

Beyond the San Pedro Cactus: Ancient Nasca Shamanism in Polychrome Ceramics

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Many scholars assume that the ancient Nasca practiced a form of shamanism on the south coast of present-day Peru (c. 1–750 CE). Typically, the identification of entheogens and shaman figures as subject matter in the vast corpus of Nasca polychrome ceramics supports those claims; however, visual analysis of the vessel forms and images reveals further evidence of a deeper understanding of shamanic practice. Some polychromes show that Nasca ceramists were concerned with documenting not only the physical nature of shamanic practice but also the unseen experiences of a shaman leading up to and during trance and visions.

This article presents visual evidence from Nasca ceramic vessels, reiterated by other Nasca visual-material culture, to suggest that, in addition to showing the elements necessary to achieve trance as well as the shamans who did so, vessel imagery and forms provide a physical and lasting form in the “real” world for experiences seen and felt only by a few in the visionary realm. These characteristics indicate that artists sought to depict the experience of a shaman, including numerous methods to achieve visions and myriad activities of a shaman, the phenomenology and imagery of the visionary realm, and the phenomenology of a shaman’s journey, thus aiding an understanding of uniquely Nasca shamanism.

Keywords: Nasca, polychrome ceramics, shamanism, ancient Andean art, pre-Columbian art

Muchos expertos asumen que los antiguos nasca practicaban una forma de chamanismo en la costa sur del Perú actual (c. 1–750 EC). La identificación de enteógenos y figuras de chamanes como tema en el vasto corpus de cerámica policromada nasca tiende a apoyar esas afirmaciones; sin embargo, el análisis visual de las formas e imágenes de las vasijas revela evidencia adicional de una comprensión más profunda de la práctica chamánica. Algunas policromías muestran que los ceramistas nasca estaban preocupados por documentar no solo la naturaleza física de la práctica chamánica, sino también las experiencias invisibles del chamán antes y durante el trance y las visiones.

Este artículo presenta evidencia visual de vasijas de cerámica nasca, reiteradas por otras culturas visuales-materiales nasca, para sugerir que, además de mostrar los elementos necesarios para lograr el trance, así como a los chamanes que lo hicieron, las imágenes y formas de vasijas proporcionan una forma física y duradera en el mundo “real” para experiencias vistas y sentidas por solo unos pocos en el reino visionario. Estas características indican que los artistas buscaban representar la experiencia del chamán, incluidos numerosos métodos para lograr visiones y una miríada de actividades del chamán, la fenomenología y las imágenes del reino visionario y la fenomenología del viaje del chamán, ayudando así a una comprensión del chamanismo nasca único.

Palabras clave: Nasca, cerámica policromática, chamanismo, arte andino antiguo, arte precolombino

Introduction and Background

Shamanism has long been recognized as part of the ancient Nasca culture (Allen 1981; Dobkin de Rios and Cardenas 1980; Proulx 2006; Sawyer 1962; Silverman 1993; Silverman and Proulx 2002; Townsend 1985). Scholars have suggested that Nasca shamans held esoteric knowledge and power related to the fecundity of the earth and supernatural realms (Silverman 1993, 323–324; Vaughn 2009, 52–53). Far from a strict system of beliefs or a state-sponsored cult that the term “religion” calls to mind, Nasca shamanism might more aptly be considered what Graham Townsley has called “an ensemble of techniques for knowing” (1993, 452). When viewed through such an assessment, Helaine Silverman and Donald Proulx’s characterization of Nasca religious practices as “fluid and flexible, more subject to innovation and modification with each celebration” better suits their shamanic underpinnings (2002, 196–197). I argue that the Nasca polychrome ceramic corpus further reveals that ceramic artists favored complex visual expressions of the infinitely dynamic and inseparable relationships between humans, animals, and every other earthly and living thing, including plants and insects, clearly surpassing simple admiration for the natural world.

This paper introduces how the Nasca artistic oeuvre depicts methods for achieving trance, the activities of and physiological and phenomenological effects of trance on a shaman’s body as well as visionary imagery, providing overwhelming visual evidence that the Nasca culture practiced a form of shamanism linked to the ancient Andean traditions that preceded and succeeded them. This analysis builds upon the iconographic studies that have dominated the scholarship of a ceramic painting style that seems to offer clarity and recognizability while attempting to answer Patrick Carmichael’s appeal to consider Nasca iconography as a symbolic system of interrelated images and themes that cannot be separated or considered to be a mirror of daily life from an emic perspective (1992).

In the ancient central Andean context in which the Nasca culture and its artistic tradition are rooted, shamanism can be defined as a socioreligious practice centered on spiritual healing through visionary consultation with otherworldly forces (Harvey 2003). A being, object, image, or idea can be “shamanic” if it exists as an integral aspect of a community in which shamans are recognizable and deemed efficacious. In other words, it is important to be able to note that the conditions under which a shaman operates, namely the trance state in which visions occur and later can be interpreted, were essential to society broadly. Typical functions of the profession include healer, midwife, diviner, and consultant for hunting, planting, familial, and community concerns, to name only a few.

Although external substances are not necessary to achieve a trance, shamans often employ “plant teachers,” types of entheogens (a catalyst for trance or visions) to guide their visions (Luna 1984; Luna and Amaringo 1999, 12–13).¹ Some terms from contemporary and politicized conversations skew our understanding of how entheogens can function in nonrecreational contexts; however, continuities in the practice of shamanism from ancient to modern times can be found throughout many regions of the Central Andes, specifically southern Peru, including the department of Ica where the Nasca thrived (Polia 1996).

Ethnographic analyses that consider modern accounts by practicing shamans have been used as an essential component of the identification and interpretation of ancient shamanic art (Furst 1974). Such a broad diachronic approach has been called into question due to the massive disruption brought on by Spanish invasions and colonization (Isbell 1995, 1–12; Silverman and Proulx 2002, 312). However, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century accounts by Spanish chroniclers attest to the ongoing colonial Inka shamanic practices (albeit in derogatory terms). For example, in describing “New World” practices and beliefs, many Colonial-era writers denigrate rituals as “sorcery” and “magic,” and refer to rituals such as the use of plant substances and other means for reaching otherworldly (as opposed to earthly) states of consciousness as “abominations” and “sinister” (Cieza de León 1984; Cervantes 1994; Cobo 1990; Guaman Poma 2006). While these descriptions must be considered within the context of the Catholic Church’s mandate for the “extirpation of idolatry” as one aspect of domination over native peoples, they also point up the persistence of local shamanic practices during Inka and European colonization (Murra 1980, 181).

¹ The word entheogen, meaning that which brings one to the divine, more neutrally approximates the catalytic function of plants visually associated with Nasca shamanism, namely the mescaline-containing San Pedro cactus (*Trichocereus sp.*), than do the presentist terms “hallucinogen” and “psychedelic” (Stone 2011, 3).

Therefore, evidence supports long-standing shamanic practice throughout the Central Andes, as some cosmological frameworks survived over millennia despite vast changes (Isbell 1976, 296). Significant cultural traditions are difficult to break but do bend in significant ways; the flexibility allowed by shamanism contributes to its longevity and ubiquity (Townesley 1993, 450–451). This is not to say that continuities have lasted unchanged since Nasca times; however, scientists, ethnographers, and art historians have noted certain basic universal characteristics of shamanic trance experiences and characteristics of the practice of “core” shamanism held in common (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1987; Siegel 1977, 132; Stone 2011, 3).

While cultural specificity is inevitable, the concept of a core shamanism recognizes aspects of shamanic practice and visions to be universal and thus at the center of all shamanic activity, including the use of sacred plants, meditation, and music as methods to reach visionary realms via a trance state; power objects used as essential vehicles for spirits in shamanic ritual; and visual percepts and phenomena experienced during trance, such as flying (i.e., out-of-body experience and ecstatic flight), transformation, and phosphenes or bright and colorful form constants (Klüver 1966; Siegel 1977).

Overall, the practice and experience of shamanism is a corporeally based enterprise: sometimes individuals are called to the profession of shaman because of their special bodies (marked by the survival of congenital condition or disease); during shamanic rituals, the shaman positions her body in poses conducive to entering a trance state and administers to other people’s bodies to treat physical ailments;² and, finally, shamans attest to intense bodily effects during visions, such as out-of-body suspension or transformation to and from animal selves.

Across media, the Nasca oeuvre evinces the fundamental corporeality of shamanism, perhaps best exemplified by depictions of the “Anthropomorphic Mythical Being” (AMB) (Roark 1965) (Figures 1 and 2). These so-called AMB figures are typically dominated by a proportionally large face with wide staring eyes, framed by a bright forehead element and whiskered mouth mask in contrast to a petite body that wears a semicircular loin cloth and floats horizontally off to one side. Often too, the AMB figure emanates spikes, curls, and disembodied heads that are grasped in clawed hands visible at the sides of the face or appear to grow from parts of the outstretched body beyond.

² I consciously interchange the pronouns (e.g., her, his, and theirs) to reflect the gender fluidity that characterizes core shamanism.



Figure 1. Nasca polychrome vessel with painted flying figure (AMB). © Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University. Photograph by Michael McKelvey. Gift of William C. and Carol W. Thibideau. 1989.8.116. Line drawing (below) by author.

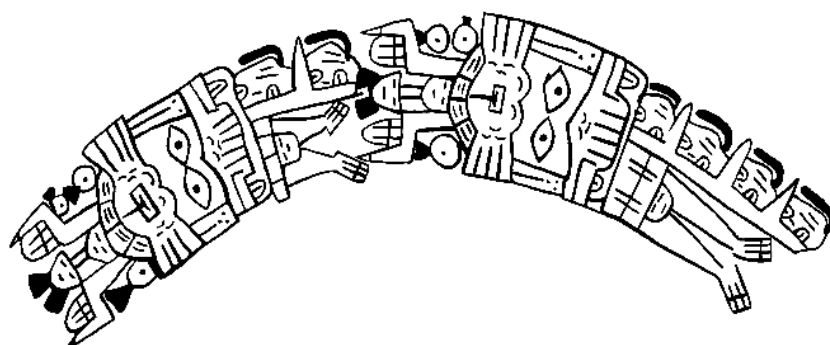
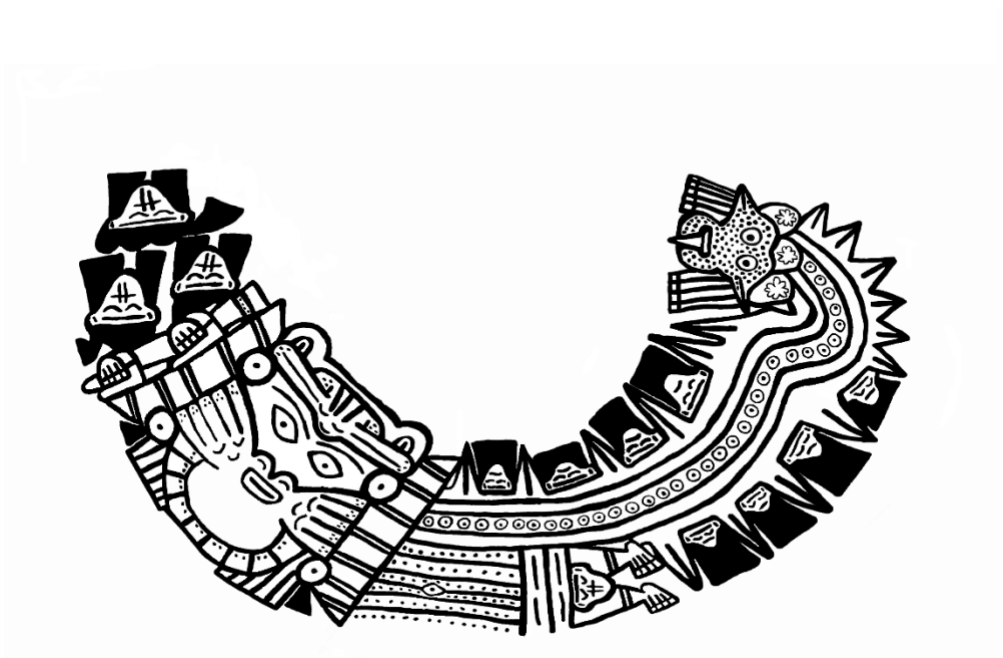




Figure 2. Nasca polychrome vessel with flying figure (AMB). © Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University. Photograph by Michael McKelvey. Gift of William C. and Carol W. Thibideau. 1989.8.98. Line drawing (below) by author.



Shamanic continuity and specificity can be seen via connections and differences between Nasca and the art of its predecessors, contemporaries, and successors. The coeval Moche culture from Peru's north coast also produced works that indicate shamanic activities (Sharon 2000; Scher 2021), as did Nasca successors the Wari, who created works that show artistic grappling with the expression of a shamanic worldview (Stone 2011). It is clear that Nasca did not deviate from certain ancient Andean artistic trends, but also developed visually complex solutions to the representation of culturally significant phenomena. Examples of shamanic art from the ancient Central Andes pre- and post-date Nasca; however, the art that directly influenced Nasca, namely that of Chavín and Paracas, highlights many trance phenomena, including images of shamanic practice, such as sacred plants and their effects on a shaman's body, as well as the aerial journey or ecstatic flight, and the perceptual and physiological shifts of animal transformation.

Imagery of the Chavín culture, found primarily at its major center at Chavín de Huantar located in Peru's northern highlands, influenced the art of coeval and subsequent cultures, including Paracas and Nasca (Reindel and Isla 2013, 107–111; Tello 1960). Chavín art often combines images of a veritable "pharmacopoeia" of entheogens with references to human-animal metamorphoses and other visionary phenomena (Cordy-Collins 1980; Rick 2008; Torres 2008). For example, carved stone panels lining the Sunken Circular Courtyard depict transforming human-jaguars, (identified by crossed fangs, pendant irises, and clawed hands and feet) grasping the entheogenic, lobed San Pedro cactus (Cordy-Collins 1977). In this instance, there is a visual link between the entheogen and its visionary effects on the shaman—human-animal transformation. Likewise, a series of sculpted disembodied heads punctuate the outer walls of the Old Temple, representing stages of shamanic transformation between human and animal (Burger 1992, figs. 147–155; Tello 1960, 159–171). Sculpted in miniature, another version of a tenoned head sprouts lobes of the San Pedro cactus from its eyes, highlighting the visionary sight produced by the entheogen (Burger 1992, fig. 181). In ceramic, a Cupisnique blackware vessel features transformation and spirit coessence in a vertically split human-feline head, suggesting the simultaneity of the human-jaguar aspects in one visage (Museo Larco, "Sculptural ceramic ceremonial vessel," [ML040218](#)). Overall, Chavín and Nasca share several motifs, including the San Pedro cactus, disembodied heads, and human-animal transformation.

The textile-oriented culture of Paracas, and Nasca's more direct cultural antecedent, was coeval with Chavín but fell under its vast sphere of influence at the beginning of its trajectory. Paracas textiles are commonly embroidered with "ecstatic shamans" (Paul and Turpin 1986), figures characterized by an ungrounded or floating presence on the ground cloth of large mantles, with arched bodies, each turned in a different direction, that repeat in a loose, grid-like pattern (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston,

"Paracas mantle," [31.501](#)). Overall, the repetition and lack of a singular orientation contribute to an overwhelming sense of disorientation, embodying the paradox of the shaman and the experience of being in both the earthly and visionary realms or in multiple places simultaneously.

On an individual level, bodies with exposed ribs exhibit signs of emaciation, offering the potential that these are shaman initiates undergoing training that requires deprivation (Eliade 1964, 84). On the other hand, perhaps these bodies are shown in an "x-ray" view to emphasize the extra-ordinary vision of which a shaman in trance is capable (Siegel 1977, 136). Taken figuratively, this characteristic communicates that a shaman sees an alternate and more detailed version of normative reality in which living humans are composed of skin, muscle, and bones. Such an extraordinary ability to see beyond the earthly realm, in combination with frequent associations with disembodied heads, could relate to shamans more broadly in their role as intermediary between the realms of the living and the dead, transitioning between the various bodily forms found therein (Stone 2011, 200).

In many cases, to be efficacious, a shaman must have contact with the dead, which requires "being dead oneself" (Eliade 1964, 84). Possession of dead heads—as in the case of the Nasca AMB (Figures 1 and 2) as well as instances of singular disembodied heads painted as an iconic and repeated motif (Dallas Museum of Art, "Bowl: nine heads," [1976.W.144](#)) and the prevalence of the head jar form in the Nasca ceramic corpus (Museo Larco, "Vaso representando cabeza humana," [ML032135](#))—could signal that the shaman has traveled to the realm of the dead to collect the head which itself contains the knowledge of the spirit realm. Overall, the Paracas ecstatic shaman imagery highlights the multivalent existence of the shaman as well as the fluidity of shamanic transformation along a continuum from life to death and back again, a notion continued in Nasca art (Carmichael 1994).

Achieving Trance

As a preliminary step, the recognition of shamanic subjects and subject matter in Nasca imagery is crucial and certainly bolsters the argument that Nasca shamanic practice included the pursuit of visions and interaction with supranatural forces. Certainly, a shaman's ability to enter trance is essential to her efficacy. Many modes of trance induction exist, including ingestion of organic substances, meditation, sensory deprivation, and long periods of music, chanting, and/or rhythmic drumming. The presence of all or most of these in Nasca iconography emphasizes their importance to the culture of achieving a visionary state.

Plant entheogens are the most commonly depicted mode for inducing trance pictured in the art of the Nasca. In particular, lobes of the San Pedro cactus are found in both

two and three dimensions on polychrome ceramics, leading to its identification as the primary entheogen used in Nasca shamanic ritual (Sharon and Donnan 1977). However, Proulx notes that “we have no direct archaeological evidence for the use of hallucinogens by the Nasca people” (2006, 62). Indeed, to concentrate the mescaline from within the cactus pulp, lobes of the San Pedro are boiled, a process that leaves little or no absolute trace in the archeological record. Still, ethnobotanical evidence for the presence of the cactus on the Peruvian coast and at the Nasca ceremonial center of Cahuachi suggests the plant was regionally available to import for growing and ceremonial purposes (Towle 1961, 71; Valdez 1994, 675–679). Be that as it may, depictions of the cactus in polychrome ceramics still serve as the primary evidence that the ancient Nasca people were familiar with and used the plant for its entheogenic properties. Multiple polychrome ceramics make pointed visual connections between raptorial birds and lobes of the entheogenic cactus (Sharon 2000, fig. 108E), further linking the vision-inducing role of the cactus to the experience of the trance itself, in which shamans experience flight and elevated perspective like those of birds or in avian form itself.

As another case in point, the vision-inducing cactus can also be seen painted on polychrome vessels depicting a night scene, as indicated by an atypical black background (The Art Institute of Chicago, “Vessel with Painted Landscape,” [1955.2137](#); Brooklyn Museum of Art, “Double-Spout, Bridge-Handle Vessel,” [41.423](#)). Primarily, scenes like these highlight the biological fact that the cactus blooms at night (Schultes, Hofmann, and Rätsch 2001, 166–169). Secondly, shamans often perform their ceremonies at night as light deprivation can induce the trance. Additionally, the dilated pupils that characterize trance might make daylight painful. Such physiological effects of the trance state are reiterated consistently in Nasca art as lenticular eyes with a dark central pupil, creating the recognizable, wide, staring visage common to ceramic effigies, head jars, and paintings of the AMB (Figures 1 and 2). Moreover, after ingesting the cactus pulp shamans often assume the form of crepuscular and nocturnal animals that thrive in such hazy and dark realms (e.g., jaguar, owl, and bat). Finally, the black background implies not only night but also the existence of what Rebecca Stone calls the “Other Side,” a place often understood as an inversion of normative terrestrial space occupied by diurnal humans (2011, 130–131). Nicholas Saunders describes this alternate plane as not “human or ‘here’ in the physical world, but ‘there’ in the parallel spirit world which is conceived as a mirror image, and which may, according to circumstance, be regarded as an inversion of the physical world” (1988, 6). Importantly, this concept also relates to the shaman’s body in transformation, understood to reverse in one’s animal guise with belly turning upward and back arched downward (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1975, 110), and visually linked to the ecstatic shaman figure embroidered on Paracas and Nasca textiles.

Along with the San Pedro cactus, some have proposed other plant entheogens such as *Datura* (*floripondio*), tobacco, *wilka* (or *vilca*) snuff (*Anadenanthera colubrina*), and espingo seeds might also have been available and used (Altschul 1972, 307–314; Dobkin de Rios and Cardenas 1980, 238; Orefici and Drusini 2003, 177; Yacovleff and Herrera 1934). Congruent with its presence in the Nasca archaeological and visual records, we should also consider the import of the spiny oyster (*Spondylus princeps*) not only as a symbolic link to water and the potentially disastrous El Niño phenomena but also for its entheogenic properties at certain times of year (i.e., seasonal toxicity) (Glowacki 2005, 257–268).

In addition to plant teachers and other organic entheogens, other means of achieving a trance state are portrayed in the Nasca corpus. States of meditation and sensory deprivation can prompt visions that reportedly contain the same experiences. Ceramic effigy vessels often hold their hands at the center of the body, offering a multivalent image indicative of meditation, but also suggesting fecundity. Others depict figures with shrouded eyes deprived of light (Museo Larco, “Cántaro cara gollete,” [ML032465](#); Sawyer 1975, fig. 35), and still more are shown playing musical instruments (Proulx 2006, plate 13). Furthermore, during shamanic trance music plays important roles; whistling, chanting, and playing flutes can serve “as a vital link bridging separate realities” (Dobkin de Rios and Katz 1975, 65), and contrastingly animated conditions inspired through rhythmic drumming or dancing incites visual phenomena akin to trance states induced by other more sedate means (Winkelman 1986, 178). Extant Nasca instruments, primarily ceramic drums, whistles, *antaras* (flutes), and trumpets are notable within the Nasca artistic corpus and their iconography further highlights the importance of music to shamanic ritual. One example of a Nasca ceramic trumpet in the collection of the National Museum of the American Indian (“Trumpet with Animal Design,” [Catalog number 15/9414](#)) has painted AMB imagery, connecting the function of the instrument to the visionary being. In sum, beyond straightforward illustrations, images of methods of trance induction such as the San Pedro cactus combined with indications of their physiological effects strongly indicate Nasca shamanic practice.

Prime examples of the combination of an entheogen and its effects can be seen in figures depicted on polychrome ceramics, called the “San Pedro Deity” or the “personification of the San Pedro cactus” (Furst 1998, 176), that have lobes of the San Pedro cactus emerging from the shoulders and sometimes the forehead and sprout cactus spines along their appendages (Sharon 2000, plate 109A–D; Pardo and Fux 2017, cat. no. 134; The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, “Personification of the San Pedro cactus,” [B77.0165](#)). However, instead of names that suggest a falsely religious or anthropocentric hierarchy, I would suggest that Quechua concepts can enrich the interpretation of what is clearly a dynamic relationship. For instance, the verb *camay*, which, in its context in Francisco de Avila’s Huarochirí manuscript, Frank Salomon

and George L. Urioste translate to “to charge with being, to infuse with species power,” suggests that perhaps this figure manifests the relationship between *camac*, or the genesis spirit that imbues all entheogenic cacti with their special life force, and the *camasca*, in this case, a shaman who has imbibed the pulp (1991, 16). Indeed, the emergence of the cactus from the body suggests an intimate relationship between the plant and the being with which it has merged (or from which it emerges). Far from a literal depiction of a person wearing a cactus costume or adorned with its spines, the artist has rendered the entheogen and the human as a single entity; plant and human are melded in form and knowledge within a nonterrestrial realm, an alternate plane of existence where such an in-between body seamlessly exists.

Shamans

Since Nasca art often shows beings that are difficult to describe in normative human terms, some experts have suggested that these depictions represent Nasca shamans in the roles of “ritual performer” and “deity impersonator” (Proulx 2006, 63; Roark 1965; Sawyer 1997, 50; Silverman and Proulx 2002, 196–199; Townsend 1985, 131). These characterizations perhaps are based more on assumptions made through Western notions of shamanism and less on evidence relating the perceived similarities of world shamanic traditions and Nasca shamanism (Harvey 2003, 19). Such descriptions of Nasca shamans preclude the connection of the AMB to a shaman in trance as well. Instead, the AMB has been called a god, deity figure, and spirit, but, despite strong visual indications of the typical trance experience, is rarely connected to shamans specifically. AMB figures are typically ungrounded, horizontally positioned, and have an arched posture. Painted AMBs wrap around the surface of vessel bodies with two-dimensional clarity (further elucidated by drawings that “unwrap” the image). More subtly, however, the intersection of the two-dimensional body with the sloping and globular form of the vessel they envelop also hints at a rotating figure, bending and contorting in multi-dimensional space (Figures 1 and 2). These twisting bodies are not only reminiscent of the Paracas ecstatic shaman figures (Cooper Hewitt Museum, “[Mantle] Fragment (Peru),” [1944-89-1](#); figure 3), but also recall the accounts by modern shamans of sensations of suspension and flight and an aerial journey (Harner 1973, 158-160).



Figure 3. [Mantle] Fragment (Peru). Cooper Hewitt Museum. 1944-89-1. Public domain. See high resolution photograph: <https://collection.cooperhewitt.org/objects/18572415/>

AMBs are painted on prestigious double-spout-and-bridge vessels indicative of the Early Nasca period, but also continue during Late Nasca, as seen in examples in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art ("Double spout and bridge bottle," 63.112.1) and the Portland Art Museum ("Double Spouted Jar," 55.291; figure 4). In many cases the figures wrap around the vessel body, thus denying the observer a complete view of the image and so contributing to purposeful visual confusion that also increases over time in the so-called Proliferous style, a term coined by John Rowe to describe imagery that stood in contrast to the clarity of bold forms and shapes of the "Monumental" style (Blagg 1975, 21; Silverman and Proulx 2002, 23). The artistic choice to favor the obfuscation of images underscores how a Nasca shamanic worldview privileged the visionary experience as opposed to an illustration or direct translation of things as they appear in the earthly realm.



Figure 4. Peru, Nasca, *Double Spouted Jar*, ca. 100/700, clay and paint, Gift of Mr. Harold Kaye, public domain, [55.291](https://www.portlandartmuseum.org/objects/11570). This work is on view. Portland Art Museum. <http://www.portlandartmuseum.us/mwebcgi/mweb.exe?request=record;id=11570;type=101>

Ceramic drums also seem to have been a particularly apropos medium for the depiction of the AMB, since rhythmic beats are a prime trance inducer (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, "Drum," [178.412.111](#)). Figures are often painted on Nasca drums, the torso and head on the two lower spherical sections that comprise the body of the drum and the legs on the upright cylinder that acts as the neck of the drum (Museo Larco, "Drum that represents a priest," [ML013683](#); Museo Arqueológico Rafael Larco Herrera and Berrin 1997, cat. no. 113). To be played, the drum would be turned on its side, and held underneath the musician's arm and across the lap or on the ground, as depicted in ceramic vessels such as one in the collections of the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology ("Jar," [4-8481](#)). As with many objects, it is productive to consider Nasca drums and the images painted on them as they would have appeared during use. Photographs of drums typically favor a configuration in which the human figure stands upright; however, this view belies the true position of the painted figure when the drum was in use and capable of inducing trance. Instead, when turned on its side to be beaten, the painted figure assumes a

horizontal, flying position much like that of a gravity-defying shaman on an aerial journey, depicting a body transformed through the act of rhythmic drumming.

In a rare equivalence between Nasca AMB imagery and physical objects, examples of gold mouth masks (large nose ornaments that often have whiskers and emanations that curl upward to partially encircle the eyes) and forehead ornaments worn by the AMB have been found (Isla Cuadrado 2008, fig. 8.9; Rickenbach and Museum Rietberg 1999, cat. nos. 147–151; Sawyer 1997, figs. 27–29) (figure 2). This correlation between the art and objects contributes to the debate regarding whether Nasca individuals who wore these accouterments were seen as impersonators of deities, or embodiments of transforming shamans, or both. Based on the visual and cultural evidence we might presume these accessories enhanced the transforming shaman's body, adding to the communication of a shimmering and otherworldly being. For ancient Andeans, including the Nasca, the essential quality of gold was its unchanging reflective brilliance and sheen (Lechtman 1988, 30). Furthermore, the importance of shiny objects in the case of Nasca may relate to "pan-Amerindian attitudes toward the spiritual and creative power of light," known to be an integral part of shamanic visionary experience (Saunders 2003, 15). Certainly, the making of gold accouterments that adorn embodied shaman figures highlights that the Nasca greatly considered the head precious as the place of visions, a point reiterated by the vast corpus of ceramic head jars (disembodied heads with modeled and painted features) and disembodied head imagery, as well as the light-emitting power of the shaman's body. The reflectivity and shine of the gold medium, as well as the shiny polychrome ceramic surfaces on which they are often painted, matches the overall brilliant light of the supranatural and visionary realm, providing another instance of the interconnectedness of Nasca art objects and shamanic experience.

Perhaps most convincingly, the Nasca Lines (geoglyphs or ground drawings found on the desert plains around important Nasca centers) provide a superlative example of the relationship between Nasca artistic choices and the cultural impulse to concretize embodied shamanic experience. Significantly, the typical sensations of ecstatic flight or an aerial journey experienced in trance provide the perspective necessary to view the ancient geoglyphs in their entirety (Dobkin de Rios 1977), and surely relates to the many accounts by modern visionaries that describe bird-like flight. A preponderance of bird imagery in other Nasca art reinforces the importance of this avian perspective as well as human-bird transformations (Tierney 2016; Yacovleff 1931, 1932).

Moreover, during trance, perceived scale can change and warp on multiple levels. Documentation of the effects of mescal shows that the telescoping of the canvas, or what is described as "the enlarging of all phenomena in the visual field," is common (Stone-Miller 2004, 50 [Klüver 1966, 38]), which may relate to the sprawling size of

the geoglyphs. Images that portray otherworldly states of being and their modes of procurement, such as those described above, communicate an internalized shamanic experience, and still other Nasca works indicate some of the outwardly ritual practices.

Shamanic Activity

In concert with entheogens and other methods for inducing the all-important visions, shamans often assemble powerful objects to facilitate the resolution of a patient's illness or problem. The recovery of such objects in the archaeological record provides a substantive link between the Nasca people and shamanic activity. One example comes from a suite of objects found wrapped within a textile bundle of unknown provenance that has long been identified as a "shaman's kit" (Proulx 2006, plate 14). One analysis of the bundle suggests it might be considered "a set of ritual objects (fetishes?) of the fertility cult" (Sawyer 1962, 159). Such interpretations show how shamanic practice can become confined to the limited notion of a "fertility cult," a vague construct that obfuscates the presence of an over-arching shamanic milieu within which such objects, people, and acts are considered spiritually efficacious.

Perhaps more accurately, one object in the "kit" has been described as an "effigy of an emaciated human figure," and the group likened to a North American Indian "medicine man" kit (Parsons 1962, 151). Still others comment: "the ritual objects were manipulated through some kind of sympathetic magic with invocations. A private rather than public ritual was involved because of the small size and low weight of the bundle, i.e., it is portable" (Silverman and Proulx 2006, 204). Although these descriptions approach a more nuanced shamanic description of the context in which the bundle was used, a visual consideration of the objects contained in the bundle, in concert with modern ethnographic analogy, reveals some aesthetic priorities for shaping powerful objects.

The kit consists of five sculpted objects: one wooden human head with inlaid eyes and teeth; one small, striped polychrome ceramic vessel in the shape of a pepper; and three carved stone objects depicting a mottled orange-red and cream llama head, a white full-bodied llama, and a human figure curled in a fetal position holding a disembodied head. As I have previously argued, within this grouping, a Nasca way of forming bodies of all species is highlighted; human and animal bodies each are shown as capable of existing as disembodied parts and as fully-embodied beings (Tierney 2016). The containment of these human, animal, and plant bodies together within a bundle is akin to the use of *entierros*, or burials, by modern shamans that make spirits and entities manifest to neutralize any detrimental effects (Joralemon and Sharon 1993, 131). Likewise, contemporary Peruvian shamans in the Cuzco region, construct *despachos*, or dispatches—"ceremonial offering[s] to the spirits of the

earth”—to serve as conduits or mediators, much like the shaman herself, between multiple realms, often those of the living and the dead (Webb 2012, 1).

Therefore, in an ancient Nasca context, we can imagine that the presence of disembodied and embodied figures as objects of power in this bundle, images of the bodies that are repeated throughout Nasca material culture in multiple media, were vital to the Nasca shamanic enterprise. Moreover, the presence of seemingly mundane and ubiquitous subjects, such as the pepper and the llama, highlights the interconnectedness of the recognizable and the extraordinary under the lens of shamanism.

Visions

Nasca artists also produced creative, and often subtle, artistic solutions to express visionary images and phenomena “seen” during trance. Yet, this visionary content can be difficult to identify without understanding the major stages of visions as reported by practicing shamans as well as by subjects of scientific experiments. At their onset, visions are often described as having “varied and saturated colors, intense brightness and symmetrical configurations,” and can be profitably compared to the bright colors capable via Nasca slip paint technology (Siegel 1977, 2). The Nasca drive to produce numerous new colors and intense sheens to replicate shamanic visions suggests that the products of new technologies conferred meaning, and that, as Heather Lechtman avers, “process and product were culturally indivisible and, therefore, manipulable to the ends of ideology” (1993, 274). Indeed, regarding Nasca polychromes, innovations in the ceramic-making process were an essential part of revealing the shamanic visionary experience through a lasting medium.

In contrast to earlier Paracas ceramics, Nasca artists sought out more permanent slip paints that when burnished and fired, produced some of the most numerous and varied colors ever produced in the ancient Central Andes. Besides achieving brilliant vessel colors, Nasca ceramists painted images that correspond to form constants, or phosphenes (visual sensations produced in the eye without light) recorded in clinical settings (Siegel 1977, 132 [Klüver 1966]); some of these consistent and repeated forms include: “grating, lattice, fretwork, filigree, honeycomb, and chessboard,” as well as “cobweb, tunnel, funnel, alley, cone, vessel, and spiral” that match some imagery repeated within the Nasca ceramic corpus, such as nested rectangles (Museo Larco, “Cuenco con diseños geométricos de cuadrados concéntricos,” [ML010503](#)) and colorful zigzags (Museo Larco, “Plato con diseños geométricos de líneas en zig zag,” [ML033907](#)).

During subsequent stages of visions, imagery becomes more complex. In this deeper state, a shaman’s training and expertise become critical in the typical encounters

with frightening animals, such as snakes and jaguars, visions of supranatural beings, and a sense of clairvoyance brought on by engagement with far-off places, times, and people. In these latter stages, kinesthetic experiences (located in the body as opposed to in sight) take hold, both distinctly and in combination (Cordy-Collins 1989, 35). Visionaries report dissolution of the ego, divination of the future, conflict resolution (sometimes combative), assumption of other perspectives, and the separation of the spirit from the body, often in order to journey elsewhere via a sense of flight (Harner 1973).

The artistic interpretation of the phenomenology of the trance state itself can be seen by and through the shaman's body. Innumerable depictions of metamorphosed body parts and bodies in the Nasca corpus highlight the importance of a shaman's transformation to and from an animal- or plant-self or selves. At times animal features are more or less overt, although it appears that birds and avian attributes signal the particularly key parts of the physical and perspectival shifts necessary for shamanic flight in the Nasca version of shamanism (Tierney 2016). Although explored in relation to many other ancient American cultures, visual renderings of transformation and its implicit shift of perspective are a subject in need of explication to expand the discourse about the intersection of art and religion in Nasca.

Conclusion

Aligned with studies that envision Nasca iconography as unified by an underlying system of thought (Allen 1981; Townsend 1985), the kind of shamanic analysis of Nasca imagery and forms presented here dilutes the severity of the problematic sacred-secular dichotomy that Carmichael suggested had previously dominated the study of Nasca iconography (1992). Shamans, as mediators between worlds with unique abilities, embody the intertwining of the typically bifurcated categories. When focused on the Nasca artistic oeuvre, a shamanic lens presents imagery open to the flexibility, ambiguity, and paradoxes that lie at the heart of the shamanic enterprise. Evidence for the presence of practicing shamans in an ancient culture, like Nasca, evinces the unsuitability of labels of sacred *or* mundane, for within a shamanic culture the rituals and experiences of the shaman are highly efficacious pursuits, not only for healing or divination purposes but also for the resolution of general problems in the spheres of life and death.

In many instances the cues indicating Nasca shamanism are subtle; however, renewed visual analysis of the art and artifacts can reveal some aspects of its character. Nasca art convincingly suggests that Nasca artists had deep knowledge of: shamanic practice and trance experiences purposefully depicted in the myriad ways of achieving trance; the shaman's body (both in trance and enacting shamanic rituals); powerful object groups showing the importance of disembodied and

embodied beings; and visionary imagery, such as colorful and bright phosphenes made possible by technological and artistic innovation. Such intimate knowledge of these phenomena then begs the question as to whether the creators of such works of art were shamans themselves (Vaughn 2009, 179). While difficult to answer that question directly, visual evidence suggests that regardless of an artist's direct familiarity with the visionary realm and trance experience, a shamanic way of knowing must have infused the culture in which these objects were used on a daily basis, proliferated on a massive scale, and valued as integral participants in multiple realms. Visual cues in Nasca polychrome ceramics indicate that beyond a straightforward re-presentation, shamanic practices, perspectives, and embodied experiences were inherent to the conception of these important objects and, thus, the culture itself.

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