

The Spirituality of *Anadenanthera*: Religion and Hallucinogens in Chavin Culture

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Without a written language and much of the civilizations still unstudied, Chavin and Cupisnique, ancient South American populations, are cast away as mysterious and savage. Looking closer at their rituals, one can begin to see that their culture was incredibly complex and intentional. Chavin existed during the end of the Initial Period (1800-900 BCE) and into the Early Horizon (900-200 BCE), lasting from 1000 to 200 BCE.¹ Cupisnique, also called Coastal Chavin, began even earlier, starting in 1400 and lasting until 500 BCE.² Both spanned across modern day Peru, and, while Cupisnique was closer to the coast, the cultures overlapped in many ways including trade, artistic style, and religion, which is why they are considered together in this essay and in much of art history (fig. 1). This essay will investigate one particular aspect of their culture: psychoactive drugs.

Both Cupisnique and Chavin have evidence in their artifacts and artworks of ritualistic use of hallucinogens. This evidence led archaeologists and anthropologists to assume the drugs were used by ritual leaders in ceremonial situations. Some of these substances would be inhaled through the nose by using complex sculptures, such as *Spoon with Profile Face with Ornate Head Decoration*. This carved piece of bone appears geometric to the untrained eye, but the pattern actually reveals a feline face when lifted to eye or nose level. By looking at the ceremonial importance of hallucinogenic snuff, particularly from the *Anadenanthera* (vilca) plant, this essay investigates the role of ceremony in Chavin design and functional use of artifacts with this bone spoon as a case study. This object asserts the notion that hallucinogens were not recreational, as seen today, but instead played a vital role in Cupisnique and Chavin religions.

¹ Jeanette Nicewinter, "Latin American Art History Week 3" (Zoom, American University, online, September 9 2020)

² Nicewinter; Michael Malpass, "Of Masks and Monoliths: The Early Horizon," in *Ancient People of the Andes* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), 108.

Looking at a tool used for hallucinogens, the *Spoon with Profile Face with Ornate Head Decoration* (fig. 2) reveals important aspects of Cupisnique and Chavin culture through its formal elements. This small, ivory-colored bone utensil has a rectangular shape that is elaborately carved on one side and curved with a gentle depression on the other.³ Within the cracks and crevices of the piece there is a reddish hue, suggesting that the piece was once painted. The intricate design on the top appears floral or leaf like and is dotted with small holes for the top half. Farther down, there are more curving lines carved into the bone in low relief. From this birds-eye view, the pattern appears to be a reference to the *Anadenanthera* (fig. 3-4), or vilca, plant with hallucinogenic properties. The oval shapes hanging below the leaves reference the seed pods of the *Anadenanthera* plant.⁴ Also, the lines of dots with a rectangular pattern are common in Wari artworks to reference the seed pods, which translates well into this object from a pre-Wari civilization.⁵ The Wari did not exist in Peru until around 600 CE, but their artifacts take cues from past Chavin tradition.⁶ This affirms that the spoon's carvings are references to the hallucinogen commonly associated with Chavin and Cupisnique culture.

The bottom half of the *Spoon with Profile Face with Ornate Head Decoration* contains a rounded rectangular shape, which was used to hold snuff. This is indicated by the thin lip around the indentation, which was used to keep the contents in place. This side is a sharp contrast to the above decoration as it is smooth and well worn, suggesting regular use. When the piece is raised to the nose, a feline face with bared fangs and serpent eyes becomes clear in the above pattern,

³ Size of *Spoon with Profile Face with Ornate Head Decoration*: W. 1 x D. ¼ x L. 3 ⅝ in (2.5 × 0.6 × 9.2 cm)

⁴ Richard L. Burger, "What Kind of Hallucinogenic Snuff Was Used at Chavin de Huantar? An Iconographic Identification," *Nawpa Pacha Journal of Andean Archaeology* 31, no. 2 (2011): 136

⁵ Colin Domnauer, "The Legume Pod Motif as a Symbolic Representation of the Shamanic Hallucinogen, Vilca (*Anadenanthera spp.*), in Pre-Columbian Andean Cultures," *Nawpa Pacha Journal of Andean Archaeology* 40, no. 2 (2020): 165

⁶ "Huari," Encyclopaedia Britannica, 7 March 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Huari>.

again affirming its intended use for hallucinogenic snuff.⁷ This complex design hides the use of the spoon from the passerby, signifying its sacred ritualistic use.

The Chavin frequently used intricate designs like that found on this spoon so that only those who were members of the culture could understand the artwork. As anthropologist Michael Malpass explained, their artistic style can be identified with anthropomorphic and animal themes, including jaguars, caimans, eagles, and other large, strong animals. Chavin artwork also can be identified with eccentric pupils in the eye and a grimacing mouth with fangs, which makes for an intimidating anthropomorphic figure.⁸ As archeologist Gordon Willey described, the Chavin style is “graceful, flowing, essentially curvilinear, and intrinsically and rhythmically balanced.”⁹ The jaguar is particularly relevant with regards to this spoon, as it features this image. It was a common theme as it was an animal celebrated and feared for its power in the jungle. As Yoshio Onuki, the scholar who excavated this piece, said, a figure “with a feline face is worth noting,” especially with Cupisnique art.¹⁰ Kuntur Wasi, the Chavin religious site where Onuki studied, did not have any jaguars in the area since they are native to the jungle and this site is in the highlands of Peru (fig. 5). Large felines were almost considered mythical beasts since they were rarely, if ever, seen in person.

Returning to the artifact as a whole, *Spoon with Profile Face with Ornate Head Decoration* suggests a purpose that reaches far beyond what its small size would lead one to believe. The *Anadenanthera* imagery and hidden jaguar face both allude to a psychoactive purpose that is connected to wider Chavin religious evidence. Art Historian Rebecca

⁷ “Spoon with Profile Face with Ornate Head Decoration,” The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Accessed 9 September 2020, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/722372>.

⁸ Malpass, 98

⁹ Malpass, 98

¹⁰ Yoshio Onuki, “From Ritual to Ideology: Ritual Activity and Artistic Representations in the Northern Highlands of Peru in the Formative Period,” in *Rituals of the Past: Prehispanic and Colonial Case Studies in Andean Archaeology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), 108.

Stone-Miller, describing the role of animals in shamanic visions, said, “A primary aspect of altered consciousness is often the direct kinesthetic experience of becoming an animal. This is both a visceral and a visual experience, but not one that partakes of “normal” seeing and corporeal sensation.”¹¹ Shamanism, as Stone-Miller explains, is not a religion like one would see today. Rather, it is a “spiritual stance and a set of practices based on flux,” meaning that rather than worshipping a particular deity, a shaman focuses on the healing powers of the earth and the supernatural, often through “altered consciousness states that feature multi-sensorial visions.”¹² This is much different from monotheistic and polytheistic practices today that are god or deity centric.

Setting Chavin religion further apart from today, Stone-Miller’s research also explains clearly that hallucinogens were not taken recreationally, since visions were regularly described as horrific and terrifying experiences. One example she uses reported “the repeated experience of being squeezed throughout his vision by naturalistically enormous, neon colored boa constrictors.”¹³ While the exact experience remains unique to the individual, there is consistent reporting of visions including “brilliant and shifting colors and shapes, attacks by predators, transformation into those and other beings, flying, seeing distant places and times, speaking to spiritual beings, and understanding the universal life force in all things.”¹⁴ The most common predators reported in these visions are snakes, felines, and crocodilians, which are also the most common animals found in artworks from the early American civilizations.¹⁵ This explains why the *Spoon with Profile Face with Ornate Head Decoration* would have a complex pattern from

¹¹ Stone-Miller, Rebecca. "Human-Animal Imagery, Shamanic Visions, and Ancient American Aesthetics." *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 45 (2004): 48.

¹² Stone-Miller 49

¹³ Stone-Miller 50

¹⁴ Stone-Miller 53

¹⁵ Stone-Miller 54

above that creates a jaguar image when raised to eye or nose level. What first appears as a design with plant iconography then becomes the intense experience of hallucinating with vilca.

In the case of the *Spoon with Profile Face with Ornate Head Decoration*, there is specific mention of a particular drug: *Anadenanthera* (vilca). It is important to note what exactly *Anadenanthera* is and how it can be used for a greater understanding of this piece. Archeologist Colin Domnauer provides a useful understanding of the plant itself, which does have multiple species. However, the various species are almost identical iconographically, so the plant is referred to generally.¹⁶ To activate the psychoactive qualities of *Anadenanthera*, one must roast the seeds, grind them into a fine powder, and then inhale them through a small tube into the nose.¹⁷ Each step requires prior knowledge to identify the plant, harvest the mature seeds, and roast them to remove the husk. This is not something that is instantly prepared once removed from a plant, like psilocybin mushrooms. Instead, there is a dedicated process that in itself is a ritual, apart from the actual use of the drug. Domnauer's research also shows that vilca has been used since 2130 BCE throughout the Andes and beyond, reaching as far south as Chile and as far north as the Caribbean.¹⁸ With such a prolific history, it is no surprise that this plant became part of important religious rituals through centuries of use.

Current scholarship about Chavin culture and religious practices supplements the formal evidence that the *Spoon with Profile Face with Ornate Head Decoration* was used for snuffing vilca for ritualistic, psychoactive purposes. The spoon's discovery at Kuntur Wasi, a ceremonial Chavin site in northern Peru, is particularly helpful for uncovering its purpose. At the site, many bone spoons, spatulas, and trays with Chavin-style iconography were discovered.¹⁹

¹⁶ Domnauer 164

¹⁷ Domnauer 164

¹⁸ Domnauer 164

¹⁹ Burger "What Kind of Snuff" 136

Finding these objects at religious centers is in itself strong evidence for the role hallucinogens played in Chavin ceremonies. Scholar and archeologist Richard Burger was able to recognize the role of the psychoactive snuff *Anadenathera* through archeological analysis at Kuntur Wasi, Chavin de Huantar, Pacopampa, and Campanayuq Rumi.²⁰ Using evidence collected by the site's main archeologist, Yoshio Onuki, Burger analyzed the spoon in comparison to other spoons from the aforementioned sites to affirm its purpose. For example, a stone artifact with similar carvings and of a similar shape was found by archeologists Rosas and Shady at Pacopampa (fig. 6), suggesting that this item was common throughout Chavin settlements.²¹ This stone carved snuff spoon also features a feline face, which is a common iconographic identifier in Chavin and Cupisnique art.²² Other spoons used for vilca snuff were made of gold and silver, showing small sculptural figures on top rather than a flat design (fig. 7-8). The prevalence of snuff spoons with intricate designs found across Chavin religious sites suggests that these artifacts were regularly used in religious ceremonies. Since the Kuntur Wasi bone spoon can now be understood in comparison to similar artifacts, the evidence supporting its relevance in Chavin and Cupisnique culture and religion is strengthened.

Building onto the evidence for vilca in Chavin culture, there is also much research for the ceremonial use of the drug at Chavin de Huantar, another major religious site for the Chavin. Evidence of the plant can be found in many of the sculptures and artifacts there. For example, large stone heads on a wall known as the Tenon heads frequently feature an anthropomorphic jaguar head with the eccentric pupils and mucus drip that suggest hallucination (fig. 9). This is particularly vital information because it shows who in the society was using the drug, how it was

²⁰ Burger "What Kind of Snuff" 136

²¹ Richard L. Burger, "The Initial Period Societies in the Highlands and Montane Forest," in *Chavin and the Origins of Andean Civilization* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1992), 107.

²² Burger "The Initial Period" 108

used, and how the use was interpreted. According to Burger, it is assumed that religious leaders would hold the ground *Anadenanthera* snuff in leather pouches, scoop it up with a small bone spoon, and then inhale through one nostril with a bird bone straw. Both bone spoons and tubes have been recovered, but there is only some suggested evidence of the leather pouches.²³ Finding the tools necessary for using snuff at a religious pilgrimage site is vital evidence in understanding the purpose of using vilca in Chavin rituals. Location of discovery is essential for interpretation when an ancient culture does not have a written language or record keeping system.

Beyond the artifacts found at Chavin de Huantar, the artwork carved into stone walls and temples is also helpful in uncovering the role of *Anadenanthera* snuff. Priests, represented with their hair in a topknot, are depicted in low relief on temple walls with anthropomorphic qualities such as fangs and eccentric pupils (figs. 10-11).²⁴ It is also important to note that these sculptures feature either mucus or discharge from the nose dripping down the face. This is in reference to the physical response from the body after inhaling the vilca snuff.²⁵ As Burger explains, the physical response to the drug is “largely invisible to the casual observer,” so emphasis on the nose dripping allowed inference that the priest was hallucinating.²⁶ Ceremonies and even daily religious practices were, as often today, centered around asking for advice and guidance from the gods above. Should someone come to a priest to get their message across, they would want to know that something was occurring, which the mucus reaction provided.

As scholar Matthew Paul Sayre explains in his dissertation, rituals in Chavin culture were not necessarily a special act, “but considered part of the broader array of social activity.”²⁷ Sayre

²³ Burger “What Kind of Snuff” 131

²⁴ Burger “What Kind of Snuff” 127

²⁵ Burger “What Kind of Snuff” 134

²⁶ Burger “What Kind of Snuff” 134

²⁷ Matthew P. Sayre, “Life Across the River: Agricultural, Ritual, and Production Practices at Chavin de Huantar, Peru,” (Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology thesis, University of California Berkeley, 2010), 58.

combines the research of multiple scholars on the topic of Chavin de Huantar to provide greater context to Chavin religious practices. Some scholars, like Burger, found that rituals at the site attracted religious pilgrims. In contrast, Sayre reports that other scholars argue that elites used Chavin de Huantar to lure people in and exploit them using religion.²⁸ Of course, it is difficult to find a definitive answer in a culture that left behind no clear record keeping system. However, looking to Chavin and Cupisnique design, it is evident that religion was a major part of the culture and daily life.

Religion for Chavin and Cupisnique looks drastically different from religions like Christianity and Islam that are popularly practiced today. However, evidence of rituals in their artworks and artifacts shows that it was culturally just as important, if not more so, in their daily life. Because their practices, such as using vilca, are foreign to most today, their culture is frequently dismissed as savage or bizarre. Putting this into perspective though, perhaps parts of today's religions will be seen in a similar light after centuries pass and all that remains are certain artifacts left for future people to interpret.

Using the *Spoon with Profile Face with Ornate Head Decoration* as a case study, it is clear that interpretation of Chavin requires context of plant life, other discovered objects, and sites where archeologists study. This spoon is simply one example of the use of *Anadenanthera* snuff, but, with context, can become a microcosm of Chavin religion. As more research on ancient cultures comes from South America, perhaps more will be revealed about the use of hallucinogens in ancient religions. With the current evidence available, however, it is evident that these drugs played a vital role in rituals and helped create a vibrant, complex religious practice.

²⁸ Sayer 67

Figures



Figure 1. Map of Chavin and Chavin influenced civilizations, accessed from Khan Academy <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/world-history/world-history-beginnings/ancient-america/a/andean-and-chavin-civilizations-article>



Figure 2. *Spoon with Profile Face with Ornate Head Decoration, 500-250 BCE, Cupisnique/Chavin, bone, Museo Kuntur Wasi, San Pablo, Ministerio de Cultura del Peru.* Accessed from <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/722372>



Figure 3. Image of Anadenanthera tree blossoming, accessed from <http://tropical.theferns.info/image.php?id=Anadenanthera+peregrina>



Anadenanthera peregrina

Figure 4. Drawing of Anadenanthera branch, mature seed pods, and seeds, accessed from <http://tropical.theferns.info/image.php?id=Anadenanthera+peregrina>

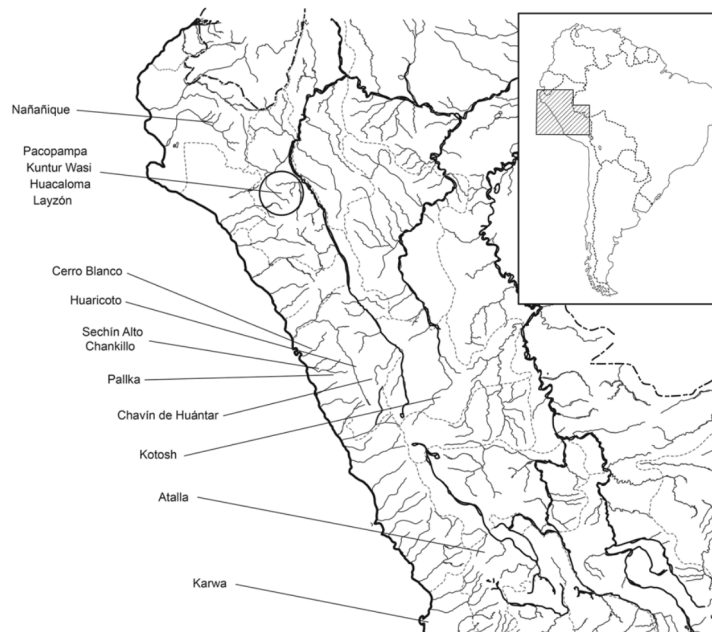


Figure 5. Map including locations of major Chavin sites, particularly to point out the location of Kuntur Wasi in the Northern Highlands of Peru, Accessed from Michael Malpass's *Ancient People of the Andes*, "Of Masks and Monoliths: The Early Horizon", pp. 97

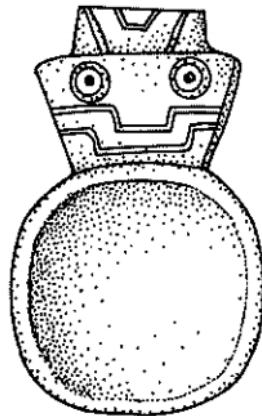


Figure 6. A sketch of a small (5cm) stone snuff spoon found in the Pacopampa area, likely used to inhale hallucinogens. Richard L. Burger, *Chavin and the Origins of Andean Civilization*, pp. 107



Figure 7. *Bimetallic Effigy Spoon*, 400-200 BCE, Chavin, Gold and Silver, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C. Accessed from https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/722135?&exhibitionId=%7b3b5ff8a3-a6fd-432e-99f7-83950f4924be%7d&oid=722135&pkgids=473&pg=0&rpp=20&pos=14&ft=*&offset=20

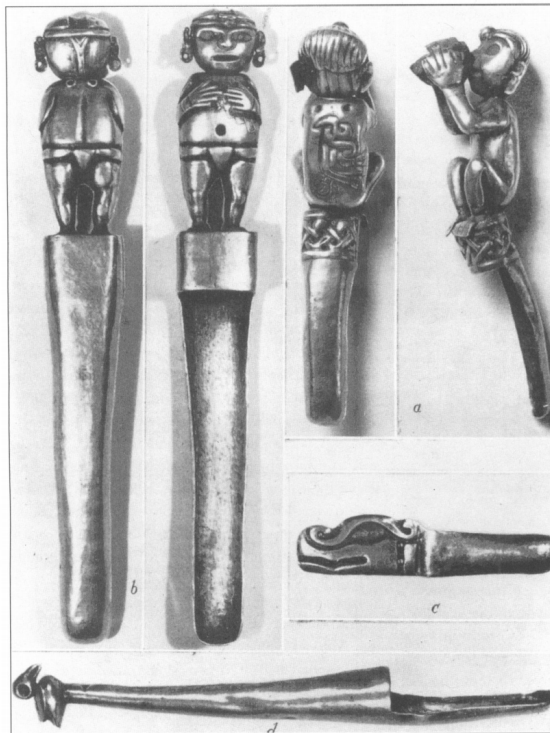


Figure 8. Four gold snuff spoons from Chavin de Huantar. Richard Burger, *What Kind of Hallucinogenic Snuff was Used at Chavin de Huantar? An Iconographic Identification*, pp. 133



Figure 9. Tenon head of an anthropomorphic jaguar with eccentric pupils, accessed from <https://www.thequantumcompass.com/en/our-tale/chavin-de-huantar-the-mysteries-of-the-jaguar-god-and-the-cactus-san-pedro>



Figure 10. Stone sculpture from Chavin de Huantar showing a supernatural figure adorned with *Anadenanthera* leaves and pods. 54 cm x 50 cm x 16cm. On display at the Museum National Chavin, Chavin de Huantar. Richard L. Burger, *What Kind of Hallucinogenic Snuff Was Used at Chavin de Huantar? An Iconographic Identification*, pp. 126.



Figure 11. Drawing of the sculpture found in Fig. 7 by Otatola. Richard L. Burger, *What Kind of Hallucinogenic Snuff Was Used at Chavin de Huantar? An Iconographic Identification*, pp. 126.

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