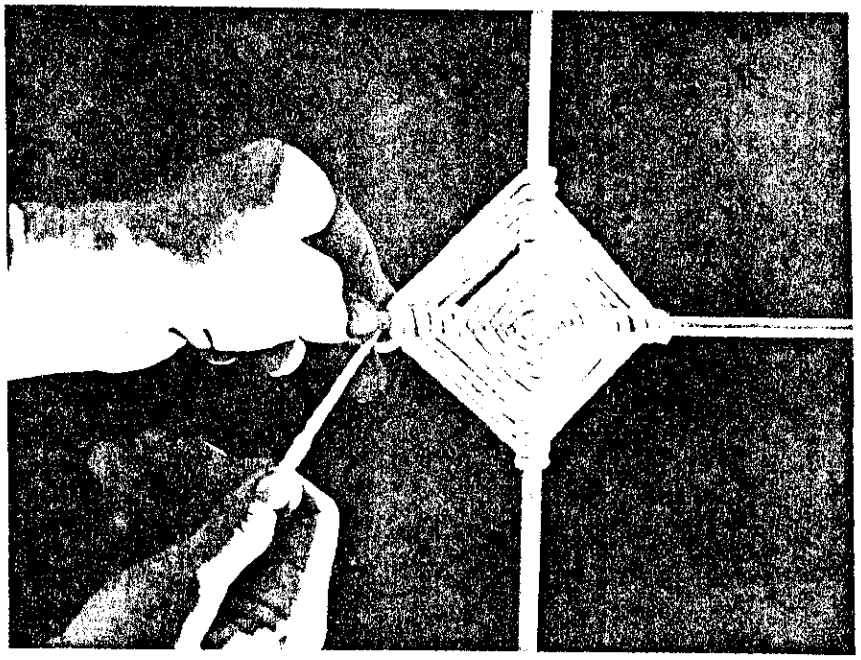
The basic technique used in making an ojo is quite simple, and there are no rules regarding size, color or shape.

Winding materials may be yarn of different weights and textures, twine or natural fibers. The two cross-members upon which the winding is done may be dowels, square sticks, bamboo or reed sticks, twigs or cruciform branches. If thick heavy sticks are used it is helpful to cut a groove in one or both sticks where they cross and glue them together there. Smaller sticks may be fastened together, crossed, by winding with the yarn twice, starting from the back, left over right (A) then right over left (C) to form a double X (Diagram I).





The hands of craftsman Betty Toulouse demonstrate winding of three-dimensional ojo. (See Variation 1 in text)



As shown in Diagram 2, wind yarn completely around A. Turn frame one quarter-turn clockwise and wind over *top* of arm and around B; again turn frame one quarter-turn clockwise and over and around C; turn frame as before and wind over and around D. Continue until ojo is complete.

If other colors are to be introduced, tuck tip of second color of yarn at back of A, wind clockwise once around frame as before, winding in end of first yarn at back as A is reached again.

Two interesting variations may be obtained by using different procedures in the winding.

(1) The winding is done in the usual manner but the frame is turned over after several rounds and the winding continued. If this procedure is repeated several times, a three-dimensional appearance will result.

(2) For an ojo with a smooth appearance on both sides, wind sticks A,B,C, and D as in Diagram 2. Then turn the frame over and wind the four sticks in sequence. Turn the frame, and wind the four sticks in sequence. Continue until ojo is finished.

In order to make a diamond-shaped ojo, use one long and one short stick tied together at the center point. Use any of the winding procedures described above, but each time one of the long arms is reached, it should be wrapped twice before proceding to the short arm.

Ojos may be made with as many different colors as desired. The easiest way to change from one color to another is to tie the new color to the previous one, keeping the knot on the back side.

An eight-sided ojo may be made by using four sticks as in photo below. This is a kind used in other types of Huichol symbolic objects. Although more complicated to make, it is stunning when finished.

The ojo has many decorative possibilities and its use is limited only by the imagination of the craftsman.

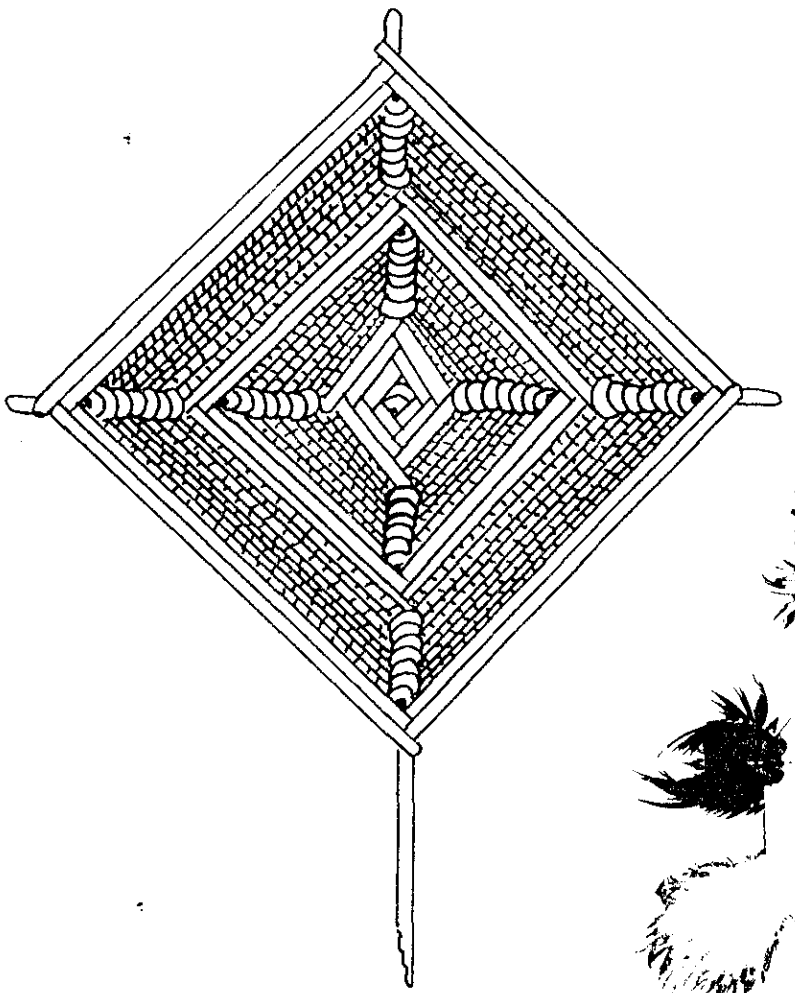
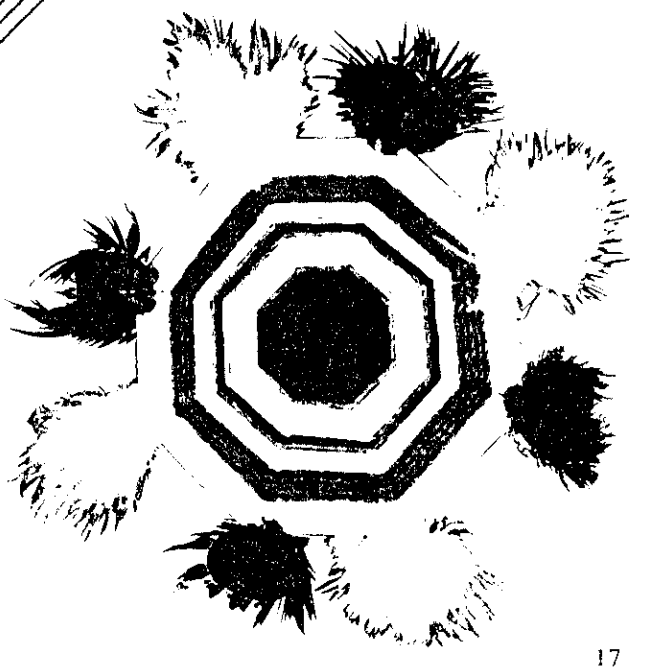
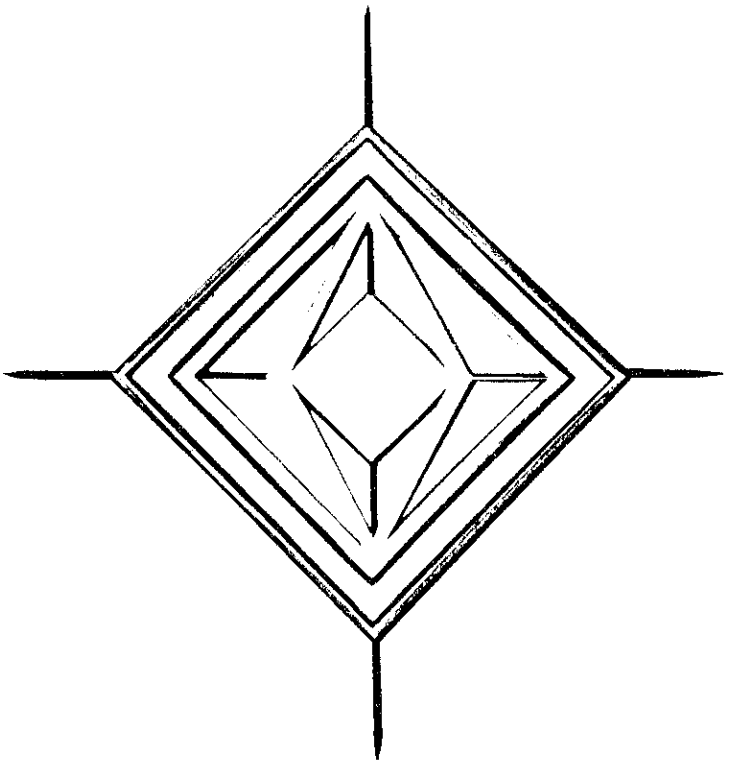
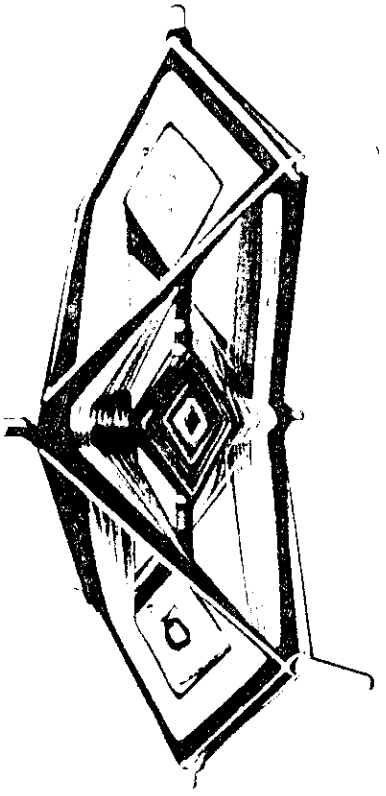


Illustration depicts two-color, three-dimensional arrangement; photo is of an octagonal feathered ojo by Vigils of Tesuque Pueblo





Top: Blue and white ojo with orange border by Mary Bushner, displayed in New Mexico Capitol. Bottom left: Multi-faceted contemporary ojo from Chimayo, New Mexico. Bottom right: Ojo-styled earring of gold wire. (Courtesy Chameleon Shop)



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