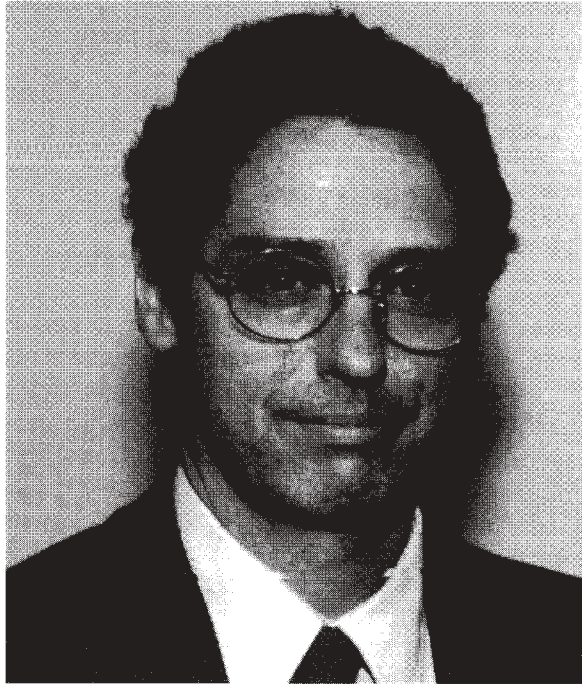


ENCUENTROS



*The Iconography of
Painted Ceramics from
the Northern Andes*

Lecture by

Felipe Cárdenas-Arroyo

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WELCOMING EACH OTHER: CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE CARIBBEAN IN THE 21ST CENTURY

By Earl Lovelace

Good evening ladies and gentlemen, friends. First allow me to say how honored I am to have been invited to this forum. For this I would like to especially thank Anne Vena and the organizers of this evening's program for bringing me here so speedily.

I spent many important years here in Washington, D.C.; first at Howard University, and later at the University of the District of Columbia, and close by at Johns Hopkins University; and I have many friends here and great memories.

I was very fortunate to be here during the Black Power movement in the 1970s; at the time when *Black was Beautiful* and the hairstyle was *The natural*, and there was a certain street militancy about. Then, in discussions with a group of friends, some of whom are no longer with us (and whose absence makes Washington, D.C. a different place for me), we thrashed out many ideas that have influenced my outlook. One of the discussions was, naturally, the differences and similarities between the state of the African American and African Caribbean person.

What came through was the idea that we in the Caribbean have labored under a false sense of freedom, that, indeed, Independence and Black governance, as well as the majority position of Black people in the islands, have contrived to mask for us the quality of our living. On the other hand, the more severe forms of racism in the United States have shaped an African American response that makes it impossible for them to accept anything less than complete liberation.

We in the Caribbean have become satisfied with a degree of liveable freedom, dangerous because our satisfaction with it could see us institutionalizing the permanent acceptance of ourselves as second-class citizens.

It is the need to understand the nature of this second-classness, and to overcome it that is one of the motive forces at the root of my recent novel, *Salt*. I believe that there can be no useful cultural transformation of the Caribbean until that second-classness is overcome. And we will not be able to properly overcome it until we retrace our

Welcoming Each Other: Cultural Transformation of the Caribbean in the 21st Century was presented in the Andrés Bello Auditorium of the Inter-American Development Bank on January 22, 1998, as part of the IDB Cultural Center's Lectures Program.

The geographic area of my research is located in southwestern Colombia and northern Ecuador, an area referred to by archaeologists as the Northern Andes. This is an important cultural trading zone because it lays just north of the Inca's northernmost frontier. Known as the Colombian Massif for its rough mountain formation, this archaeological area comprises practically all of southwestern Colombia—including such renowned sites as San Agustín and Tierradentro—known for its magnificent monumental stone carvings and subterranean carved and painted tombs. The broken terrain produces very steep slopes and deep river gorges with few available flat areas. This was, perhaps, the reason for a scattered type of settlement pattern in the past. There are a few small high valleys which could be potential archaeological sites for study.

At the present time, most of the land located between three and six thousand feet is devoted to agriculture. At higher elevations, the main crops are barley and wheat, although of greater interest to archaeologists is the cultivation of a wide variety of potatoes grown by farmers, not for sale or exchange, but for household consumption. Many of these species—together with tuber plants—are unknown to modern markets and have been in use for hundreds of years, offering a wonderful opportunity for research in the field of paleonutrition of the Northern Andes. Also, the commercial movement of medicinal plants—together with the sharing of medical, religious and magical knowledge—can still be seen in today's village

markets, such as the one in Otavalo in neighboring Ecuador, or Ipiales in Colombia.

At the time of the Spanish conquest, there were a number of ethnic groups inhabiting the highlands, the mountain slopes and lowlands. According to ethno-historical accounts, there were two major groups: the Pasto and the Quillacinga. Many other groups were located in the lowlands adjacent to the mountains, and those are also important in our research. At the close of the nineteenth century, the German archaeologist Max Uhle became interested in this area, and began studying the ceramics from a few collections, particularly the A. Stübel, W. Reiss, and B. Koppel collections in Leipzig, as well as pottery pieces from Colombia and Ecuador.

The Pacific coast, an area which is archaeologically shared by both nations, was of interest to Uhle because it represents an important archaeological area known as the Tolita-Tumaco complex, and its ceramics are characterized by the representation of human figures. Since many of the features in these ceramics are similar to the iconography of Mesoamerican art styles, Uhle proposed a Mesoamerican origin for the cultures of southwestern Colombia, suggesting two periods of Maya occupation and a subsequent occupation by the Toltecs. Uhle's ideas no longer stand, but his work was important because he brought this area to the attention of other scholars at the beginning of the twentieth century. Uhle's work was published in 1933 and was much criticized. The drawings from the Stübel, Reiss, Koppel

collections came to light much earlier in Berlin, in the beautiful publication, *Kultur un Industrie Sudamerikanischer Volker*. Uhle built a typology that was continued by the Ecuadorian diplomat, historian and archaeologist, Jacinto Jijón y Caamaño. Although assigned by Uhle and Jijón as Pasto and Quillacinga style—known as Tuncahuan—they have, in fact, nothing in common with Pasto and Quillacinga ceramics. Two French scientists, René Verneau and Paul Rivet, who accompanied the French geodesical expedition to the equator at the beginning of the twentieth century, collected a good number of ceramic pieces which later became the standard for defining the ceramic culture in this area.

Our excavations have been aimed at solving four main issues: first, we are looking for the places where people established their settlements. This is being done through systematic regional surveys which show us areas of greater population density, but we are also excavating trash pits which are giving us a great deal of information concerning the form and function of the ceramics. Second, we are seeking to build a chronology of the area in order to answer questions of cultural evolution through time. Third, we are working with new methods of analyzing the prehistoric diet directly from the bones excavated at the sites, supplementing the information with pollen studies and analysis of how soils were used in the past. We have recently excavated an area with a good concentration of carbonized seeds and food remains, one of which was a corn cob with the kernels still on. And fourth, we are

concerned with the ceramics as a symbolic system, analyzing its iconography and connecting it to funerary archaeological contexts. The fourth aspect is what I will talk about today, although I must emphasize that my ideas on this topic are still preliminary and are presented as hypothetical, awaiting further confirmation.

Most of the decorated ceramics from southwestern Colombia come from tombs. Some of these have been systematically excavated by archaeologists, but many others, unfortunately, have been looted by treasure hunters. The burials in this area are known as shaft and chamber tombs, consisting of a deep shaft—some of which go down twenty-five meters or more—and a chamber where the deceased and his belongings were placed. It is also interesting to see that some of the cemeteries excavated show a hierarchical pattern of spatial distribution, in which the tombs at the center of the cemetery belonged to ethnic lords, chiefs and possibly shamans. These were very deep with chambers high enough that people could stand upright. A principal person was buried in the center surrounded by other individuals. At the center there were holes filled with golden objects and ceramics surrounded the perimeter of the chamber. As we move away from the center of the cemetery, the tombs become less deep and the contents less elaborate. An interesting hypothesis about this was set forward by M. V. Uribe who suggested that the cemeteries were built after the pattern of villages, where the houses of the principal chiefs stood at the center, surrounded by the houses of the

common people. This is important for our topic on decorated ceramics, because I believe that a significant amount of information about the symbolic character of the ceramics can be inferred by understanding the spatial distribution in the cemeteries.

One of the most interesting subjects in the study of archaeology is the search for evidence of the consumption of narcotics in ancient societies. This practice is thousands of years old and can be found in almost every geographic area of the world. However, the use of psychoactive substances in the past, as well as by contemporary aboriginal groups, contrasts dramatically with their consumption in Western culture, especially when viewed from the stand-point of the cultural contexts involved, and the motivations for use.

Regardless of geographical location or cultural background, the use of psychotropic drugs in prehistory occurred within the framework of magic, divination, curing or communication with other spheres of complex cosmological significance. If we were to compare the use of narcotic drugs in ancient times with modern times, such a comparison would show antagonistic views. In the past, narcotics were an aid for entering an alternate state of consciousness with profound philosophical meaning. The use of drugs in the present can be viewed within the context of social-ideological conflicts. In other words, psychotropic substances were a powerful element of social unity and a reason for social gathering in ancient times, but today they are one of the main sources of social

disruption and isolation. Hallucinogens played an important role in the preservation of power structures and political alliances, and as medicinal agents among pre-Hispanic South Americans, and they still do to a great extent among many Amazonian groups.

Recent years have seen the development of new laboratory methods for detecting the presence of metabolites of cocaine and nicotine in skeletal and mummified ancient human remains. Such research has successfully established protocols by which these components can be identified, and opens the possibility for establishing a chronological framework within the geographic areas for ancient coca consumption. Archaeological research has traditionally studied the consumption of coca and tobacco through the analysis of indirect evidence, such as the presence of ceramic effigies representing coca chewers or scenes painted on ceramic vessels depicting the consumption of coca. When working with large skeletal population samples, modern forensics can produce important statistical information, such as data on the consumption of these and other substances by age and sex, offering the possibility for building hypotheses regarding drug use for social and religious activities in the past.

Detecting the use of psychotropic drugs, as well as antidepressant and antipsychotic drugs from human scalp hair, has been successfully carried out by forensic professionals in modern day criminal cases, and we suspect that further research into such methods, as applied to

archaeology, will be of great value.

Coca and tobacco, for example, were two of the most important narcotic plants known to the Indians of South America. Coca was used for the anesthetic properties of its main alkaloid, cocaine, and was important as an addition to hallucinogenic substances in northwestern Amazonia, where they regarded it as a sacred plant. Tobacco was and still is taken, either as a drink, chewed, smoked, snuffed or anally in the form of enemas. Tobacco was also mixed with hallucinogenic plants, a practice still performed by several tribes of the Colombian Amazon rain forest, and is strongly associated with the ritual consumption of hallucinogenic substances. A liquid-like preparation of tobacco known as *ambil* is taken as a drink and is also introduced into the anal canal for therapeutic purposes; the same is done in mortuary rituals. Recent research suggests the possibility that certain plants containing nicotine, other than tobacco, may have been known from early times for their analgesic properties, reinforcing the possibility of ancestral knowledge of the medicinal potential of plants containing nicotine.

I have been intrigued by the role played by narcotic plants in ancient societies. They were socially and ritually so important that they formed an integral part of aboriginal cosmogony, and their origin is usually explained through mythology, as in the case of the Tukano Indians from the northwest Amazon, who recite an extraordinary myth time and again inside their ceremonial houses when gathering to

drink an hallucinogenic potion.

I wish to present the cultural context of hallucinogens in tropical South America. Their use has been recorded from ancient times among aboriginal peoples, and they had, and still have, far reaching consequences on social behavior. Aspects of this behavior can be studied through their art, which has been shown to have a strong biological and neurological foundation.

Many authors argue that psychoactive plants have been collected and prepared for use since antiquity. It has been suggested that the narcotic seeds of *A. peregrina*—a powerful hallucinogenic snuff known as *yopo* in the Orinoco plains and northwest Amazon— may have been known by 9000 BC in northern Chile and southern Peru, and that other psychotropic plants may have been used very early in other parts of the Americas. Present day distribution of such plants on the Continent goes from southern Canada to central Chile and Argentina, with the greatest use by aboriginals in northwestern Amazonia and northern Mexico.

The early Spanish chroniclers, traveling with the conquest troops in the sixteenth century, described the use of hallucinogenic substances among the Indians. The Europeans were frightened by the powerful effects of these plants, particularly the Catholic priests, because they believed that the Indians were being possessed by demons. These drugs produce vomiting, considerable salivation and frantic behavior, all of which the friars associated to their previous experiences with European witchcraft, also known to

have had a strong hallucinogenic foundation. As we shall see, one of the common themes in drug-induced hallucinations is that the person taking the drug can contact fabulous beings. Interpretation of these visions is, of course, a matter that depends on each particular cultural background and can turn out to be a highly subjective matter. Amazonian Indians regarded the individuals in their hallucinations as supernatural beings, but for the Spanish these visions were clearly the devil. Their interpretation, derived from their own European cultural experience, provided one more reason to crack down on native religious beliefs. Many attempts were made by the Spanish crown, the Catholic Church, and the newly established colonies to abolish the use of these hallucinogens, but only with partial success.

Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, one of the most systematic and detailed narrators of the early years of discovery and conquest of the Americas, gives a description of the use of hallucinogens in the Antilles early in the sixteenth century: "...[the Indians] say this shaman talks to the devil... and after having talked, the shaman will tell the Indians what the devil said to him... and the Indians will do whatever the devil said they must do..."

With reference to the narcotic snuff known as *yopo* mentioned earlier, a seventeenth-century friar by the name of Pedro Guillén wrote in 1634: "...all night the chief and the Indians took *yopo*... until they saw the devil and they talked to him." This talking to the devil should be seen in a

totally different religious context since the aboriginal belief systems are very complex. Under the influence of hallucinogens, individuals believe they can transform themselves into other beings. Most of these are animals that maintain a human character. The resultant imagery is strongly dualistic because the shaman that has taken the drug, although still human, acquires the features of a particular animal. The most common iconographic image in this respect is the feline—the Amazonian jaguar—a cult that can be traced to many years before Christ in coastal Peru. Images of half human—half feline monsters play a big part in Paracas and Chavin art styles, and they also appear in one of the most interesting archaeological sites with monumental stone carvings at San Agustín, in southwestern Colombia. The half human—half feline transformation is depicted in many of these monoliths, some of which also depict paraphernalia for the use of drugs, such as carved snuffing tablets, snuffing spoons, lime sticks and coca bags. This iconography is very common in San Agustín, and in many other areas of the country. Gold work and ceramics recurrently show the theme of the transformation between humans and animals within the context of shamanic imagery.

Another widely distributed feature in pre-Hispanic art is the transformation between humans and birds—traditionally known as the shamanic flight—a sensation induced by hallucinogens containing harmine. This aspect is closely related to the European flying witch—again, a vision that was brought about by the use of

Peganum harmala, the potent Old World hallucinogen. The devil was not the devil, but a shaman transforming into a jaguar.

The use of psychotropic substances in aboriginal Colombia today is mostly limited to the tropical lowlands, where the incidence of Spanish colonial rule was never really as effective as it was in the higher Andean areas. Due to the harsh natural conditions of the tropical rain forest, Spanish interests mostly concentrated in the Andean highlands with its fertile valleys and mountain slopes. Therefore, most cultural traditions in Amazonia remained nearly untouched until the mid-nineteenth century, such as the native practice of drug-induced visions. How these native people came to know the psychoactive properties of such plants is a matter that still amazes us, even more when we consider the immense variety of species that make up the astonishing Amazonian ecological mosaic.

Let us turn now to a brief description of some major hallucinogens used by South American Indians, the effects of which are known to be closely related with their decorative art styles. These hallucinogens are known by their vernacular names as *ayahuasca* (or *yage*) and *yopo*. *Ayahuasca* is a Quechua word. The plant belongs to a genus known as *Banisteriopsis*. There are many species distributed in the tropical zones of northern South America, but only three are used by the Indians. It is a powerful hallucinogenic beverage prepared from either one or several of these species, which grow as vines in the rainforest. The psychotropic effects are caused by harmine

and harmaline alkaloids.

Harmine is a well known alkaloid in the Old World, which is found in the narcotic plant *Peganum harmala*. Chemical research, however, has shown that not all species contain the same alkaloids. The Indians know by experience the different effects produced by the different species, and will frequently prepare admixtures in which the leaves of one plant are added to the bark of another, enhancing the hallucinogenic power of the beverage. This is done according to the ritual circumstances.

The second hallucinogen is known as *yopo*, belonging to the genera *Anadenanthera*, of which there are two species. *Yopo* is a strong hallucinogenic snuff prepared from the beans of the plant. It is taken by blowing it into the nose through specially designed blowers. Chemical research has shown it contains powerful psychotropic substances. Most sixteenth century descriptions make reference to the use of *yopo* in many parts of pre-Hispanic Colombia. There are several written accounts about the highland Andean areas occupied by complex agricultural chiefdoms at the time of the Spanish conquest, as well as many others in the Orinoco River basin, northwest Amazonia and the western flanks of the Andes mountains towards the Pacific Ocean. Many researchers have described both the visions and the physical reactions caused by these drugs in humans, and in many instances they themselves have experienced the intoxications.

Let us turn now to the chemical and neurophysiological phenomena that give

rise to the designs in archaeological and present day ethnographic objects. Broadly defined, an hallucination is an altered state of consciousness brought about by one or more factors, such as the ingestion of intoxicating chemical substances, high fever, deep states of meditation, extreme heat, or states of extreme deprivation such as little or no food intake. Hallucinations can take various forms: they can be visual—seeing colorful lights, geometric forms, figures of people or extraordinary beings—but they can also be auditory, olfactory, tactile and gustatory. In other words, all senses can be subjected to hallucinations to greater or lesser degrees.

Drugs that cause these changes act on the central nervous system. Research conducted on *ayahuasca* has shown that the hallucinogenic effects of that drug can be divided essentially into three stages: first is a state in which various geometric forms appear under a general sensation of well being; second, a series of figurative visions of individuals, animals and horrifying monsters come into action; the third and final stage is deep sleep.

The light patterns of the first stage are known in the medical and psychological literature as phosphenes—a phenomenon which is the object of our discussion. Phosphenes are neurally based patterns of light which occur without the intervention of an external light source to the human eye. They can appear for various reasons, for example, when we apply a slight pressure on our eyelids, and also when electrical shocks are applied to the temples. Remaining in the dark for prolonged

periods of time will also produce these light patterns; even airline pilots can experience phosphenes when looking for hours into cloudless skies. During the late eighteenth century, Alessandro Volta was able to induce phosphenes by placing electrodes on the temples. He was followed by Johannes Purkinje who, in 1819, produced extensive work on electrically induced phosphenes. Many years after these early experiments, German scientist Max Knoll carried out a large investigation on phosphenes on a group of over one thousand people. He applied low voltage to his subjects who reported seeing a series of light patterns which he classified into various categories. Those people who were also given small amounts of hallucinogens (in that particular case, LSD was used), experienced much stronger and clearly defined phosphene patterns. The Knoll phosphenes are essentially in the form of concentric circles, semi-concentric circles, spirals, stars, diamonds, dots and different types of lines ending in a characteristic curvature. When viewing these designs, nothing particularly unusual would seem to call the attention of the average observer, other than mere curiosity.

However, the significance of Knoll's research for anthropology was not discovered until forty years later, when Austrian born ethnologist G. Reichel-Dolmatoff carried out an extensive investigation into the biological and religious significance of hallucinogenic plants in the Colombian Amazon rainforest among the Tukano Indians. During his observations of ritual practices, in which the central

activity was the consumption of *ayahuasca*, Reichel-Dolmatoff was able to identify decorative patterns on ceramics, walls of ceremonial houses, bark paintings, basketry designs and other objects, which were directly related to the visions induced by the drug. What turned out to be truly amazing was that many of the patterns made by the Tukanos were nearly identical to the phosphene patterns described forty years earlier by Knoll with his European patients.

Understanding the symbolism of these designs is a highly subjective undertaking, although some ethnologists have been able to decode the meaning behind the world of aboriginal designs. This, of course, is not my goal; rather, it has become clear to me that some designs in archaeological ceramics from the Northern Andes, as well as the geometric designs in petroglyphs and monolithic stone carvings from these same areas, have their origins in drug-induced phosphenes.

Let us turn now to the archaeological evidence and the ethnographic record. We have seen that phosphene patterns were first described by Knoll, and then discovered by Reichel-Dolmatoff in the Amazon. Since prehistoric times, there has been an intense interaction between the tropical lowlands and the Andean highlands. Contacts between both areas are confirmed by the presence of lowland objects in highland archaeological contexts, and vice versa. For example, sea shells and pottery vessels that depict typical lowland animals, such as primates, parrots and sea birds, have been excavated from tombs at

elevations above ten thousand feet. Wooden stools made from *chonta* wood—a palm that only grows in the lowlands—have been excavated in highland tombs. The stool is a classic Amazonian object used by shamans and leaders to symbolize political and shamanic power. These were also depicted in ancient ceramic effigies, many times with a man chewing the sacred coca plant. Paraphernalia for the use of hallucinogens has also been found in archaeological excavations in highland Colombia, such as wood and bone spoons for snuffing *yopo*, suggesting that some of these plants could have been transported hundreds of miles through exchange networks. So the contacts between highlands and lowlands are well documented.

Some ceremonial houses are highly decorated with concentric circles, stars and images of special beings. Other designs are made on cloth, bark, basketry and wooden objects. According to the Indians, they represent the visions they see under the influence of hallucinogenic substances. Rock art in various parts of the lowland Amazon and the Andean highlands show the same motifs, some of which can also be seen in archaeological ceramics.

It is very intriguing to think about possible universal patterns of design produced by neurological and chemical phenomena in humans, and particularly how these phenomena became so prominent in rituals. The use of *ayahuasca* and *yopo* spread beyond the tropical rainforest. Although the species that I have mentioned are grown in the humid forests, they were probably products of elite exchange in the

past. Reichel-Dolmatoff wrote that the boundary between archaeology and ethnology is vague, suggesting that ethnology offers a world of possibilities for producing models that may help explain some archaeological problems. For many archaeologists, this seems an impossible task because they believe that the cultural processes that have taken place in aboriginal societies during their many years of contact with Western civilization have produced changes that reflect a new perspective of the world, and new social beliefs. This, in many ways, may be true but not entirely, because any new social formation in the American aboriginals is necessarily the result of various cultural traditions coming together. Religious syncretism, for example, is clearly a philosophical construct that takes elements from one belief system and transplants them into the old one with the hope of making it stronger, or more powerful, or more magical. Archaeologists must try to isolate those elements that have been in continuous use since antiquity.

The subject of design patterns and their recurrence in the Northern Andes must be understood as both an epiphenomenon of the use of psychotropic drugs in ritual contexts, and as a consequence of constant contact and exchange.

The universal that we seek here is not just to establish the fact that these substances were used, but that such use made the supernatural world a legitimate and coherent way to understand life and explain a series of natural phenomena. I believe that many of these design patterns were a form of communication, an unspoken language that held symbolic meaning in its iconography, which transcended linguistic and cultural barriers. Archaeologists should make a greater effort in trying to decode the symbolism beyond the art.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Felipe Cardenas-Arroyo'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial 'F' and 'C'.

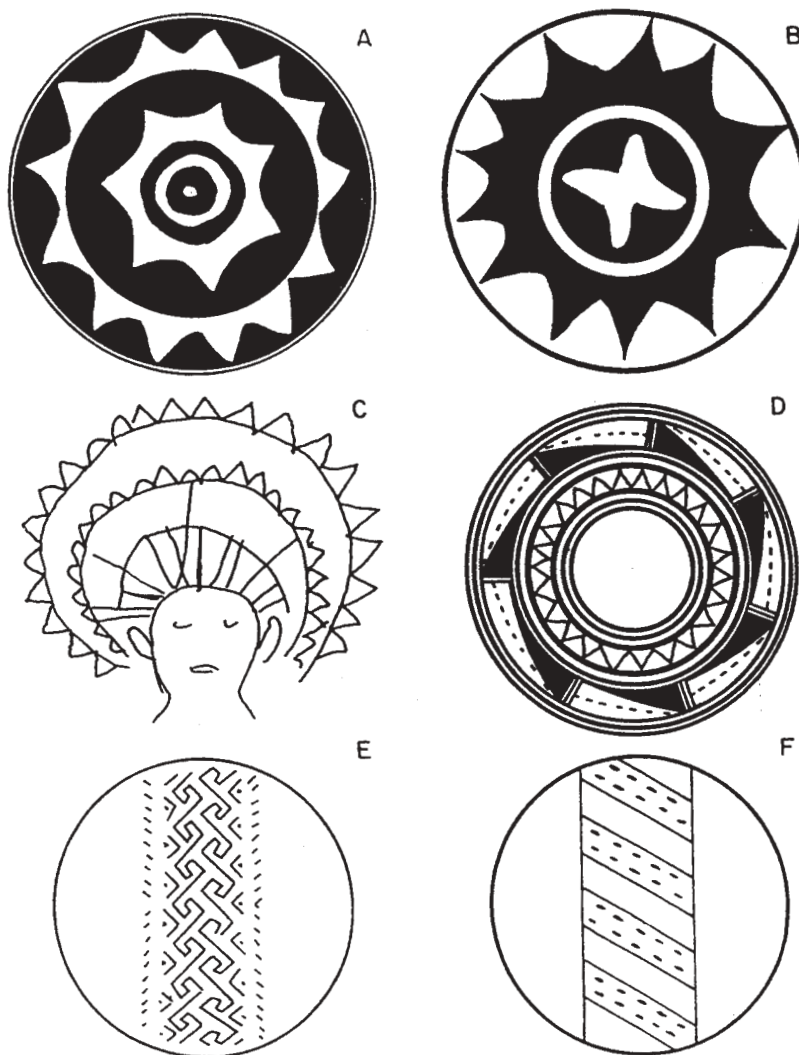


Figure 1: A) painted design on the exterior wall of a ceremonial house in the Amazon (Colombia); B) painted design on an archaeological pot from the Andean highlands (southwestern Colombia); C) drawing by a Jivaro shaman of another shaman, when under the influence of *ayahuasca* (after Michael Harner); D) painted design on an archaeological pot from the Andean highlands (southwestern Colombia), depicting the same crown-like design as in drawing C; E) basketry design from the Colombian Amazon; and F) design on an archaeological pot from the Andean highlands (southwestern Colombia).

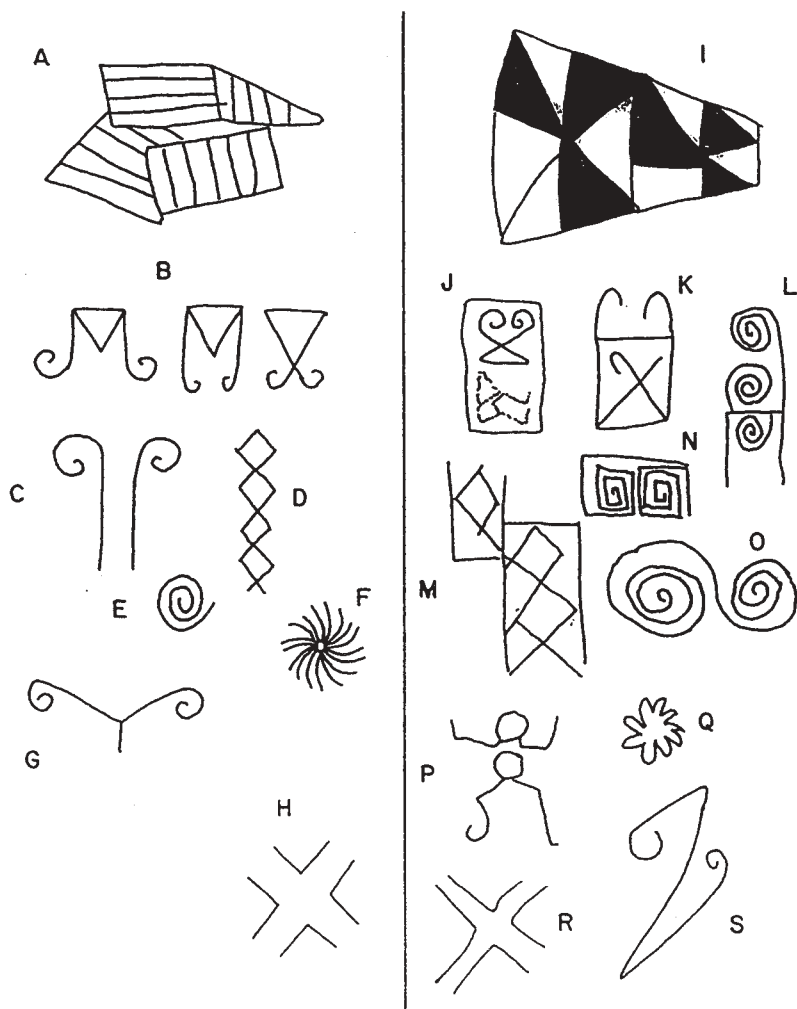


Figure 2: A to H: Ethnographic designs. According to the Indians, these are seen under the influence of hallucinogens. I to S: Designs seen in archaeological pottery and rock art.

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He has contributed numerous articles to anthropological journals, including the *Paleopathology Newsletter*, the *Revista Colombiana de Antropología*, *Boletín Museo del Oro*, *Archaeometry* and the *Annals of Human Genetics*. He is editor of the *Revista de Antropología y Arqueología* at the Universidad de los Andes, and has organized exhibitions of indigenous mummies in the region.

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 - *Aspectos de creación en la novela centroamericana*
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