

# Chapter 14

## Communication and Thought in Rock Art: A Discussion of the Spiritual World of Rock Art in Colombia

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### Introduction

This study synthesizes and integrates investigations by Grupo de Investigación de Arte Rupestre Indígena [Investigation Group of Indigenous Rock Art] (GIPRI) a Colombian research group dedicated to studying rock art interpretations as reflected in communication and thought. Through the years we have become accustomed to accepting trends in rock art research that associate it with expressions or intellectual demonstrations of sacred sites, gods, origin myths, and teachers of culture. In general rock art is thought to depict persons or entities who were important to a culture and who were instrumental in constructing religions, as if this were the most sophisticated form of human thought. However, through finding and documenting an ever larger number of rock art sites, GIPRI has found evidence to support objections to religion being the most sophisticated form of human thought contrary to what has been proposed by researchers both inside and outside of Colombia (Muñoz 2006a). The current state of style classifications and debates about inconsistencies of traditional interpretations come together to form a less optimistic view of the sacred character of rock art designs than was originally thought (Rosenfeld and Bahn 1991). Here I suggest that some rock art images may represent refined communication systems with complex intellectual structures, but not all are necessarily metaphysical representations associated with religion. Instead many depictions are communication systems with a potential to express a view of the world that refers to a variety of possible relationships between humans and between humans and nature. Thus, religion is one aspect of rock art images, but not the only one.

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## Myths and Gods of the Cundinamarca–Boyaca High Plains Area

Many myths have been recorded in the traditions of the ethnic groups that lived in the Colombian high plains of Cundinamarca and Boyaca, and many of these stories were preserved by early Spanish scribe historians recording pre-Hispanic South American history. Historians found that many of these myths refer to persons of high social rank or to creators of natural features who transformed the environment, made space for humans, or were famous people who changed the way of life and relationships between people.

Here I am concerned with the Muisca ethnic group. They are part of the Chibcha linguistic group whose culture was destroyed by the European invasion of the sixteenth century and whose cultural details were mentioned by the *Conquistadores* and by governmental scribe historians during the Conquest and Colonial period (Castellanos 1874; Quesada-Friede 1960). The Muisca culture was organized into different levels and social classes (González de Pérez 1996; Langebaek 1992; Lleras 2005). They were a chiefdom society located in the central part of western Colombia in the departments of Cundinamarca, Boyaca, and Santander (Fig. 14.1). Most of our knowledge about this culture comes from records made by scribes, priests, notaries, and historians of the invading culture who wrote about some aspects of the life of the Muisca (Castellanos 1874; Fernández De Piedrahita 1688; Simón 1981). They reported some traditions of the Muisca including their ideas about creation of the world and its people. However, descriptions by Spanish historians are problematic because they were written by people who did not know the culture and the accounts recorded by the historians were subjected to a censorship committee. In the end, the only part of Muisca culture that survived was that which did not go against Catholic Church doctrine or put the education of future readers in danger (Gamboa 2010). Most of the cultural traditions of the Muisca were considered extravagant and many were considered heretical and were deleted from the Spanish records. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that many Indians, in spite of the destruction of their culture, traditions, and their territorial boundaries, resisted the various means of acculturation, and this was mainly accomplished by hiding their beliefs “in plain sight” inside the formal structure of the Catholic religion. There are many accounts of how the high plains Indians integrated their religious beliefs with those of the Catholic arrivals.

One document in particular shows how the country people jealously guarded their symbols within Christian icons:

I have seen them take some keys and images from our rosaries: Also a priest of our religion in the town of Cogua (Cundinamarca) 8–10 leagues from the city of Santa Fe, said that an Indian who had been practicing the principles of our Christian religion, was sick on his death bed; had visited the priest various times, and was very close to death. In order to help him at this time of death, the priest related that a nephew of the sick man was holding a cross-made of Palm Sunday palm fronds (Fig. 14.2). When the priest lifted them and exhorted God to inspire him, it seemed that the fronds weighed more than they should weigh. Turning them over he found a gold idol representing the god Bochica that the sick



**Fig. 14.1** Map of Muisca territory, about 1539 as drawn by Luis Alberto Acuña (Camargo Pérez 1937)

man adored and worshiped. The man died soon afterwards, not paying much attention to the prayers of the priest, preferring to honor Bochica. The priest chastised the nephew because he let the man die in that state (Simón 1981:295).

The above account was recorded by one of the most important historians in this territory, and it indicates that the Muisca quickly understood the necessity to conform their beliefs to formal Christian structures and social celebrations while at the same time they protected their own language and spiritual beliefs. According to current archaeological data, the ancestors of the inhabitants of this area have lived here for at least 10,000 years. Modern demographic investigations (Correal and Van der Hammen 1977) as well as data from physical anthropology (Rodríguez 2007)



**Fig. 14.2** The palm fronds of Palm Sunday are woven and sown into the crop to assure good yields (photo from GIPRI archive, 1980)

indicate that during various periods and stages of development, those groups established connections and interactions with nature, which allowed them to slowly build diverse forms of language and systems of perception. However, what is most important about the Muisca is not their material constructions but their intellectual development.

...a culture can have aspects of complexity without building permanent monuments to impress archaeologists. In reality the aspects of the Chibcha culture that the historians like to highlight as being complex are precisely those that one cannot hope to find archaeologically speaking; that is to say, the socio-political organization and religion; and in material culture, objects that don't last long such as textiles and wooden structures (Broadbent 1965:32).

Distinctions of all kinds, including chiefdoms and qualitative relations, allow a refined knowledge of one's surroundings and a capacity to systematically observe the distinct seasons of the year. With that information cultures can interact intelligently with nature. Various theoretical structures help them establish precise counts to record months and years, transform natural humanized space, and anthropomorphize nature. One of the most interesting vestiges corresponding to a particular system of representations is shown in different artistic manifestations associated with ceramics, stone, ceremonial objects, weaving, and rock art. Many of these objects have a variety of painted or engraved motifs indicating a wide spectrum of themes and variations. We know little about the meaning and function of the images, but investigations have established links with other ethnic groups that aid in the

explanation through the use of analogy. Most of these other groups are in the same macro-Chibcha linguistic family as the Muisca and have been studied by anthropologists and archeologists during the past 60 years. These studies allow us to advance our knowledge of certain themes related to the origin of communication, which can be applied to our studies of the reasons for making rock art. By studying the Kogui, Arhuakos, Arzarios, and Cancuamos and understanding some of their characteristics, an attempt has been made understand how the Muisca of the Cundinamarca–Boyaca high plains lived. Some shamans of the macro-Chibcha family continued into the Republic period, and consequently their rites and sacred sites survived, although many of them have Christian influences. Kogui *Mamos* intellectuals in the northern part of Colombia still read the sun in their ceremonial hut, which lets them know when to plant and harvest based on teachings passed down from their ancestors. They also know their sacred histories and how they obligated them to have celebrations, make payments, and make offerings. Various stories and myths were created around natural phenomena that involve the climate and its effect on economic conditions, and these are reflected in communication systems such as rock art.

The shamans (*Jeques*, *chiquis*, or high plains priests) were in charge of educating the youth who were to inherit their power to make it rain when needed and cure or prevent illness (González de Pérez 1996). In ancient times during the early settlement phase, these religious leaders dressed as animals (possibly birds), and disguised as animals, they established a bond with the animals to obtain the respect and admiration of the animals. During other types of ceremonies they changed the style of their shawls (*mantas*) by choosing a different color according to the occasion or by making drawings painted with a brush on the mantas. These shamans abided by precise rules and decided on behalf of the community what was to be done during the upcoming year. These ceremonies show knowledge of the climate and contain recommendations concerning crop management. It is possible to reconstruct some of their ideas about their beliefs in the origin of nature and mankind, and in the same way know something about their gods, who acted as civilizing agents.

Some of the Muisca traditions were preserved because they were familiar to the Conquistadors. For example, the legend of Bochica resonated with the Spaniards. The capacity of Bochica to organize the morality of the Indians, his capacity to walk on water, his theoretical teachings (baptism), and his other practices were familiar themes to the Spanish, and they attributed them to the arrival of an apostle (Bochica) who civilized the Muisca. Bochica's clothes, his symbols (crosses on his arms and forehead), and the special way he honored sacred things were interpreted for many years as unequivocal examples of Christian evangelism. Because this story survived the persecution, it was believed to be Christian. The story about Bochica is very explicit:

Take it as truth that an apostle or holy man passed through the New Kingdom, land of those Muisca Indians and that he preached things of the church, the immortality of souls, the eternal glory and he let them know God, and he duplicated the holy baptism. And wanting to cross the river at Cota that is three leagues from this city of Santa Fe,

from Cota to Suba he threw his cloak on the water and crossed on it, and from that point on the Indians highly respected him and in memory of him and because of this feat there are some roads that the Indians are accustomed to make in the fields of which there are many throughout the New Kingdom, these roads are made by hand and there are many who have the opinion that there are many gold treasures and sanctuaries, and this river that is called Bogota or Tunja has a tall waterfall over some cliffs more than five hundred “*estados*” tall and the Indians wanted to keep him there so they took him and threw his clothes in the water. Before arriving at the top, he passed to the other side and seeing this miracle the Indians went to a flat plain to shoot arrows at him, and the arrows they shot at him did not touch him, and many fell back on the same Indians who shot them and killed them; and the Indians were very impressed with this miracle, and the holy man then went to Sogamoso, that today is within the jurisdiction of Tunja, an Indian town of the Spanish Crown and there he died and is buried, and along with this tale came a fear of the Sogamoso chief by the Muisca, who threatened them saying that he had the power to take their food and burn them (Asencio 1950:1).

The above quote from Asencio shows why, in the high plains area of Cundinamarca–Boyaca, it was easy to confuse Bochica with a biblical Christian. The similarity of his appearance and teachings allowed Bochica to be perpetuated in Santa Fe (today Bogota) history to the point that some of the ancient attributes and their symbols were portrayed as if they were European. During this fusion of beliefs, some of Bochica’s characteristics disappeared when they were superimposed on other Christian saints, but unquestionably this cultural history was perpetuated to the present day because of analogies that were made with Western culture. Until a few years ago it would have been impossible to imagine that this history had any truth associated with it. People would have thought it the result of an inventive mind without any facts to support it or that it was simply an intellectual construct of a mythical legend that told about a fantastic event where Bochica, who had supernatural powers like Moses, could destroy a large rock in the southwest area of the Bogota Savannah and drain the flooded plains that had damaged all the crops in the affected area, a phenomenon occurring during “*La Niña*” climatic episodes, which generated these conditions in the areas along the Bogota River. Today we know the complexity of their hydraulic systems and the different control systems for management of the streams and springs that come from the east and flowed into canals, impeding the fast dispersion of water (Boada 2006; Etayo 2002). The wide area of crops, the high temperature, and the presence of different varieties of fish give objective meaning to the history of a supposed god who civilized the Muisca by providing advanced techniques to control nature and transform a large lake and its wetlands into intensive agricultural zones. Without archaeological and ethnohistorical evidence it would be impossible to confirm this period in the socioeconomic history of these people.

The Muisca and Chibcha groups created stories that survive as oral traditions about the stages of creation and the origin of what exists today, but we still do not know if all the ethnic Muisca and Chibcha language groups shared the same creation beliefs. Historical records of the Muisca relate that there was one moment when the entire world was illuminated and created by an entity that made all nature. Chiminigagua (the force of creation for the ancient Muisca; before there was anything in this world, when darkness filled everything, this powerful creator existed)

created some black birds that scattered light through the sky using their beaks to peck holes in the darkness, thus leaving the earth in its present state. It is very similar to the tradition of the flight of the *Tijeretas* birds (*Elanoides forficatus*) of the Uwa communities (Osborn 1985) and the journey of the Sun God of the Kogui and Arhuaca (Reichel-Dolmatof 1951). There are different versions in other Chibcha groups. One of these Muisca origin myths was recorded by historians in the town of Ramiriqui, Boyaca, where an Indian priest (*jeque*) was transformed into the sun (Férrandez 1688; Simón 1981). The birth of this sun is celebrated every December during the Huan festival near the winter solstice.

How these groups developed through time and how influences passed between these groups is unknown, and I leave it for future investigators to discover exactly when and where, and under what conditions their metaphysical constructs were formed, to explain their everyday activities and determine when they started, and reveal the basis of their dynamic social structures. At some point, these metaphysical structures no longer remembered their origins and were converted into intellectual structures, with qualities that controlled actions and systems of perception, including the simplest ones of everyday life. The historic strength of such communication systems and their qualities were by nature so stable that many of them (even the simplest practices) have been continued in country towns to the present, as levels of knowledge that can be observed in the customs of today's communities. Visitors to the highland towns in the Cundinamarca–Boyaca highlands are surprised to see that some country people continue spinning wool while they are caring for their cattle or moving them from place to place. Spinning is done in the same way it has been done from time immemorial. In the Kogui and Arhuaca zone country people weave handbags (*mochilas*) while they are walking, incorporating designs that indicate that they know the meaning of many symbols and designs. Some of these images show traditional content relating to each family and territory, while others show both male and female characteristics with various and simplified figures, both of which are also present in some rock art. Spinning and weaving are not simply recent useful activities engaged in once sheep were imported, since they also weave other fibers into various designs, some of which can be observed in petroglyphs in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta mountains in the Colombian Caribbean coast (Fig. 14.3).

In the Colonial era, historians wrote that they spun cotton and made a variety of shawls in different sizes and qualities. These were given to the Spaniards to pay a Colonial tax, but this custom dates back to ancient times when an economic payment was given to the chiefs (Colmenares 1999). This form of tax apparently has its roots in the teachings of Bochica. The dress, the way they made the shawls, and the way they made the mantas and their designs, mainly crosses and sacred drawings (Fig. 14.4), reminded the Spaniards of the ancient presence of a supposed apostle.

This person taught the natives how to spin cotton and weave shawls, because before this time they only covered themselves with small pieces of matted cotton from the plant, tied with strings made of “*fique*” [century plant fibers] and loosely fixed together, all badly aligned and looking like it was done by primitive people: when he left a town he left weaving



**Fig. 14.3** Arhuacan Mochilas designs resembling those seen in some petroglyphs (photo from GIPRI archive, 2011)



**Fig. 14.4** Pictographs in the highland zone (Sibate, Cundinamarca) with motifs suggestive of weaving designs and crosses that, according to historians, were teachings Bochica left on the rocks (photo from GIPRI archive, 1980)

designs painted on smooth polished rocks, as can be seen in some places, in case the people forgot what he taught them, as they forgot many other good things he told them preaching in their own language in each town, and leaving them with admiration. Teaching them to make crosses and to use them on “*manta*” (shawl) designs that they use to cover themselves, and for the future telling them about their mysteries and those about the re-incarnation and death of Christ.... (Simón 1981:284).

Rock art of the highlands and the textile tradition according to this version were the result of evangelism. Many years after they received his teachings, people forgot





**Fig. 14.5** Pictographs in the high plains zone (Sutatausa, Cundinamarca) with motifs suggesting weaving draws and lessons that Bochica left on the rocks (photo from GIPRI archive, 1980)

where they learned these skills and confused the motifs and their meaning. About “meaning” the priest Pedro Simon has this to say:

Also they confuse the doctrine of the cross, as the first evangelist told them when he told them to put them on their shawls, they began to change the perfect forms, placing rays from the ends making them today appear more like signs made by scribes than anything else (Simón 1981:286).

Another version shows the same thing:

There were four ages, that were named by Bxogonoa, a man who looked and dressed the same; he came to the lands of Bogota, and evangelized and taught many good things, leaving remnants that can be seen today; they are so blind that they barely know them; the sign of the cross on the head and arms, and in this mixture he carried a club in his hand; calling him with three names: Sadigua was one heard, that means our parent and holy father Sugumonxe, who is invisible, and Sugunsua, that means man that disappeared... (Simón 1981:314).

It is not clear how the rock art sites where Bochica left paintings of his principles and teachings were used, but they appear to be instructions for how to weave and make clothes, and they gave lessons about moral rules of behavior (Fig. 14.5). Father Pedro Simon tells that in Iza, Boyaca women scraped sacred rocks that showed the sign of the presence of Bochica to help with birthing.

...teaching them also to spin cotton and weave shawls, and other things about political life, such as those about Bogota, during the time he was with them, which was not short, afterwards arriving at the town of Iza, and having predicated to them and taught them the same thing as the others, he disappeared, never more being seen, leaving a footprint stamped into a rock that is worshiped by the Indians, specially the pregnant ones, who go to scrape that rock and then drink it mixed with water to have an easy birth. ...Also we found, as was

described by the Conquistador Gonzalo Jimenez de Quesada in a notebook written by him that they placed (painted) crosses on the tombs of those who had been bitten by poisonous snakes or other snakes, however the reason for doing so is not known or why it was not done on other tombs. It was also found that this same figure of the Holy Cross, well made and painted with a red ochre so strong that neither time nor rain has been able to erase them on some tall rocks, were found by the Spaniards when they entered and I have seen some near the towns of Bosa and Suacha. The Pijao Indians, and some in Tunja district, had figures in their sanctuaries with three heads or with three faces on one body that they say are three people with one heart (Simón 1981:283).

Today, in order to assure an easy birth that is fast and without pain, country people from the high plains burn a holy branch mixed with the urine of a child's father. The complex designs of the woven holy branches are undoubtedly related to the Bochica solar tradition, where the solar god protects humans and creators of all arts (Fig. 14.5).

Another reference by the same author is even more explicit in explaining how the population was educated.

And still as primitive people when he left a town he left them weaving designs painted on a smooth polished rock as now is seen in several places, so that they do not forget what they were taught, since they have forgotten many other good things that he taught them in their own language going to each town leaving them admiring him (Simón 1981:285).

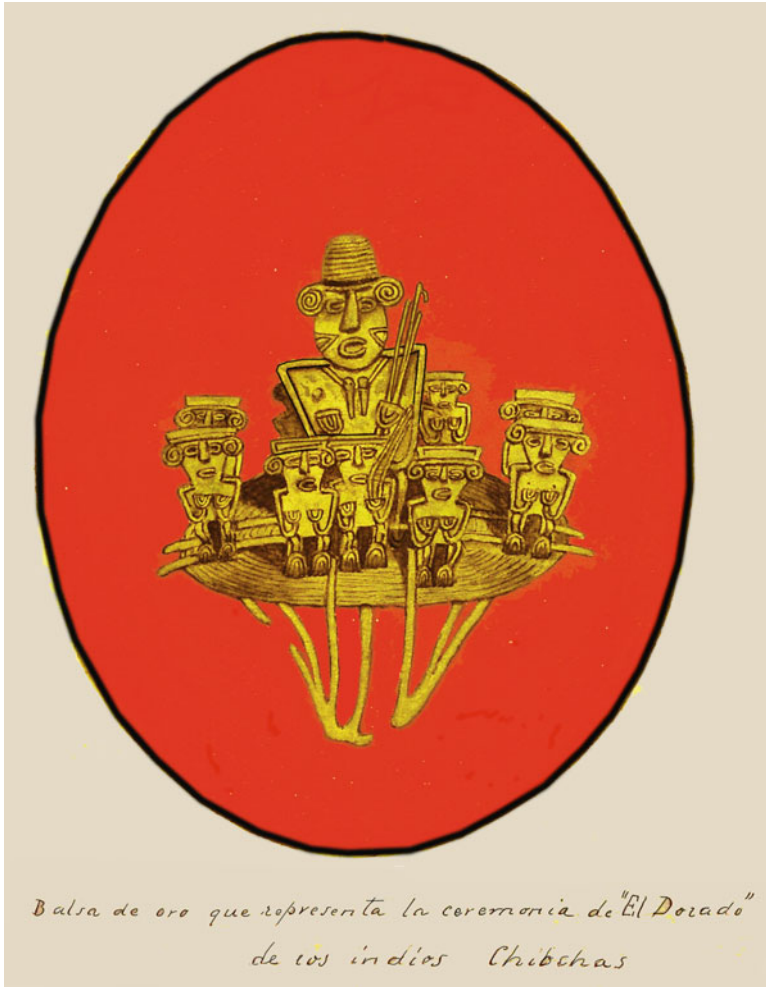
According to a Guane tradition, Bochica left his teachings engraved in the form of petroglyphs showing chalices near the great Sogamoso River (Fig. 14.6). Some sacred symbols on the rocks are also on their tombs, and depending on the reason for death, other objects formed by the intertwining of different colored threads were left there. According to ethnohistorians, these objects are similar to flowery signatures on documents written by scribes. There are also sacred sites or anthropomorphized sites corresponding to particular lakes and some hills. Some rocks appear to be a recording of origin themes. Guatavita Lake, Siecha, Pedro Palo, Fuquene, and Tota have a sacred tradition associated with them recorded by historians and passed down to today's country people.

Early historians wrote about the legend of Guatavita Lake. Many expeditions searching for gold were motivated to explore Muisca territory when they heard that a communal chief covered his body with gold powder and adorned himself with gold objects. Accompanied by much whistling, shouts, and applause, he presented himself to the community and dove into the water, probably to celebrate an origin theme or possibly the return of the sun to its northerly path after darkness at the winter solstice. This ceremony may have also occurred in the ancient Fuquene Lake, which was guarded by priests and shamans. At the baths of the Baganique chief in Boyaca and also at Chia, the ancient Cana family had places to meet and places where they had rock art (this is also the case in other areas such as in Fusca). Today many Colombian museums and private collections have ceramic pieces, metal effigies, and textiles with painted or incised designs of different shapes that suggest there was a graphic communication system associated with the pre-Columbian intellectual world (Fig. 14.7).



**Fig. 14.6** Pictographs (Mongua, Boyaca) and petroglyphs (Sasaima, Cundinamarca) with similar form of chalices (photo from GIPRI archive, 2011)

Triangular heads, three-fingered frogs, and crosses or X's are the most common designs on water jugs (*mucuras*), other ceramics, and rock art murals. Archaeological studies generally support a distinction between domestic and ceremonial objects, but from other perspectives, it may be possible to make other distinctions using ethnohistorical sources that show the diversity that existed in complex societies, that is to say, to show that different groups recognized different levels of power symbols.



**Fig. 14.7** Photograph of the Muisca raft at the Gold's Museum of Bogota by Julio Racines. Balsa gold represents the ceremony of "El Dorado" of the Chibcha Indians. National Museum of Colombia, reg. 4862, 1892

Thus, certain images appear to indicate a social hierarchy and cultural distinctions associated with ancient power (oldest inhabitants of the area) or associated with direct access to specific resources, specialization of certain jobs and activities, or their importance to the community.

For many years, a sacred site was understood to be simply a physical place constructed by a particular culture using objects from nature that symbolized their relationship with certain spiritual entities. Using this concept, sites were described and techniques were refined to analyze their characteristics, but in a wider context, a sacred site can be described as a communication system linked directly to the forces of a spirit who can understand it.

If the sacred is seen from this Cartesian perspective as a communication system, it automatically ceases being a simple visible object and becomes an integral part of the study of the qualities that are synthesized there. Things observed, measured, and structured in the language of science and collected do not contain the same sacredness, and it is necessary to study the thoughts and cultural qualities that give meaning to those objects in order to understand in-depth the way that these representations of the sacred existed in an unknown communication system of an ancient society. Only from this precise cultural and historical plane do empirical objects acquire meaning, and the most important traditional descriptions should acquire a new level of meaning. There they are made real with precise words that give meaning to things. A sacred place is basically an intellectual construction and not a specific spot, that is to say an empirical spot.

Investigation of communication places should begin with the search for the earliest evidence of an empirical description of the places, instruments, and associated objects. A study begins with a detailed collection, but the basis of the explanation must progress beyond this. Ritual ceramic, sacred object, and instrument of a religious cult are only abstract definitions that scarcely suggest their sacred significance. Cultural *a priories* are basic goals, but those are not anything more than organic rules of human communication, a class and a grade of this universal speech.

The search for the meaning of an object of any epoch should be done with wider objectivity. A search in a wider sphere needs to be accomplished without being confined to the world of things, but it should include the infinite capacity of thought. Investigation should try to reproduce the qualities that articulate and gave the condition to certain objects and their hierarchies in order to permit their expression and empirical presence. We cannot forget that the meaning given to an object in all cultures depends on a wider vision of objectivity, in which everything is related, so that each human construction, though simple as it may seem, is a quality produced by multiple historic processes. An object is then a *synthesis* and a unit of complex qualities. The central proposal is that which is human is communication and all of that which is configured by it is characteristic of its system of perception and the basis of human creations. The sacred, by itself, is communication, and it is original meaning, explanation, and a system of social cohesion. Sacred is a system of perception, a condition of order and ranking of the world. Religion is a system of synthesis that imposes a manner of resolving things such as the general destiny of a society, and aspects of life that have to do with daily living. It is for this reason that communities repeat sacred acts in their workplaces and other common places in order to guarantee to be impregnated by the same sacred communication each time. The repetition of the original acts, the acts of the gods, of the perfect life of those who made order out of chaos and made language is paradigmatic and explains why each action, as elemental as it may appear, is impregnated by this sacred order. If humans did not do this, they would lose their true role and would find each act was arbitrary in a profane way, but that does not mean to say it is without meaning, not human, not sacred, and without language. Modern humans, by contrast, have abandoned many ways of thinking that do not meet mathematical parameters and have thereby destroyed the option of encountering its ancient origin. The crisis of

modern thought cannot be attributed simply to its limited capacity to resolve adequately its proposals and promises, but it has to be seen from the point of view of ancient cultural forms that were waiting for fissures to be reborn in order to reinstall its objectives.

In Third World countries these ancient forms reappeared with more vigor the instant colonial religious powers began to lose the control they had during colonization. This left an opening for people (first Indians, now country residents) to relate openly to their most ancient histories and act out their 1,000-year-old practices in a natural setting. The first surprise to researchers is that the ancient beliefs were not destroyed by modern life. These ancient forms of thinking and communication (rock art) are full of representations that reflect the diverse relations of humans with nature configured in the past, which articulated and regulated the various objects and practices. These alternate forms stayed alive in the population, especially in communities that were distant from the process of desacralization and modernization of nature. Here they were able to perpetuate their culture, and a historical millennium force was awaiting resurgence. They had not been greatly influenced by modern thought nor incorporated popular knowledge in the ways of science as its processes. Instead, lurking in the background of all those people was the integral form of the meanings of the religions and premodern perceptions, as if they were at the beginning of the disintegration of the system of explanation and the reality of social modernism. Not having designed a useful view of the world produced by science and not having socialized its capacity and been taught its origin, the door was left open for breaking down the world and using archaic forms of thinking that are capable of unifying reality. They were given a second chance not only to alter the order but to create in its movements a supposed richness and capacity to restore its old and always convincing forms of expressing the truth. These are forms of thought and forms of explanation that are undoubtedly proven and are capable of creating social cohesion. It is interesting to see that it is possible for certain forms of perception and living to be present, although they were thought to be outdated. Thus, the existence of sacred places that contain ancient attributes remain in the mentality of the people and change the decisions that each individual makes, making one believe that it is treated as a progressive autonomous attitude, including the past, and using the disguise of what is supposedly real in order to perpetuate itself (Muñoz 2007).

## **Sacred Sites and Rock Art in the Cundinamarca–Boyaca High Plains Area**

In 1985, GIPRI presented the results of a series of investigations at the Congress of Americanistas (Bogota, Los Andes University) where connections between the pictorial representations and origin myths or legends mentioned in early historical manuscripts were discussed. For many years Colombian archaeology has associated ethnohistorical data of the Colonial times with excavated discoveries, so it was easy to assume that rock art is a reflection of the mythic personalities and the pre-Columbian



**Fig. 14.8** Pictograph murals (Une, Cundinamarca) and petroglyphs (San Antonio de Tequendama, Cundinamarca) are in almost all municipalities of Cundiboyacense High Plateau (photo from GIPRI archive, 2010)

histories of the territory and the new and numerous discoveries on the Cundinamarca–Boyaca high plains (Fig. 14.8). However, during the Congress of Americanistas sessions two presentations were made—one about Bochica and the other about Bachue—that are related to new materials associated with the recording of rock art in the southwest zone of the Bogota Savannah, in the towns of Soacha and Sibate.

Influenced by investigations during the early twentieth century, a search was made for a site with representations of Bochica and with representations of Bachué (Triana 1922). The first problem was determining the dates of many rock art images.

With increasing numbers of sites and images it became more difficult to solidify a relation between the known myths and existing depictions. Hundreds of rocks with thousands of designs were found to exist in an extraordinary variety of rock art manifestations. A second problem was the presence of at least 1,800 petroglyphs in the municipality of Mesitas de El Colegio, Cundinamarca, found between 1996 and 2005 (Muñoz 2006b). The original interpretation was that these were sacred sites, places of worship, and ceremonial spaces, and these ideas gave way to uncertainty and the thought that it was not possible that all these sites were sacred. Also, if everything was sacred, the differences between images and the indescribable objects were not explained. The resulting opinion was that sacredness did not explain everything. At the same time we realized that not all ethnic traditions had been recorded, and that there were European versions of indigenous practices made in the sixteenth century. Thus, accounts by the early historians about the gods and mythic beings were probably associated more with Western ideas than with the intellectual structure of the pre-Columbian communities because these early beliefs were considered false religions, whose demonic structures and myths were suspect and objectionable. It was at this stage that the investigative group became interested in oral tradition, which produced interesting results that were also problematic. Through interviews with country people and workers it was confirmed that interesting stories still exist, but these are based on a complex structure of combined Spanish and Indian traditions mixed to such a degree that it is difficult to separate the two. On the other hand, we were able to learn that when the Conquest Indians were displaced from their territories, many were forced to practice other regions, some of which we have studied. Consequently, it was difficult to establish the original beliefs of any area and determine what kinds of legends were conserved from pre-Columbian periods. In the end, the only certainty was that many of them were not strictly European and contained very complex metaphysical structures similar to those described by Levi Strauss in *The Savage Thought* (1997).

Today researchers routinely compare rock art sites that contain similar contexts with those that are described in religions from other latitudes. In general the organizational structure of the pre-Columbian community of my study area was shaped by a complex chiefdom that had different strata determining the power of certain groups that directed the economic possibilities, such as in the assignment of work tasks and subordination within the community. The control of such activities undoubtedly required a certain type of belief and with it systems of representation that are surely found in rock art motifs. The fundamental goal of the Colombian rock art investigation group in the Colombian highlands is to make reasonable and well thought out decisions about the stylistic typology and about the religious character of the rock art motifs. Although archaeological analysis only allows rough estimates about the density, concentration, and utilization of rock art sites, possible links of these sites with areas of cultivation and habitation, the complexity of pigments use and paint recipes, techniques to make petroglyphs, and the extraordinary variety of rock art motifs demonstrates that an advanced intellect, which has been extraordinarily refined, is present. In no case does it appear that these images were derived from mimicry or from the observation of nature.



## Metaphysical and Religious Construction

It is difficult to show a relationship between rock art and religion, but in the attempt to do so a precise distinction between what is considered religion and the metaphysical construction needs to be made. Certainly all religions come from an intellectual metaphysical construction, but not all metaphysical construction is religious. When and why did this distinction of origin become confused? What role did scientific archaeology play in this supposed unity between religion and rock art? What type of contradiction was generated from the methods and perspectives of geology, paleontology, and rock art images in the first caves discovered in France? When was it determined that Paleolithic rock art was religious and later shamanic?

Metaphysical structures in the Western world that have come to explain reality include premodern constructions that made reference to religious phenomenon and communication systems that are based on nature and have come to be known as ingenious objective realism. In both cases objectivity is not possible. This type of archaic thinking distorts and alienates the human intellectual capacity and makes it impossible to imagine that most of the organization of the objectivity, and objectivity itself, are the result of nature and thought not limited to following the rules of the external world. From the most primitive times onward communication systems have been invented, and throughout the history of human thought it was believed that experience and knowledge of reality came from a relationship with nature, where the content was derived from what the external world contained. Even today this way of understanding the relationship of humans with nature is used to explain human communication, and many interpretations of rock art are based on this idea, which is to say that the metaphysical would be a construct derived from the precariousness of the spiritualization of those absent. Including the common level of meaning it is easy to say what spiritual is, and that gods are the solidifying attributes of what one does not yet possess. However, in addition to this premodern intellectual structure, there exist other distinct ways of thinking about objectivity, and in this context the debates between the traditional metaphysical and the metaphysics of Kant produced a new way of confronting the origin of knowledge. He formulated the construction of a new objectivity and with it paths to a new esthetic. After the reflections derived from the study of thought during the seventeenth century a new way was found whereby that which characterized the rational in humans is precisely the capacity to construct communication systems. After communication is established, humans use it to form connections with the external world to have experiences, which is to say objects that result from these experiences are the consequence of its intellectual activities and that the experience is a synthesis of human conditions. Therefore, modern constructions, communication systems, and problems that are taken on-board during the study of the history of art and rock art have a particular characteristic and that is that they alone know they were made by humans.

During the past 20 years various objections have been made regarding the connection between rock art and religion. Starting with Max Raphael in 1946 and continuing to Michel Lorblanchet (2006) a variety of criticisms have been leveled

against conventional Breuil style conclusions that use interpretations initiated in a systematic manner during the early years of the twentieth century. Raphael (1946) believed that Paleolithic rock art was not only primitive, but he also believed that it was the earliest human expression made possible by esthetic communication to show a difference between man and animal. Painting an animal showed that it had been converted into an intellectual object. Raphael's criticism of the Breuil esthetic opened a number of arguments that over time have become unstructured, finding new paths from stylistic typologies and from the chronologies that have been constructed in his interpretation at the Paris Institute of Human Paleontology. Andre Leroi-Gourhan (1966) and Annette Laming-Emperaire (1964) presented a new way of studying these images by using a systematic reconstruction of the caves (mainly Lascaux) and in doing so came in conflict with the chronologies and traditional stylistic typologies. Besides the animals, their reconstruction placed abstract figures or synthetic forms, which according to the stylistic typology should correspond to older periods, in contemporary analysis fields. In Breuil's version it was assumed that humans in the upper Paleolithic, of the *Magdalenian*, did not have a set idea of space and that all the animals corresponded to isolated images. Calling the site sacred produced a cultural unraveling that increased the value of such vestiges from the Paleolithic. Those who considered the rock art motifs to be religious manifestations viewed them as sublime and placed them in the highest limits of intellectual development, as if gods were the highest forms of human intellect.

When Peter Ucko and Andree Rosenfeld (1967) investigated the Paleolithic they reflected historically about the inconsistencies of current theories in Europe, about the studies of the representations (mostly in the caves), and with that they presented all types of arguments that showed a lack of understanding of the basics. One of the strongest arguments expressed by Ucko and Rosenfeld is that in nearly all cases the interpretations were coming from a general hypothesis that aspired to explain everything in all cases and everywhere, as if it were possible to embrace the variety of human communication systems with one unified theory. One of the strongest objections was produced by the anti-stylists Lorblanchet and Bahn (1993), who accentuated the difficulty of the general hypothesis model and with it the religious hypothesis. They pointed out it is difficult to establish a single hypothesis due to the differences between ethnic groups that produced different interpretations. They emphasized the loss of information in archaeological documentation, which deals with investigations that have a rigid, formal structure with a lineal chronology that is only interested in verifying if the theory is good.

In his study about the origins of culture and the origins of art, Lorblanchet (2006) showed that three million years ago (*Australopithecus* time) there was an admiration of rock figures (Makapansgat) evident in the archaeological record. Two million years ago, according to recent investigations and finds in Africa, the hominid family had a certain attraction to spheres, and 1,700,000 years ago iron oxides were used. One million five hundred thousand years ago, the first bifacial objects were made, and over 1,000,200 years ago the archaeological record demonstrates that before they arrived to Europe humans collected stones and fossils (Lorblanchet 2006). This compilation of data made Lorblanchet confident that human development cannot be explained as a simple biological development, but that it was also

necessary to explain the origin of culture and art, and understand that those humanoids had esthetic leanings and interest in the symmetry and the proportion and the equilibrium of forms. These data also appear to support the idea that humans had a group of previously formed esthetic structures. Therefore, the artistic creation that the Institute of Human Paleontology assigned to *Homo sapiens* in the Upper Paleolithic period (*Magdalenian*) was not the first primitive art, but quite the contrary; it was the result of the development of a large number of processes of intellectual structures that started about three million years ago.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, new pathways have been opened by researchers that remove the limits from traditional interpretations of certain representations and structure new arguments to differentiate rock art representations that correspond to esthetic communication systems as intellectual elaborations relating humans to nature from those that could be called religious or sacred. In the past few years it has become important to learn the history of reasoning behind why an investigator became interested in various fields of knowledge during their investigation into the origin theme or about questions that arose from asking about creation. In philosophy, as it is in anthropology and archaeology, it is important to understand these historic tendencies because in them are political connotations that insert themselves into studies of contexts, processes, and social relationships. These connotations play a role in human communication studies that occur under the guise of religion or simple shamanic themes, and if you look carefully, they are almost the same.

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