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The San Pedro Cactus in Peruvian Folk Healing *

From: *Flesh of the gods. The Ritual Use of Hallucinogens*, edited by Peter T. Furst. Praeger Publishers, NY, 1972.

Only recently have social scientists and other students of human behavior turned their attention in any depth to the widespread phenomenon of folk therapy with hallucinogens in northern Peru. Gillin (1945) was the first investigator to observe and record the role of the hallucinogenic cactus known as San Pedro (*Trichocereus pachanoi*), which contains mescaline as its active ingredient. His work was followed by that of Gutierrez-Noriega and Cruz Sanchez in the late 1940's, and a decade later by that of the French ethnobotanist Friedberg (1959, 1960, 1963), who traveled extensively through the north classifying plants and describing folk medicine. It was not until 1967, however, that scholars began to concentrate seriously on *curanderismo* (or folk healing) and its function in contemporary Peruvian society, especially among the urban and rural poor. In that year a team of investigators, including social psychiatrists and anthropologists, converged on the town of Salas, reputed to be the capital of north coastal healers, to study folk healing from a variety of points of view. As a result there is a growing body of literature † on a widespread system of therapy that represents a blend of prehispanic Indian, Western, Eastern, and idiosyncratic beliefs and techniques in which traditional hallucinogens, especially San Pedro,

* Field work on which this paper is based was made possible through a President's Fellowship from the University of California at Los Angeles. The author also expresses his appreciation to Christopher Donnan and William A. Lessa for their guidance and encouragement throughout the project, and to Clement W. Meighan for his support. Most of all, he owes a debt of gratitude to the curandero Gálvaez, who so generously shared his knowledge and wisdom, and to Gálvaez' family, whose hospitality was boundless.

† See, among others, Gutierrez-Noriega and Cruz Sanchez (1947), Cruz Sanchez (1948a, 1948b), Gutierrez-Noriega (1950), Friedberg (1959, 1963, 1964), Chiappe (1968), Dragunsky (1968), Dobkin (1968, 1969a, 1969b, 1969c, 1970), Schultes (1967), and Rodriguez Suy Suy (1970).



Fig. 21. A ceramic vessel of the Chavín culture (1200–600 B.C.) depicting a jaguar in close association with columnar cactus. This suggests that the hallucinogen *San Pedro* played an important ritual and magical role in northern Peru at least 3,000 years ago. Coll. Munson-Williams Proctor Institute, Utica, N.Y. (Photo by André Emmerich.)

play a catalytic role. Although they are extralegal, these hallucinogens clearly have a considerable following among the local population.

The ritual and symbolic importance in northern Peru of the hallucinogenic San Pedro (or a columnar cactus closely related to it) has recently been demonstrated to date back at least three thousand years, on the basis of its association with jaguars and spirit beings on ceremonial pottery and painted textiles of the Chavín horizon (Furst, 1971b). As Furst has noted, the identification of *Trichocereus pachanoi* or a related species on ritual burial ceramics and weavings of the Chavín period makes this the second hallucinogen for which we have very ancient evidence, the first being snuff. For the latter, there is even earlier archaeological proof in the form of snuffing paraphernalia almost four thousand years old, from the site of Huaca Prieta on the Peruvian coast.

My own interest in folk healing with hallucinogens came about through exposure to these practices during archaeological exploration work conducted in Peru from 1961 to 1966. It was discovered that, for trips considered hazardous, the only way to secure the services of guides and porters was to hire a *curandero*, or folk healer,* to accompany the expedition. In 1965, while cooperating with a Peruvian archaeological restoration committee working on the ruins of Chan Chan, near Trujillo, I made the acquaintance of a local curandero who was the artist in charge of adobe frieze reconstruction. He extended several invitations to participate in his curing sessions, but a busy work schedule and frequent absences from Trujillo for archaeological reconnaissance in the Andes prevented me from accepting his offer before leaving Peru in 1967. It was not until the summer of 1970 that a grant from UCLA made it possible for me to return to Peru and study the practices of this curandero in some depth. This paper is the result of an exploratory study undertaken to familiarize myself with the curandero's application of his art and to "gain membership" to the curandero community by following the approach of Slotkin (1955-56) and Castaneda (1969).†

As will soon be apparent, contemporary folk-healing practices in northern Peru are syncretic in nature, combining many Christian elements with older beliefs surviving from pre-European times. In this respect they strongly resemble the sacred mushroom cult as it is practiced today in Oaxaca, Mexico (see Wasson, pp. 185-200, below). Nevertheless,

* The English term hardly begins to convey the pervasive role that these modern shamans play in their communities as spiritual mentors and guardians of traditional lore—functions that include, but are not restricted to, medical therapy.

† Slotkin, who studied the peyote cult as practiced within the Native American (Indian) Church as an anthropologist, eventually became a full-fledged member of that Church. Castaneda apprenticed himself to a "man of knowledge" (Castaneda calls him a sorcerer) of Yaqui Indian origin while doing field work for his doctoral degree in anthropology. His apprenticeship continued for several years and included the use of various hallucinogenic plants employed by his teacher, don Juan.

it is correct to say that the core of the folk-healing system in Peru (as in Mexico) is shamanistic, and that the curandero himself is more of a shaman, in the traditional meaning of that term, than anything else—the various modern or folk-Catholic elements of contemporary curanderismo notwithstanding. The shamanistic component is especially apparent in the attitude toward, and use of, the hallucinogenic cactus. San Pedro is the catalyst that activates all the complex forces at work in a folk-healing session, especially the visionary and divinatory powers of the curandero himself. What the curer has to say about this phenomenon and his relationship to San Pedro and other magical plants is reminiscent of what one reads about shamans and peyote, mushrooms, yajé, and other psychotomimetics.* On the other hand, the contrast between my experiences with San Pedro and those of the indigenous curandero should demonstrate that much more than the psychotropic cactus itself is at work in "learning to see," which is the goal of every folk healer. To "see," to attain vision beyond what we would call the "real" world, requires hard work, lengthy training, and, most important, a very special kind of psychological predisposition combined with cultural "conditioning."

THE CURER GÁLVAEZ

My mentor-to-be, whom I shall call Gálvaez,† was born forty-one years ago in Trujillo, where his parents had settled after migrating to the coast from the Andean highlands. Much of his life history is unique, and yet in many ways he is typical of north Peruvian folk healers, for they are all extraordinary individuals. His father was a skilled artisan, adept in many trades, especially shoemaking. Gálvaez worked from an early age to help support the family; at sixteen he enrolled in religious studies in the hope of becoming a priest, but he soon became disillusioned. For a time he intended to study medicine; but this proved unfeasible. Nevertheless, some of what he learned in those early years stayed with him for the rest of his life and entered into his later practice of curanderismo. He was gifted in the fine arts, especially sculpture and ceramics, and for a year studied at the School of Fine Arts in Lima, using money he had earned as a bricklayer to support himself in the

* It is interesting to note that the curandero with whom I worked is himself well aware of the antiquity of the San Pedro cactus in Peruvian ritual. He knew, for example, that the hallucinogenic cactus is depicted on burial ceramics of the Mochica culture, dating back some 1500 years and more, an identification also made by Friedberg (1963).

† Since this was written, I returned to Peru (in the summer of 1971) for another season's research with the same curandero. By then his confidence in me had progressed to the point of permitting me to use his real name, Eduardo Calderón Palomino, in my published reports. He also agreed to accept me as full-fledged assistant in his curing rituals.

capital. He was married for the first time at age twenty, but the marriage soon dissolved, and his wife kept their infant daughter. Gálvaez then turned to fishing as a livelihood. At twenty-three he met his present companion, the daughter of a fisherman, herself a skilled potter. As of August, 1970, they had nine children—four girls and five boys.

At the time of his second marriage, the Peruvian fishing industry was just beginning to expand, and Gálvaez and his wife began to move to Chimbote, south of Trujillo, each fishing season. Soon he was foreman of a tuna clipper crew. In the off-season he returned to Trujillo, where he worked as a stevedore and earned extra money by making wood-carvings and ceramics on the side. In 1962 a hospital ship put into port for a year, and Gálvaez worked almost full time copying pre-Columbian ceramics for the vessel's crew and staff. Eventually he bought his own small fishing boat and began fishing near Trujillo, where he had first learned his trade. Here he became an innovator, introducing modern fishing methods for the first time to the local fishermen. Then, at age thirty-five, fortune turned against him, and he lost everything. However, not long after he was appointed artist in charge of restoring the famous adobe friezes at Chan Chan, political and economic center of the pre-Inca kingdom of Chimor. He held this job until 1969, when restoration work was terminated, and during this period he also produced some 2000 ceramic copies of ancient pottery vessels for sale to tourists. Apart from this close association with the remote Indian past and the Indian origins of his parents in the Peruvian highlands, there was obviously nothing very Indian about Gálvaez' lifeway—on the contrary, he was a typical Mestizo, Spanish-speaking, literate, Catholic in religion, apparently with only the most tenuous ties to native Indian culture.

However, throughout his long career in a variety of jobs, Gálvaez the artist and family man was also evolving as Gálvaez the curandero. His early interest in the priesthood had been an attempt to realize what he regarded as a "calling to serve humanity." He experienced dreams urging him to prepare himself and felt a deep and idealistic yearning to help alleviate human suffering. His attempt toward the priesthood was a disappointment, and medicine was out of reach. Then, aged only twenty-two, he suddenly fell ill with a mysterious ailment that failed to yield to modern medical treatment. Both of his grandfathers had been curanderos in the highlands, and so he decided to see if a folk healer might help where the doctors had failed. He underwent treatment and was cured. He did not understand what had happened but felt an urge to learn.*

* Gálvaez' experience is obviously akin to "sickness vocation," a common phenomenon in shamanism, in which the future shaman feels himself "called" through a

His second wife had an uncle who was noted as a curandero working with hallucinogens and a *mesa* (literally table, a kind of altar containing numerous standardized and idiosyncratic "power objects"). At twenty-four Gálvaez began his apprenticeship under this relative. Fishing in Chimbote kept him from entering as deeply into his vocation as he wished, but between voyages he gained sufficient experience to serve as *rastreador* (literally "tracker," one who helps the curandero "see" during the curing session). In Chimbote he was also exposed to curanderos who specialized in "raising" the luck of fishing crews.

When he remained in Trujillo he had enough time to develop his powers to the point where, during one momentous session, he suddenly felt that the "Christ of the mesa" had chosen him to effect a part of the curing ritual. After that session Gálvaez decided that he had outgrown his teacher. But he did not yet feel ready to establish his own mesa. Instead he went north to work with famous curanderos in Chiclayo, Motupe, and Ferreñafe. When he returned, at age twenty-eight, he was still hesitant to practice on his own, although he had had four years of training. Then a cousin of his fell seriously ill. The girl's father, Gálvaez' uncle, was in financial difficulties and could not afford doctor bills. He suspected that his daughter was suffering from *daño*, witchcraft, and implored Gálvaez to take her case. Despite his doubts, Gálvaez decided to try. In two sessions he uncovered the cause and effected a cure using the hallucinogenic San Pedro cactus. Thus his career as a curandero working with his own mesa was launched. In gratitude to God, Gálvaez made a vow never to abuse his powers and to work only for good in the service of humanity. This, then, was the man who had agreed to become my teacher.

SAN PEDRO

San Pedro, a smooth, relatively thin, often spineless, columnar cactus of the *Cereus* family, was first described and classified as *Trichocereus pachanoi* by Britton and Rose (1920), who gave the area of its distribution as Andean Ecuador, where it is also called *agua-colla*, *giganton*, and *San Pedrillo*. How and why it came to be called "Saint Peter" was not stated. Backeberg (1959) agreed with the Britton and Rose classification but expanded the distribution area to include northern Peru and Bolivia. Friedberg (1959) submitted a voucher specimen to Poisson (1960), of the Faculty of Pharmacy at Paris, and Poisson identified mescaline (1.2 grams per kilo of fresh material) as the active alkaloid in *T. pachanoi*. The presence of mescaline was verified by

serious illness that fails to respond to normal treatment and requires supernatural intervention.—Ed.

Gonzalez Huerta (1960) and also by Turner and Heyman (1961), although there was some confusion of the relevant species in the latter report. There may be alkaloids other than mescaline in San Pedro, but this will have to be determined by future pharmacological studies.

Britton and Rose reported San Pedro growing at altitudes ranging from 2000 to 3000 meters above sea level. However, I found San Pedro growing at an altitude only 24 meters above sea level in a suburb of Trujillo. The presence of San Pedro in other areas near the city was also confirmed to me by Michael Mosely of Harvard University's Moche-Chan Chan Project. (It should be noted that no voucher specimens were collected and that the identification of the cactus was not made by trained botanists.)

According to Gálvaez there are several types of San Pedro, distinguished by the number of longitudinal ribs. The kind most often used by curanderos has seven ribs. Four-ribbed cacti are very rare and are considered to have special curative properties. The varieties found in the Andean highlands are said to be the most potent, whatever the number of ribs, because of the higher mineral content of the soil.

The preparation of San Pedro for use in the folk-healing session is a very simple process. At noon on the day of the session, four short cacti (the thinnest cacti are believed to make the best brew) are sliced like loaves of bread, placed in a five-gallon can of water, and boiled for seven hours. For most cases brought to the folk healer, nothing is added to the boiled San Pedro infusion. However, in cases of illness caused by a sorcerer's magic concoction, such as powdered bones, cemetery dust, or dust from archaeological ruins, certain botanically unidentified plants, known as *hornamo blanco*, *hornamo amarillo*, *hornamo morado*, *hornamo cuti*, *hornamo caballo*, and *condor purga*, are boiled separately for addition to the portions of San Pedro served to the patient. Also, a separate purgative brew made from another unidentified plant (*condorillo* or *yerba de la justicia* or *mejorana*) is prepared to be taken after San Pedro and the *hornamos* to induce vomiting. Finally, a portion of the San Pedro infusion is set aside to be added to the ingredients mixed to produce *tabaco*, a liquid prepared from tobacco and other ingredients and imbibed via the nostrils during the curing ceremony.

Many curanderos in the Chiclayo area add *Floripondio* or *Floripondium* (*Datura arborea*)—one of the numerous *mishas*, or *Daturas*—to San Pedro, but Gálvaez does not. He was initiated by healers who used these potent plants and is aware of their toxic properties and adverse effects on many patients. He does not feel that such drastic shock therapy is necessary to alleviate the ailments of those seeking his services.

Gálvaez described San Pedro as follows:

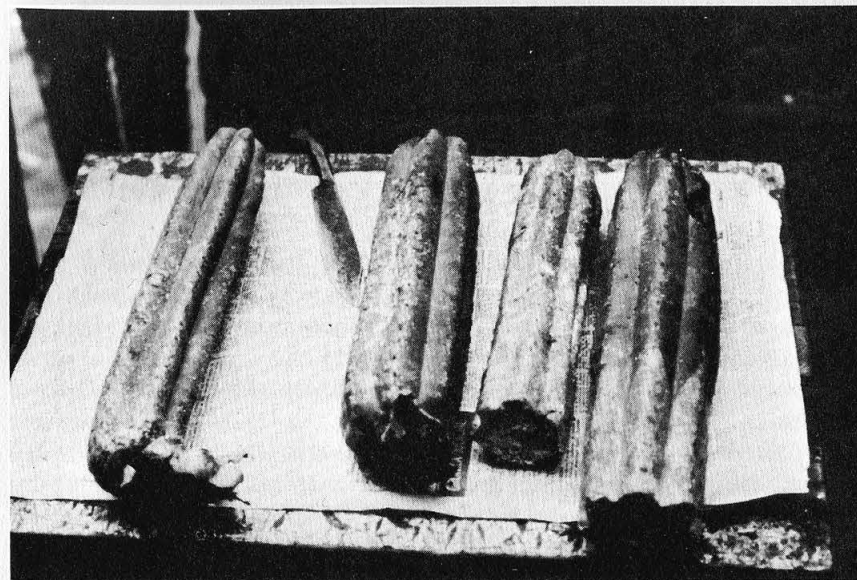


Fig. 22. Sections of *San Pedro* ready for cutting and boiling in the preparation of the hallucinogenic potion used in curing.

San Pedro, *Huando Hermoso*, *Cardo*, *Huachuma* [are] various names applied to this cactus. . . . It is medicinal. It is applied, for example, to cutaneous infections. It is diuretic.* It is utilized in general for cases of healing and witchcraft. . . . It is used . . . for both [types of] magic—white and black. . . . It is always recommended that after taking San Pedro one must follow a diet: not eat any food that contains hot peppers, salt, animal fat or grease, or anything that "entangles," for example, foods that grow on climbing vines, such as beans, peas, lentils, etc. . . . It has been represented in archaeological ceramics, possibly to represent its power, its application, its use. . . . San Pedro has a special symbolism in curanderismo, for a reason: San Pedro is always in tune with ("accounted" with) the saints, with the powers of animals, of strong personages or beings, of serious beings, of beings that have supernatural power. . . . The symbolism of San Pedro is to locate in all the regions of the territory the elemental thought and potentiality of man.

Another interesting power claimed for San Pedro is the protection of houses:

* The terminology used here is the result of his assimilation of modern medical knowledge through correspondence courses and reading.

It cares for the house . . . as if it were a dog. It is accounted for [in the curanderismo traditions], it is in tune [with the curandero's own powers and with his other magical artifacts and herbs], and it is raised* with *tabaco* in the proper manner. Then it cares for the house. It serves as guardian. In the night it appears to strangers who want to enter as a man in white, wearing a hat. Or else it whistles. It whistles with a peculiar sound so that anyone who enters who is not of the household . . . comes out at top speed, like a bullet.

San Pedro is only one—thought to be the principal one—of a great number of “magic” plants. These plants—some of which are medicinal as well as magical—are carefully distinguished from the overwhelming number of purely medicinal plants known to the curandero. The great majority of magical plants are herbs collected on the hillsides of sacred lagoons in the Andes at altitudes of 12,000 to 13,000 feet above sea level. There are several areas in the northern highlands where such lagoons are found, but the most important, called collectively Las Huaringas, are found above the town of Huancabamba near the border between Peru and Ecuador. Many curanderos make periodic pilgrimages to Huancabamba to collect these herbs or have friends who do this for them. The herbs are then placed in the curandero's *seguro*, a special glass jar, where they are kept in a state of preservation by several perfumes accompanying them. The *seguro* is one of the focal points of the curandero's attention during the curing division of a session. According to Gálvaez, these plants, once activated by the ceremonial part of a session and by the drinking of San Pedro, “talk” to him when he is concentrating on the *seguro*. Some merely indicate representative symbols of the curing art and the causes of a patient's ailment during diagnosis, while others, which have both symbolic and medicinal value, indicate what herb or herbs should be used in the cure during treatment. Most of these plants can be purchased at the herb stands in the markets of the coastal towns and cities of Peru.

This is how Gálvaez explains the action of the magic plants and their relation to San Pedro and to himself:

According to my evaluation as a curandero, the herbs have their spirits, because they speak [and] direct the activities in the realm of curanderismo during the nocturnal session. . . . Their spirits are susceptible to the curandero who manipulates them. They can advise or warn him. . . . They indicate to him how the cure is to be effected by means of the San Pedro infusion, which is the principal base of curanderismo. They enumerate the dangers to watch

* “Raising,” in the idiom of curanderismo, has both descriptive and symbolic meanings. In the curing ceremony San Pedro, *tabaco*, and other potions are in fact raised high before they are taken orally or through the nose. However, the context in which Gálvaez used the term here suggests he was not referring solely to the physical act of lifting. See below.

out for, and what is to be done about the sickness. If one does not drink San Pedro, there is nothing. . . . The herbs . . . have power to manifest themselves. It seems that possibly they have a spirit that is matched with the power of San Pedro and the intellectual power of the curandero. . . .

When asked about the force of the magic plants, he explained:

The curandero or *brujo* [sorcerer], upon invoking the power of the plants within his curative power, also influences them. He imposes his personal spiritual force over the plants . . . giving them that magic power which becomes, let us say, the power that plants contain as a result of having been rooted in the earth and partaken of its magnetic force. And, since man is an element of the earth, with the power of his intelligence . . . he emits this potentiality over the plants. The plants receive this influence and return it toward man, toward the individual in the moment when he invokes. In other words, all of the spirit of the plants is . . . fortified by the influences—intellectual, spiritual, and human—of man. He is the one who forms the magic potentiality of the plants. Because of the fact that they are in an isolated place, a place untouched by strange hands, by foreign elements, the plants together with water produce the magic power by virtue of their duality.

It would seem, then, that once the inner power of the curandero is activated by the hallucinogenic San Pedro cactus, the magic plants provide a medium by which his contact with the earth is renewed in a reciprocal flow of energy.

THE SYMBOLISM AND POWER OF THE MESA

Every curandero has his mesa, which, as mentioned, is a collection of numerous power objects laid out on the ground in altar-like fashion for the curing sessions. These objects are of either a positive or a negative nature. The mesa symbolizes the duality of the world of man and nature and of the spiritual realm, as manifested in the struggle between good and evil. The opposites among the power objects are complementary rather than irreconcilable, rather like two sides of a coin.

To the curandero, the existence of opposite forces does not mean splitting the world in two (the “sacred” and “profane”) or establishing a rigid dichotomy between “this” world of matter and the “other” world of spirit. On the contrary, the curandero seeks to perceive unity in the dynamic interaction between the forces of good and evil through the attainment of “vision.” Such a view of the world is very flexible and adaptable; it leaves room for the acceptance of new symbols and ideas and allows competing elements to enter into one's structuring of reality and the behavior determined by such structuring.

This manner of perceiving reality probably explains Gálvaez's ability to resolve apparent contradictions in his daily life (e.g., sensitive artist—rugged fisherman and stevedore, etc.). He clearly has developed a



Fig. 23. Mesa of a *curandero*, with staffs and other "power objects" used in divination and curing with *San Pedro*.

capacity to inhabit, with apparent ease, two religious worlds at once, one traditional, the other Roman Catholic; his faith in the power of the "ancients" and the hallucinogenic San Pedro cactus is as absolute as his belief in Christ, the Virgin, and the saints. Witness the following statement:

I salute the ancients, the powerful ones, men who have lived in antiquity . . . for their intellectual force, their power, their magnificence, and the saints for . . . their intellect, their personality . . . their great power as philosophers, writers, poets . . . [so] that they will help me intellectually in search of these inconveniences [i.e., the causes of the patient's problems] in order to discover a solution. I always invoke the ancients, brujos, curanderos who have died [and] who are alive, calling their spirits, their personalities. They attend and deliver ideas that can bring one out of trance, out of the wrong path that he may be following. Therefore I [also] call on St. Augustine, Moses, Solomon, St. Cyprian, St. Paul, for advice, for help in moments of doubt.

Similarly, Gálvaez sees no contradiction between modern medicine and traditional curing and, depending on the situation and his diagnosis, readily employs pharmaceutical products in his work. Nor does he see modern medicine as a threat to his vocation; on the contrary, he is

seeking to assimilate scientific knowledge and techniques into his practice by taking correspondence courses and reading medical literature. Also, for advanced organic or chronic disorders, he recommends immediate medical and hospital treatment to augment his own.

To return to the mesa: in accordance with the concept of complementary opposites, the mesa is divided into two major (though unequal) zones, called *campos* (fields) or *bancos* (benches), which are kept apart by a "neutral" area. The left and smaller side of the oblong mesa is called the *Campo Ganadero* (Field of the Sly Dealer, Satan). It contains artifacts associated with the forces of evil, the underworld, and negative magic, mainly fragments of ancient ceramics and stones from archaeological ruins, along with cane alcohol, a deer foot, and a triton shell. This zone is governed by Satan, whose negative powers are concentrated in three staffs—called Satan's Bayonet, Owl Staff, and the Staff of the Single Woman—placed upright in the ground behind the artifacts of the *Campo Ganadero*. A witch or sorcerer would use this negative zone for sorcery or curing for lucrative gain; a benevolent curer like Gálvaez needs it for consultation in cases of witchcraft, adverse love magic, or bad luck, since this is the realm responsible for such evils and consequently capable of revealing their sources.

The right and larger side of the mesa, called the *Campo Justiciero* (Field of the Divine Judge or Divine Justice), contains artifacts related to the forces of good or positive magic—including images of saints, positive power objects such as stones, shells, bowls, a glass, a dagger, and a rattle, and certain substances, including three perfumes, holy water, tobacco, sugar, lime, and a five-gallon can of San Pedro infusion. This zone is governed by Christ, whose positive powers are focused in eight staffs—called, respectively, Swordfish Beak Staff, Eagle Staff, Greyhound Staff, Hummingbird Staff, Staff of the Virgin of Mercy, Sword of St. Paul, Sabre of St. Michael the Archangel, and Sword of St. James the Elder—positioned behind the artifacts. The neutral field (*Campo Medio*) contains artifacts of a neutral nature, in which the forces of good and evil are evenly balanced. This zone is governed by St. Cyprian (a powerful magician who was converted to Christianity), whose neutral powers are focused in a Serpent Staff. The "neutral" or "balanced" objects are a bronze sunburst, a stone symbolizing the sea and the winds, a glass jar containing magic herbs, a statue of St. Cyprian, a "fortune stone," and a crystal "mirror." These are symbolic of forces in nature and the world of man that can be used for good or for evil, depending on the intention of the individual. This part of the mesa is the focal point of the curandero's "vision." Because of its neutral quality, it is considered capable of reflecting the case under consideration without distortion, usually in the glass jar of magic herbs or in the crystal mirror.

The artifacts of the mesa are not just a random collection of standard objects. Rather, they are gradually accumulated over the years of a curandero's practice. Gálvaez started his practice with the bare essentials—utensils and a few key artifacts for each of the three campos. As his skills improved he enlarged the collection and replaced objects with others considered to have more power. Each was carefully selected and acquired under special circumstances, and each has unique personal significance to the curandero, along with its own *cuenta*, or "account," which is activated by the catalyst San Pedro. Many artifacts were made by Gálvaez from carefully selected materials of special significance to him as an artist and fisherman. Obviously, within the standard symbolic framework passed on from curandero to initiate, there is room for personal elaboration, once mastery has been gained over the curing art. The same is true of the curandero's *tarjos*, or chants. He learns the traditional rhythms and song cycles but, as with the various power objects, he elaborates on the basic complex with his own particular talents and according to the inspiration he receives from a variety of extrapersonal and supernatural sources.

One of Gálvaez's most important power objects, activated by the hallucinogenic San Pedro and utilized in certain especially virulent cases of witchcraft or sorcery, is "the cat." His account of how he obtained it and how it is used is of particular interest, not only because of the role of cats in European witchcraft lore but also because of the intimate relationship of felines to traditional South American shamanism and the considerable feline symbolism to be found in the ancient ritual art of Peru:

In my case I have some talismans that I prepared by means of my own ideas and illuminations that I have had in my dreams. The cat plays a principal role in witchcraft and its glance has great power. When a cat dies . . . the eyes remain open. Then there is reflected all concerning the tragedy that has happened in the hour of its death. And it carries in its pupils the moment of [its] abduction toward the tomb. . . . Therefore, I purposely prepared this talisman. I grabbed a cat and killed it and drank the blood three times. I sucked the blood from the neck of the animal three times and then I took out the eyes. After I took out the eyes I cut off its right paw, the right claw. And this I gathered together and placed in a receptacle with *agua cananga* (dark perfume) during one complete cycle of the moon. . . . After that I added *agua florida* (scented water, another perfume). And after the *agua florida* I added cane alcohol at the end in order to give this feline bravery and power to intoxicate with his glance. Those eyes I sewed together with green and red silk thread and tied them to a flint arrowhead that I found in an ancient archaeological tomb. This talisman I carry with me and I use it at night when I want to countercheck the power of a cat, of a feline, of some exterior spirit attack of a sorcerer who wants to attack or

perturb me. All I do is launch my savage cat by means of a few sparks made with the flint arrowhead. And it has its power. The cat goes out to the hills screaming and screeching. . . . I use it on a block of crystal. This block of crystal is like a mirror, and the cat sees what moves in this mirror. For whatever [disturbance] it is there, looking. The eyes light up as if they were light bulbs. This is one of the talismans purposely prepared by us in accordance with the idea that one has, or the inspiration of a dream, or the intuition of each one.

The whole concept of the mesa with its numerous power objects typifies the fusion of European-Christian and traditional Indian symbolism in contemporary curanderismo. All shamans have power objects, and many of those owned by Gálvaez are characteristic of shamans in many cultures, as is the manner in which they are obtained. Saints, Christ, Satan, the Virgin, etc., of course are Christian, but their functions are very similar to those of negative and positive forces in aboriginal shamanism; duality, or the complementary nature of opposites, likewise is characteristic of many indigenous symbolic systems.

To understand how the artifacts function it is important to remember that to the curandero they are not lifeless objects. Each is a focal point of a particular force. Collectively, they are a projection of his own inner spiritual power, which becomes activated whenever the mesa is manipulated in conjunction with the drinking of the hallucinogenic San Pedro infusion. This is clearly demonstrated in Gálvaez's account of what happened when he found an ancient sorcerer's kit in an archaeological site and took it home in the hope of "dominating its accounts" for use in his own work:

I took it in order "to track" (*rastrear*), to see what type it was. As a result these artifacts rebelled. Rare animals and monstrous beasts issued forth with hunger and desire to seize people. Then, when I placed the kit on my mesa, everything was distorted and turned black. The artifacts began bleeding. Several personages with huge fangs gushing blood came forth and demanded my wife and children. Then I tried to throw them out. I purified the kit with holy water and burned it because the day that I brought it home there had also begun a noise on my roof like the galloping of wild beasts. And they didn't leave me alone until I made cabalistic thrusts with my swords to countercheck these influences. . . . For me [the kit] was of no use. It was a black artifact, an artifact of witchcraft. That is, this was used in witchcraft . . . in remote ancestral times by the Mochica or Chimú peoples . . . to destroy farms, crops, [human] organs, etc. [*Question*: And this evil power remains preserved there for centuries, right?]. . . . Yes, all the evil has been preserved for centuries for one reason, which is that this [the kit] is designed or "accounted" (*contado*) under the influence of a person of this character. . . . When accounted, the object absorbs the potentiality, let us say, the intellectual potentiality of the man who manipulates it and remains impregnated forever.

Once the curandero has set up his mesa he is ready to begin the curing session. There are two parts to this: (1) ceremonial acts, and (2) curing acts. The ceremonial part lasts generally from about 10 P.M. until midnight; diagnosis and/or treatment lasts from midnight until about 4 A.M. The entire session takes place in the open, usually in an area enclosed by a wall or fence, and can be performed any night of the week except Monday, the "day of the spirits," when dead souls from purgatory are supposed to be roaming about.

The ceremonial part consists of prayers, invocations, and chants (accompanied by the rhythmic beat of the traditional shamanic rattle) addressed to all the supernaturals of the aboriginal and Roman Catholic faiths. The three perfumes mentioned earlier are used to "purify" the mesa and the San Pedro infusion. At specified intervals everyone present must imbibe a mixture called *tabaco* (see below for ingredients) through the nostrils. This process is known as "raising," most likely because the receptacle containing the fluid is lifted high and poured into the nostrils. However, as we have noted, the term may also have symbolic significance. Finally, at midnight, when the ceremonial acts have been completed, all present must drink one cup of the hallucinogenic cactus brew, after which they are ceremonially "cleansed" by the curandero. The ritual drinking of San Pedro is initiated by the curandero, who takes the first cupful, and concluded by his two assistants, who are the last to drink.

The curing part, which follows, consists of a standard series of therapeutic acts that must be performed by the curandero for all participants. Each takes a turn in front of the mesa. The curandero chants a tarjo in his name, whereupon everyone concentrates on the vertical staffs at the head of the mesa. One of these staffs, the focal point of the patient's ailment (or of the life history of a healthy visitor who has accompanied a sick one to lend moral support), is supposed to vibrate. When consensus has been reached as to which staff moved it is handed to the patient to hold in his left hand. The curandero chants the tarjo of the staff, which focuses his "vision" and activates the power of the staff and associated artifacts on the mesa. This is followed by a lengthy divinatory discourse by the curandero, relating events and describing people from the patient's life. Others present may share some of the curandero's visions. During this phase the curandero "sees" the cause of *daño* (witchcraft), *enredo* (love magic), or *suerte* (fate or bad luck), depending on which of these is bothering the patient. Once the evil has been exorcised, the curandero's two assistants "raise" the patient (i.e., stand behind and in front of him or her and imbibe through the nostrils one or all of the ingredients of the tabaco mixture, as specified by the curandero). Then the patient raises the staff to the level of his face and at the same time pours the

substance selected by the curandero into his nostrils. After this one of the assistants "cleanses" the patient by rubbing the staff all over his body. Next the assistant slices the air with the staff, takes a liquid indicated by the curandero (lime juice, perfume, San Pedro, etc.), into his mouth and sprays it on the staff, after which he returns it to its place at the head of the mesa. Once everyone has taken a turn at the head of the mesa, the curandero ends the session and all depart after a final purification ceremony.*

Thus, through elaborate ceremony, music, perfumes, brews, and symbolic contact, the curing session stimulates the five senses of the patient in a familiar cultural environment. In addition, during his turn before the mesa, everyone present gives attention to the patient and his problem in a supportive fashion. All this, added to the hallucinogenic nature of the San Pedro infusion, is intended to render the patient susceptible to therapy.

The liquid *tabaco* which is imbibed through the nostrils by all present during the ceremonial acts and prior to the drinking of the pure hallucinogenic San Pedro infusion, is individually prepared for each participant by mixing the following ingredients in a bivalve shell: dried leaves of a wild, unprocessed tobacco plant (the principal ingredient from which the mixture gets its name); the hallucinogenic San Pedro, for its catalytic action; sugar candy and lime juice, symbolizing sweetness, intended to render the patient's spirit susceptible to therapy; two perfumes, one to reinforce the action of the sugar and lime, and the other, of a dark color, symbolizing fire or the purifying agent against evil; scented water, symbolic of magic plants which it helps to preserve; and *aguardiente*, cane alcohol, symbolic of the intoxicating force of the powers of evil (which must be invoked to get at the causes of disharmony). The purpose of the tobacco in the mixture was given by Gálvaez as follows:

Pure tobacco (*sayri* or *huaman tabaco*—the famous falcon, as the ancients called it) gives power to "visualize" . . . and very rapid sight, mind, and imagination. It is for this reason that in ancient times they used *rapé* made from ground tobacco to "clear" the mind. It is in exactly the same fashion that we . . . the curanderos . . . utilize tobacco: to "clear" our minds and speed

* The fact that other observations of the San Pedro curing ritual conform in their major features to those reported by Sharon suggests a shared tradition, though with some idiosyncratic variations or innovations. Another anthropologist, Scott Robinson (personal communication), for example, had much the same experience with another San Pedro practitioner as did Sharon with Gálvaez. In Robinson's case the curandero preferred an entirely open space among the dunes, without walls or fences; also, lime juice was not administered in a mixture with tobacco juice but given separately afterwards, and the patient's body was cleansed or purified with a "doll" or figurine rather than with the staff. Otherwise the ritual proceeded along much the same lines and with similar paraphernalia as that conducted by Gálvaez.—Ed.

our thoughts toward the ends that we seek. (*Question: Why do you take it through the nostrils?*) Because it is near certain motor nerves that transmit it to the brain. There it touches these olfactory papillae that go directly to the brain. Then its power is more rapid.

THE SAN PEDRO EXPERIENCE: CURANDERO AND PATIENT

What emerges from many hours of taped conversation with Gálvaez and participation in his curing sessions is that the hallucinogenic San Pedro cactus is experienced as the catalyst that enables the curandero to transcend the limitations placed on ordinary mortals: to activate all his senses; project his spirit or soul; ascend and descend into the supernatural realms; identify and do battle with the sources of illness, witchcraft, and misfortune; confront and vanquish ferocious animals and demons of disease and sorcerers who direct them; "jump over" barriers of time, space, and matter; divine the past, present, and future—in short, to attain vision, "to see." And "seeing," in the sense in which this word is used by the curandero, is very different from "looking at." The effects of San Pedro, according to Gálvaez:

... are first a slight dizziness that one hardly notices. And then a great vision, a clearing of all the faculties of the individual. It produces a light numbness in the body and afterward a tranquility. And then comes a detachment, a type of visual force in the individual inclusive of all the senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, etc.—all the senses, including the sixth sense, the telepathic sense of transmitting oneself across time and matter. . . . It develops the power of perception . . . in the sense that when one wants to see something far away . . . he can distinguish powers or problems or disturbances at a great distance, so as to deal with them. . . . It [also] produces . . . a general cleansing, which includes the kidneys, the liver . . . the stomach, and the blood.

When asked how San Pedro helps him vis-à-vis the patient, and the effects it has on the latter, Gálvaez replied:

San Pedro has great power . . . as it is "accounted" with the saints . . . with all the hills, ancient shrines, lakes, streams, and powers . . . that one must "account" with the saints. That San Pedro I "raise" intellectually, with my mind, with my five senses, in all the radius around us, according to the way my focus of action, that is, my power, irradiates [it]. Then San Pedro tends to manifest itself [in the patient] in the form of vomiting, perspiration . . . sometimes in dancing. At times during diagnosis a patient automatically starts to dance alone, or to throw himself writhing on the ground. And there unfolds the power (i.e., the ailment, or evil power) placed into the person. It seems that . . . not all of us are resistant. Some are very susceptible, very unstable, and San Pedro tends to reach the subconscious . . . and the conscious, in such cases. It penetrates the blood . . . rises to, let us say, the intellectual nervous system. Then it "visualizes" and opens up a sixth sense.

. . . Then the individual, sometimes by himself, can visualize his past or . . . the present, or an immediate future.

What did the concept of the "subconscious" mean to him? Here is his answer:

The subconscious is a superior part (of man) . . . a kind of bag where the individual has stored all his memories, all his valuations. . . . One must try . . . to make the individual "jump out" of his conscious mind. That is the principal task of curanderismo. By means of the magical plants and the chants and the search for the roots of the problem, the subconscious of the individual is opened like a flower, and it releases these blockages. All by itself it tells things. A very practical manner . . . which was known to the ancients [of Peru].

It might be noted that Gálvaez distinguishes between "psychological sickness" and "sickness very different from that"—i.e., sickness caused by witchcraft.*

Again and again Gálvaez returned to the curandero's attainment of "vision" as the major focus of the curing session. "Vision" not only involves seeing problems "at a great distance" but also refers to his experiences on ecstatic journeys, in trances induced by San Pedro:

I called certain saints, hills, ancient shrines; and I disappeared. There was an unfolding of my personality. . . . I was no longer at the mesa. . . . That is to say, my personality had departed to other places. . . . The human mind has great power, a supernatural power. And one must exercise it, of course, in order to conduct a session. . . . During my sessions at times I have been looking for a certain force, for example, an ancient shrine or a hill, and suddenly [while] I was whistling and singing, the "account" was activated, and I felt myself enter the hill which opened all its passages, all its labyrinths. And suddenly I returned again. I had "seen" and I had "visualized" with my spirit.

He also told me that the curanderos of northern Peru had their own sacred lagoons, called Las Huaringas, where one traveled to bathe and to learn about all the magical plants that grow there—"those for good and those for evil." I asked him if he had ever personally visited these sacred lagoons. Physically, no, he said, but supernaturally, yes, through the agency of his jar of magical herbs.

When an illness has been produced by the concoction of a sorcerer, the spirit of that concoction

* That this cultural syndrome is recognized as a separate and legitimate category which is shared with the patient and not simply as another psychological ailment, as it is often characterized by Western psychology, may give curanderismo great therapeutic value and may explain its persistence. Our knowledge of the extent to which culture influences psychological disturbances is weak, to say the least. Can we deny witchcraft the status of a separate, legitimate category in contemporary Latin American culture when great numbers of people accept it as such and act accordingly?

. . . comes to look for what it is lacking. A light in the form of a firefly blinks on and off and comes looking for its "bone," which the sorcerer has introduced into the patient's stomach, killing him, consuming him. And until the patient throws up that element, the firefly is there, circling.

In certain serious cases, the illness-causing forces are believed to be powerful enough to attack the patient during the actual curing session, in an effort to thwart the curandero's therapeutic measures. This is extremely critical and requires vigorous emergency action. The curandero seizes one of the swords of his mesa and charges into the open, beyond the mesa and the patients. Here he conducts a ferocious battle with the attacking forces (which only he can see in his San Pedro trance vision), violently thrusting and slicing the air with his blade. Then he performs seven somersaults in the form of a cross, while grasping the sword in both hands with the sharp edge held forward. This is intended to drive off the attacking spirits and shock the sorcerer who is directing them.*

If sufficiently strong, these hostile forces may even attack the curandero himself. In that case he must rely on the aid and protection of higher beings:

In certain trances, on paths closed to most men, rare beasts have confronted me with harmful intentions. And the presence of the Lord and His powerful light have helped me out of these places unharmed. And I always get out unharmed because there are beings in the other "mansion" [realm] such as great curanderos. . . . [By] calling these spirits via the prayers that I know, they come and assist in any trance.

To summarize, within the indigenous framework the hallucinogenic San Pedro infusion is the magical substance that activates the curer's inner powers, as well as those inherent in the objects of his mesa. For the patient it opens his subconscious "like a flower" and renders the forces that made him sick visible and susceptible to the curer's therapeutic powers. By means of San Pedro the curer awakens all of his senses, including a vital sixth sense, and by their interaction attains "vision"—the true focus of the curing session and the supreme achieve-

* Here the pre-European shamanistic tradition is again obvious. Such trance experiences as visits to sacred lakes or water holes which belong exclusively to the supernatural practitioners (see, for example, Wilbert's account of the supernatural initiatory journey of the shaman of the Venezuelan Warao), entering the earth or hills, spirit projection, physical combat against disease demons and ferocious animals doing the bidding of sorcerers, foreign objects magically introduced into the body to cause illness, assistance from dead shamans and benevolent supernaturals, etc., all are typically shamanistic. Somersaulting also is a not uncommon shamanistic phenomenon, utilized especially for purposes of transformation. In neighboring Bolivia, for example, shamans of the Tacana perform somersaults in one direction to turn themselves into jaguars (their alter egos) and in the opposite direction to reassume human form (cf. Hissink-Hahn, 1961).—Ed.

ment of the curandero. For aid, guidance, and protection during these arduous and dangerous sessions, the curandero places his faith in higher spiritual beings, including those of the Christian faith as well as the aboriginal Indian pantheon.

THE SAN PEDRO EXPERIENCE: THE APPRENTICE

During my field work in 1970, I was able to participate in only three curing sessions as more than an observer. Thus there was insufficient time for me to develop even the beginning of "vision," as understood by Gálvaez, or to make an adequate analysis of the process. The problem was aggravated by the trappings of my anthropological subculture: tape recorder, notebook, and a felt need to collect ethnographic data on a phenomenon about which little had been written by trained observers. As a result, my first subjective experiences leave much to be desired in terms of content. However, this very paucity may prove useful, in that it illustrates the role of cultural factors in the "psychedelic" experience. It is with these limitations in mind that the following should be evaluated.

In the first session, the San Pedro infusion produced no observable effect whatever. I taped the ceremonial phase of the session until midnight. After drinking the infusion and taping the tarjo addressed to the first patient, I put the tape recorder away and began to participate in the curing phase. I did not notice any effects on myself, nor did I "see" any of the dogs, rats, or stars that the curandero and others present seemed to be perceiving together. After the session concluded, at about 5 A.M., I retired and slept soundly until noon. Throughout the afternoon, after rising, I experienced a very slight headache in the region of the frontal lobes, which passed by evening.

During the second session, fourteen days later, San Pedro did take effect, despite the fact that I was busy taping the entire session. The morning after the session, as soon as I awoke I jotted down the following notes:

Finally had some results with San Pedro. Felt warm and relaxed. At 3 A.M. began to see what Gálvaez calls a *remolino*, a whirlpool of red and yellow light spinning inward before my eyes and lightly printed on everything I looked at. Also noticed flashes of light out of the corners of my eyes when I moved my head suddenly. . . . Was fully conscious of my surroundings and felt no strange sensations or dizziness—just very relaxed. Still don't see what everyone else sees, but did notice patients under "attack," leaning crazily backwards as if pulled by some force. Noticed a white ghostlike outline around each patient as each took his turn before the mesa out in the darkness. Also the outline of one patient seemed to melt around the edges. Gálvaez said this patient was in a state of indecision!

Actually saw one of the twelve staffs "vibrate" while the others remained stationary, on two occasions. Both times these were the staffs given to the particular patient taking his turn before the mesa. . . .

When we returned home and I finally got to bed (5 A.M.), as I began to doze off all kinds of designs in every color imaginable unfolded before my eyes—whether open or closed (although the latter made vision easier). There was a whole kaleidoscope of patterns, shapes, and designs which appeared very faintly and softly before my eyes. I slept till 8 A.M. (three hours), after which I was up and about with no ill effects or unpleasantness (other than fatigue from lack of sleep).

When the *remolino* first appeared, I waited for a break in the sequence of curing acts to ask Gálvaez about this phenomenon. He was quite familiar with it and said it was common in the early stages of San Pedro usage. From this it would follow that the objective sensory impressions triggered by San Pedro might be fairly standard for all users no matter what their culture. Culture influences how these objective impressions are conceptualized or processed. For example, even though San Pedro was clearly taking effect during my second experiment and the patient seemed to lean "crazily backwards as if pulled by some force," I still did not "see what everyone else sees." Everyone else, it seemed, was seeing a monster of some sort pulling his hair and trying to abduct him. From the participants' comments during the session and their obvious state of panic, it appeared that all except myself were sharing this perception together and at the same moment.

Later I discovered that, as in my own case, this was only the second time these patients had used San Pedro. Yet they had experienced something *together* that had completely escaped me. Thus it cannot be that they were physiologically more susceptible than I to the effects of mescaline through longer use. Rather, it seems more likely that the degree of their susceptibility and their common vision were due to culture—that, unlike myself, they were culturally conditioned to certain experiential expectations under the influence of San Pedro, within the context of a curing session. It is likely also that these expectations are held in common in that sector of north Peruvian society which accepts curanderismo as a valid and effective system of therapy. These expectations, reinforced by the long history of curanderismo in the north and the traditional shamanistic beliefs and practices in which it is rooted, would tend to determine the way in which neutral sense impressions produced by the action of San Pedro are processed—i.e., perceived—by northern Peruvians. I, on the other hand, would perceive these "neutral" impressions according to my own cultural conditioning—i.e., as the sympathetic but "objective" observer.

The experiences of my third session, seven days later, were similar to those of the second—warmth, relaxed feeling, *remolino*, flashes of

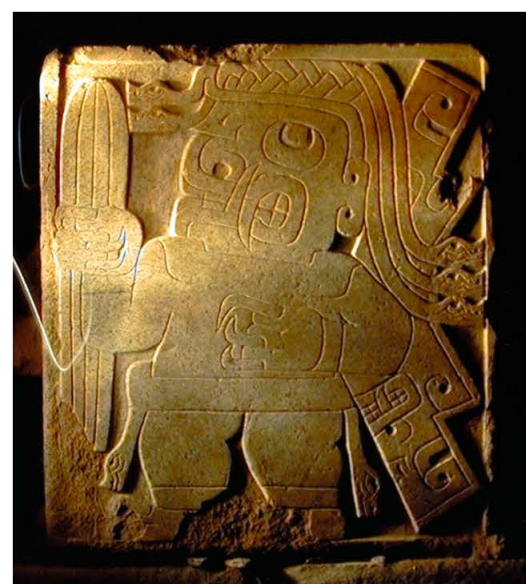
light, the white ghostlike outline around the patients, and colors after the session—except that the *remolino* occurred earlier, at 1 A.M. instead of 3 A.M. and there were no "attacks." However, my impressions were much less intense than during the previous session, despite the fact that Gálvaez gave me a double dose of tabaco and San Pedro and the fact that, in an effort to give myself over completely to the hallucinogen, I did no taping whatever. Instead I spent the entire evening "concentrating" as hard as I could on participation, since I had soon to return to the United States and this was to be my last session. Gálvaez—wise man!—said later that my second session had been more successful (in the sense that the effects of San Pedro had been stronger) because my conscious mind had been occupied with the mechanical processes of taping and so had been kept out of the way, allowing my subconscious to take over completely. In my first and third sessions, on the other hand, I was acting as I had been taught to act in a learning (or apprentice) situation—tense, alert, "concentrating" with my conscious mind. The Peruvian patients, by contrast, backed by their cultural heritage, had simply relaxed, allowing San Pedro and the curandero to take hold of them completely.

That Gálvaez himself is well aware of the role of culture in one's subjective experience with a hallucinogen such as San Pedro is evident in his reply when I asked why people from other cultures seem to have such difficulty seeing what his own people see:

That perhaps is due to the geographic position or the cultural heritage of the *raza*. For example, the *raza* of Peru is rooted in the very origin of the universe, it is one with the universe and its beginnings. And all the characteristics of our ancestors—race, blood, religion, intellectuality, culture—these are to be taken into account in an *ambiente* such as curanderismo. Possibly in Europe also, in antiquity, there was this [art], but it is according to one's geographic position. I believe this because people who have come to experiment, such as various friends of mine and my *compadres*, among them two ex-Peace Corps volunteers, never have had immediate certainty in capturing these things, except by means of exercise. And I also claim that exercise is primal in these operations. The more one practices the more one enters into the power. That is to say that all exercise is equal to the gain, to the appreciation of the *ambiente* in which one wants to introduce himself, in which one desires to live.*

The life of Gálvaez is testimony to the fact that wisdom is the universal property of all men, whatever their "cultural conditioning" or "geographic position." The profound wisdom embodied in Gálvaez' art is a tribute to the human spirit.

* *Raza*: literally race, but here meaning a people sharing a common cultural and genetic heritage. *Ambiente* is difficult to render into English; it is used to refer to a socio-cultural environment or milieu. *Compadre*, a ritual kinship term, literally "co-father," defining a relationship usually established at the baptism of a child.—Ed.



Low-relief carving, Chavín de Huantar, Peru, ca. 900 BC



Cupisnique ceramic, no. Peru, ca. 900-1000 BC



Nazca ceramic, central Peruvian coast, ca. 200 BC



Eduardo Calderon mesa, Trujillo, Peru, ca. 1970 AD



Roberto Rojas mesa, Trujillo, Peru, ca. 1970 AD