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# PSYCHOACTIVE PAINTED PERUVIAN PLANTS THE SHAMANISM TEXTILE

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ABSTRACT.—From a cache of over 200 Chavín textiles found in the Ica Valley on the Peruvian south coast in 1969, one is particularly intriguing. Exhibited in the San Diego Museum of Man's 1980 analysis of South American shamanism, this 2000 year old cloth is painted with images of transformation and transcendence. Of special interest is the representation of three plants shown in connection with a jaguar, winged deer, hummingbirds, shamans, and a deity. While this textile has been described before in the context of the others in the group, the present paper addresses the plants specifically. One plant is very likely to be the hallucinogenic San Pedro cactus *(Trichocereus pachanoi);* another is more tentatively suggested to be seed pods of the psychoactive acacia *(Anadenanthera peregrina* or *A. colubrina).* The third plant, while still eluding precise classification, must be considered as a possible narcotic as well.

## INTRODUCTION

Over 2000 years ago a Chavín artist of ancient Peru painted a cotton textile with a religious message which is dramatically clear today. The message is shamanism and the textile is remarkable because all of shamanism's basic elements are represented on it: the shaman, his animal familiar, his means for entering a trance to contact the supernatural world, and a deity from that world (Fig. 1). This cloth is hereafter referred to as The Shamanism Textile. Now fragmentary and measuring 54.61 x 68.58 cm, the cloth is a plain weave, 1/1 (1 warp thread by 1 weft thread), of S-spun cotton *(Gossypium barbadense)* and is painted with tan and brown colors (pigments as yet untested) over the ecru


FIG. 1—The Shamanism Textile: a. shaman grasping *Anadenanthera* pods, b. San Pedro cactus, c. jaguar, d. hummingbird, e. Staff God, f. winged deer, g. mystery plant.
(Ken Hedges photo)

tone of the natural cotton. A total of 65 extant motifs is assignable to 12 categories (Table 1).

## DISCUSSION

### *The Archaeological Context*

The Shamanism Textile, along with the others in the cache, was reportedly found at the site of Carhua in the Ica Valley on the south coast of Peru by *huaqueros* (grave robbers)[1]. However, on stylistic grounds, the textiles belong to a quite different locale; they are most comparable to the art of the Chavín type site, Chavín de Huántar, situated in the eastern Andes at an elevation of 3135 m above sea level, and 644 km distant from Carhua (Fig. 2). Therefore, it is most likely that the textiles were carried from the locus of manufacture, possibly Chavín de Huántar, to the south coast (Cordy-Collins 1976:272; Conklin 1978:7).

### *Chavín Shamanism*

Elsewhere I have argued that, as a group, the textiles functioned as a catechism which brought a religious message from one non-literate society to another in pictographic form, and that the message concerned the ascendency of a new Chavín deity (Cordy-Collins 1976). Furthermore, I have contended that the Chavín peoples' religion was shamanistic and was based on plant hallucinogens (Cordy-Collins 1977, 1980).

Simply stated, shamanism is a means by which order and balance are maintained within a society. The shaman is the focal character in the system and through his intercession with the supernatural world, homeostasis is sustained. To achieve homeostasis the shaman (1) enters a trance (frequently induced by plant hallucinogens), (2) transforms into his animal familiar (usually the jaguar), and (3) then flies upward to the spirit world where he intercedes with the supernaturals residing there.

The hypothesis proposed for the textiles' presence on the south coast is that they served as a medium of a proselytizing movement from a Chavín central locus. Furthermore, Chavín religious iconography has been shown to consistently include hallucinogenic references. Curls emanating from the nostrils of supernatural images seems to represent the mucus discharge which results from snuffing hallucinogenic powder (Chagnon 1968:

TABLE 1.—*Comparative frequency table of motifs on The Shamanism Textile in present, fragmentary state.*

| Element | Number of appearances |
|---|---|
| Staff God | 1, very fragmentary |
| double ring | 1 section above Staff God |
| feline, spotted | 1 |
| partial plant (San Pedro?) | 1, less than half remaining |
| mystery plant | 2, both in bloom; 1 fragmentary |
| deer, winged | 4 |
| misc. unidentified objects | 4, all fragmentary |
| shamans | 5 |
| San Pedro cactus | 6: 4 in bloom, 1 not, 1 unclear |
| acacia seed pods | 6: 5 held by shamans, 1 fragmentary |
| hummingbirds | 16 |
| floating circles | 18: 1 sexpartite, 5 quadrupartite, 4 halved, 5 plain |


FIG. 2—Map of Peru locating Carhua, reported site of textile cache, and Chavín de Huántar, site of the Chavín art style's definition.

5; Cordy-Collins 1980). Chavín artists' use of hallucinogenic snuff has also been suggested by Donald Lathrap (1973:96). In addition to psychoactive snuff, the hallucinogenic San Pedro cactus has also been identified in Chavín religious art (Cordy-Collins 1977:360; Lumbreras 1977:23; Sharon and Donnan 1977:377-379). Therefore, any attempts to decipher Chavín iconography should test for hallucinogenic and shamanistic references. A refinement of the aforementioned general hypothesis accounting for the presence of Chavín textiles on the south coast, specifically aimed at the iconography of the textile under discussion here, argues that all the motifs on the textile in Figure 1 refer directly to the general proselytizing message: plant hallucinogen-based shamanism sup-

ported a deity new to Chavín religion. The following discussion will concern itself with the possible representation of (1) hallucinogenic plants, (2) a shamanistic complex and, (3) the new Chavín deity.

*Analysis of The Shamanism Textile's Components*

To unravel the textile's message, ethnographic studies of South American shamanism made over the last century are invaluable. Shamans' transforming agents in South America today are commonly plant hallucinogens, and the most readily identifiable design on the textile appears to be one of these, the San Pedro cactus *(Trichocereus pachanoi)* (Fig. 3). A columnar, ribbed plant, San Pedro is used by coastal Peruvian shamans today to achieve a trance state whereby the supernatural world is opened to them; San Pedro's active alkaloid is mescaline[2]. Traditionally, shamanic curing sessions employing the cactus occur at night when the flower blooms. Apparently the act of blooming is particularly important because the language of the curing session makes continued use of the blooming metaphor (Sharon 1978:107). Therefore, it seems especially significant that in four of the five cases where identification is possible, the painted San Pedros are in bloom. It is pertinent to note that the proposed San Pedro cacti, as represented on the textile, have no more than four ribs. This is contradictory to fact: *T. pachanoi* has between six and eight ribs. However, modern Peruvian shamans believe that four-ribbed San Pedro cacti do exist and are especially potent *because* of the four ribs (Sharon and Donnan 1977:376). The number four is a magical, ritual one in modern shamanism. Therefore, it is entirely possible that four-ribbed San Pedros are entirely mythical. This is an important point to which I shall return.

The second motif on The Shamanism Textile which may be a plant hallucinogen appears as linear clusters of circular elements. It is possible that this motif represents *Anadenanthera peregrina* (acacia) seed pods (Fig. 4). *A. peregrina* has a documented use

FIG. 3—San Pedro cactus growing at Chavín de Huántar, Peru. (Jack L. Riesland photo)


FIG. 4—*Anadenanthera peregrina* (after Schultes 1976).

in South America extending back to 1496 (Schultes and Hofmann 1979:116). As shamanic trance-inducing agents, the seeds are removed from the pods and ground into powder for snuffing or, in some cases, it is reported that the seeds were simply chewed. Whereas actual *A. peregrina* pods average about 20 cm in length, the motifs on the textile appear to be much larger relative to the individuals who seem to be holding them. However, in defense of the argument, the size of the hummingbirds relative to everything else indicates that true scale was not a particular concern of the Chavín artist. Yet, there is a second objective which might be leveled against interpreting the proposed plant as *A. peregrina*. Actual acacia pods split open along their sides rather than interdigitally between the seeds as seems to be indicated on the textile. Nonetheless, some *A. peregrina* pods evidence severe constriction on the pod between individual seeds (cf., Schultes and Hofmann 1979:117, lower photograph). Finally, though, the point must be made that the geographical zone occupied by the Chavín artist who painted the textile was not that where the psychoactive acacia grows. *Anadenanthera peregrina* is apparently native to the tropical lowlands drained by the Orinoco River. Nevertheless, it is documented that there was extensive trade of the drug into the highlands (Schultes and Hofmann 1979: 117). What makes the discussion of the motif particularly intriguing is that we cannot be certain of the form the drug was in when traded: whether in whole pods, individual seeds, or as ground powder. If it was brought into the highlands in either of the latter two forms, then we would not expect the Chavín artist to necessarily be aware of its appearance while growing, except by heresay from the traders. Though the identification as *A. peregrina* is tentative, it should be noted that some of the animals on the textile appear with muzzle emanations which could well represent nasal discharge which results from inhalation of hallucinogenic snuff.

The third proposed plant on The Shamanism Textile presents a conundrum. Only two images of the motif appear, one complete and one fragmentary. That they are plants seems reasonable to assume because the roots of the complete example are metaphorically shown as truncated serpents (Fig. 5) just as they are with the San Pedro cacti. Serpents appear throughout Chavín art as a sort of visual pun known as "kennings" (Rowe 1967:82)[3] and snakes as plant roots are known from another Chavín textile which depicts cotton plants (Cordy-Collins 1979: Figs. 3, 7-9). Furthermore, a flower-like ele-

FIG. 5—Detail of The Shamanism Textile showing the complete representation of the mystery plant (Alana Cordy-Collins photo).

ment appears atop the motif in question. Therefore, I think it likely that the mysterious image is that of a plant. But what plant? Given the context, one might expect it would be a plant with hallucinogenic properties. One of the problems in identification is that of proper scale, a problem discussed in reference to the supposed acacia pods. Another problem is the uncertainty of the viewer's vantage point; Chavín art occasionally makes use of simultaneous Picasso-like views. One more difficulty is the abstract quality of the painting itself; and, finally, many hallucinogenic plants used by shamans today are still unclassified. The plant's diagonal lines are intriguing; they could be gashes to allow for the draining and collecting of sap as with rubber trees. If this is the meaning of the lines, perhaps the plant can be compared with the virola tree (*Virola* spp.), the resinous sap of which is gathered by contemporary Amazonians to be employed as a snuff ingredient. However, currently shamans obtain virola resin by scraping the inner bark, not by gashing the tree. An alternative interpretation is that the mystery plant is really a flower, since the upper portion is very flower-like. Finally, two more possibilities must be entertained: either the plant might by mythical as the four-ribbed San Pedro cactus discussed earlier seems to be, or it might simply have been unknown to the Chavín artists in its live, growing form, as has been suggested for *A. peregrina*. Here too, it could have been that the processed hallucinogenic substance alone was imported by Chavín people. Therefore, they would have had to depend on foreign descriptions or on their own imaginations to create a visual image of the plant.

Taken by themselves, the three proposed plants may not seem to make a particularly strong case for a definition of the painted Chavín cloth as "The Shamanism Textile." However, like any archaeological data, these three iconographic motifs must be studied in their context in order to arrive at a meaningful interpretation.

As stated at the beginning of this discussion, shamanism is a complex, the trance-inducing agents being but one element in the system. Other elements include the shaman, his animal familiars, spirits and supernaturals from the netherworld. It can be demonstrated that most, if not all, these elements are present on the textile, thus providing both a context for the identification of trance-inducing agents—psychoactive plants—and for the overall interpretation of the painted cloth as The Shamanism Textile.

The figures associated with the presumed acacia pods may be shamans. While the bodies of these individuals are anthropomorphic, their faces are decidedly zoomorphic (compare these faces with those of the deer and feline below). This could indicate that these individuals are shamans in the process of transformation. Composite faces in Chavín ceramic art seem to represent states of transformation (Figs. 6, 7). Alternatively, these creatures may be spirits, specifically spirits of the acacia. Among the Waika Indians of southern Venezuela and Brazil who regularly make extensive use of *A. peregrina* snuff, spirits called *Hekula* are believed to communicate with them during their snuff-induced ecstatic trances (Schultes and Hofmann 1979:118-119).

According to widely-held Amazonian beliefs, once the transforming agent is ingested, the shaman is no longer human in form, but jaguarian. One spotted feline appears with his paw resting on an opened cactus bloom. Emanations exude from his muzzle. I have previously suggested that such emanations in Chavín art refer to the use of hallucinogenic snuff (Cordy-Collins 1980). Therefore, a reasonable interpretation of the motifs' juxtaposition is that the jaguar is the transformed shaman, intimately associated with the transforming media[4].

The hummingbirds are also appropriate inclusions because, due to their ability to draw nectar from flowers by sucking, the birds are equated with the shaman who, in curing, sucks the pathogens from his patients' bodies. Here, however, the bird/shaman association extends even further: in eight instances on The Shamanism Textile the hummingbirds are depicted with their beaks abutting the cacti as if to draw out the transforming juices. Furthermore, invariably all birds in a shamanic context symbolize the shaman's magical flight to the realm of the deities.

One deity, even though only partially extant, can be precisely identified. This is the Staff God, the new Chavín supernatural around whom revolved the proselytizing movement which brought the textile cache to the south coast. The deity has been somewhat reconstructed in Fig. 8. Comparable Staff Gods evidence the same headdress form, an inverted agnathic fanged mouth with serpents (Figs. 9, 10).

Deer are apparently very old shamanic symbols, extending back at least to the Upper Paleolithic period in Europe (Furst 1976). Today in Peru the deer acts as a metaphor for the swiftness and elusiveness of the shaman. The wing on its back reinforces the shaman's power of flight. Additionally, at least one of the deer on the textile is shown with muzzle emanations, probably relating to the use of hallucinogenic snuff. The deer's association with hallucinogens is corroborated by a Chavín ceramic bottle showing the deer in direct association with a San Pedro cactus (Cordy-Collins 1976: Fig. 110).

Therefore, it can be seen that, even without the identification of the three proposed hallucinogenic plants, the message this textile carries is shamanism as a complex of interrelated elements. Yet, because shamanism as it is known today throughout South America and as it has been documented since the 15th century, has made consistent use of plant hallucinogens to achieve the desired state of ecstacy and communication with the spirit world, it is reasonable to assume that such plants also played an important part in the shamanism of South America's prehistoric past. It is reasonable to suggest that the three otherwise unidentified motifs on The Shamanism Textile are meant to represent plant hallucinogens.

## CONCLUSION

A Chavín painted textile from Precolumbian Peru has been, by means of iconographic analysis and ethnographic analogy, shown to be a very important document.

FIG. 6—Chavín stirrup spout bottle showing a face in process of transformation. (Junius B. Bird photo)

FIG. 7—Chavín stirrup spout bottle showing a face in process of transformation. (Jack L. Riesland photo)

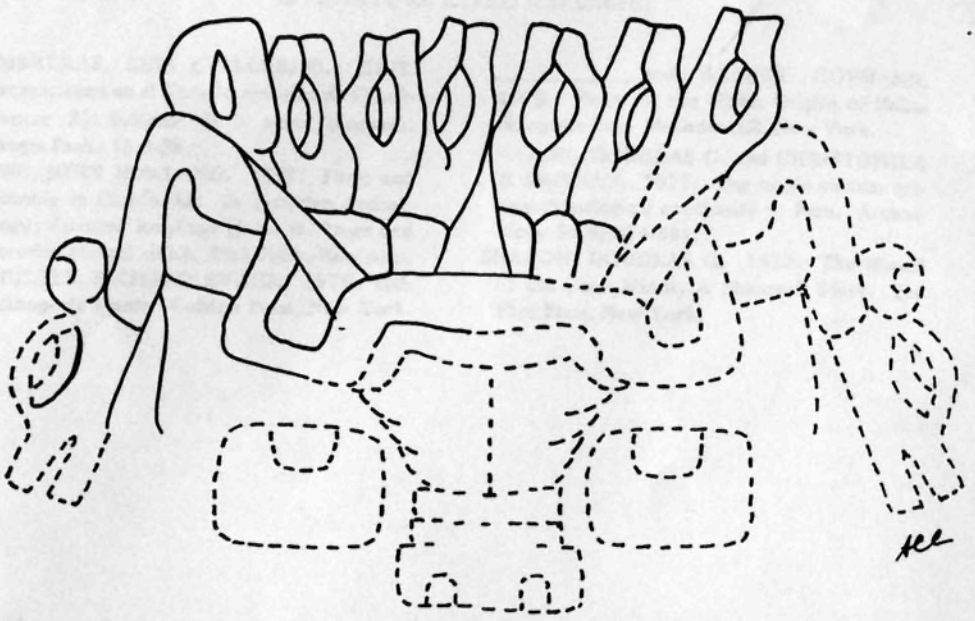

FIG. 8—Partially reconstructed Staff God face from The Shamanism Textile.
(Alana Cordy-Collins drawing)

FIG. 9—Staff God on Chavín textile showing same headdress type as on The Shamanism Textile. (F.E. Landman photo)

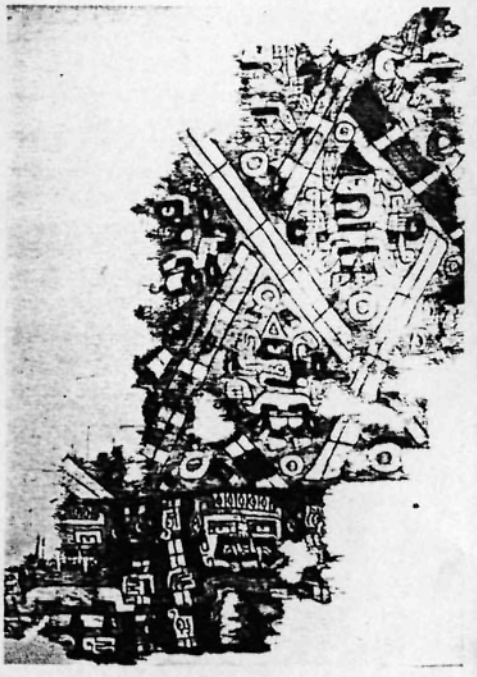

FIG. 10—Staff God on border of Chavín textile showing same headdress as on The Shamanism Textile.
(Alana Cordy-Collins photo)

Not only does it corroborate earlier independent interpretations that Chavín society's religion was shamanistic, but it suggests specific plants used in its shamanistic practices. Of the three plants shown, one seems to be San Pedro cactus, another may be acacia seed pods, but the third image eludes identification. Nevertheless, because the cactus and acacia are both hallucinogens used in South American shamanism today, it seems extremely likely that this image with plant features may be similarly interpreted. While it may be that future research will reveal the exact nature of the mysterious motif, it should be born in mind that Chavín art is highly conventionalized with a strong mythological component. That the Chavín artists consistently chose to represent San Pedro cactus with four ribs instead of the actual six to eight suggests mythological/spiritual concerns were in a sense more real than the everyday world about them. Therefore, it would be a mistake to look upon Chavín botanical representations as mirrors of the actual ecology in Peru in the second millenium B.C.

## NOTES

1 Because the textiles were not excavated archaeologically, *the locale of their discovery—supposedly* Carhua—is undocumented. However, because conditions for optimum preservation of organic materials exist on the south coast, it is very probable that the textiles were discovered near Carhua, if not precisely there.

2 Although Britton and Rose (1920) report San Pedro growing at elevations from 2000 to 3000 m, Sharon and Donnan (1977:375) have repeatedly observed it growing at sea level along the north coast of Peru.

3 "Smaller bodily appendages [in Chavín art] are usually compared to snakes, and in this way they usually issue directly from the body . . ." (Rowe 1967:79).

4 While there might be some objection to identifying *the feline on the textile as a jaguar*, rather than an ocelot, a pampas cat or *gato montes*, it should be noted that native South Americans do not make the same taxonomic distinctions as do Westerners. The term "jaguar" is a general generic referent which is sometimes broken down into more specific subtypes. For instance, Theodor Koch-Grünberg reported during 1917-1928 that the Taulipang shamans of Venezuela refered to themselves as "the black jaguar . . .the tapir jaguar . . . the puma jaguar . . . the multi-colored jaguar . . ." (cf., Furst 1968:158). These animals, whose outward appearances are distinct were, nonetheless, all categorized as jaguars.

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