

10.

The Nicoya Shaman

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Shamanism is a very early belief pattern that relates humans to their environment. Its continuities are strong from the painted caves of Upper Paleolithic France to the rituals of tribal peoples today. Concerned primarily with hunting, fertility, healing, and death, its manifestations appear to have migrated with hunting bands from northern Europe, across the cold steppes of Russia and Siberia, and into the Americas. The ethnographic record demonstrates that many traditions from the past still exist in shamanistic practices today. The division of the world into three zones—upper, middle, and lower; the symbolic world tree that reaches with its roots, trunk, and branches into these three worlds; the use of an animal as a special *nahua* or alter ego; and the trance or ecstatic state of shamanistic transformation are just a few of the similarities and continuities that can be recognized (Sullivan 1988; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1971; Furst 1966; Grim 1983).

Shamans are most often associated with tribes whose major pursuit is hunting, such as those around the Arctic Circle or bands isolated deep in the Amazon Basin. However, during the precolumbian period in the Americas, many attributes of shamanism can be recognized in the art of tribal peoples whose subsistence had shifted to horticulture. In the centuries since the Spanish Conquest, shamanism has become even more thoroughly integrated into the religious existence of farmers as well as hunters and gatherers, particularly in the tropical forest cultures typical of lower Central America and South America (Sullivan 1988:448). This chapter will discuss one area of lower Central America, Greater Nicoya (Figure 10.1), where shamanism had a strong, visible presence prehistorically. This presence is evidenced in objects from burials dating between about 300 B.C. and A.D. 800—the periods known in the local sequence as the Tempisque and the Bagaces periods.

One of the earliest references in archaeological literature to the role of the shaman in the Nicoya area was made by Haberland (1961d). During a 1958–1959 expedition he excavated a grave on Ometepe Island in the Nicaragua, or northern, section of Greater Nicoya. He concluded from the contents that a shaman had been interred there. He found carefully arranged around a well-preserved skeleton an elaborately decorated ceramic incense ladle, an egg-shaped green stone, a bone tube, and a pottery ring. Several small and large clay vessels in the tomb decorated with incised designs placed the

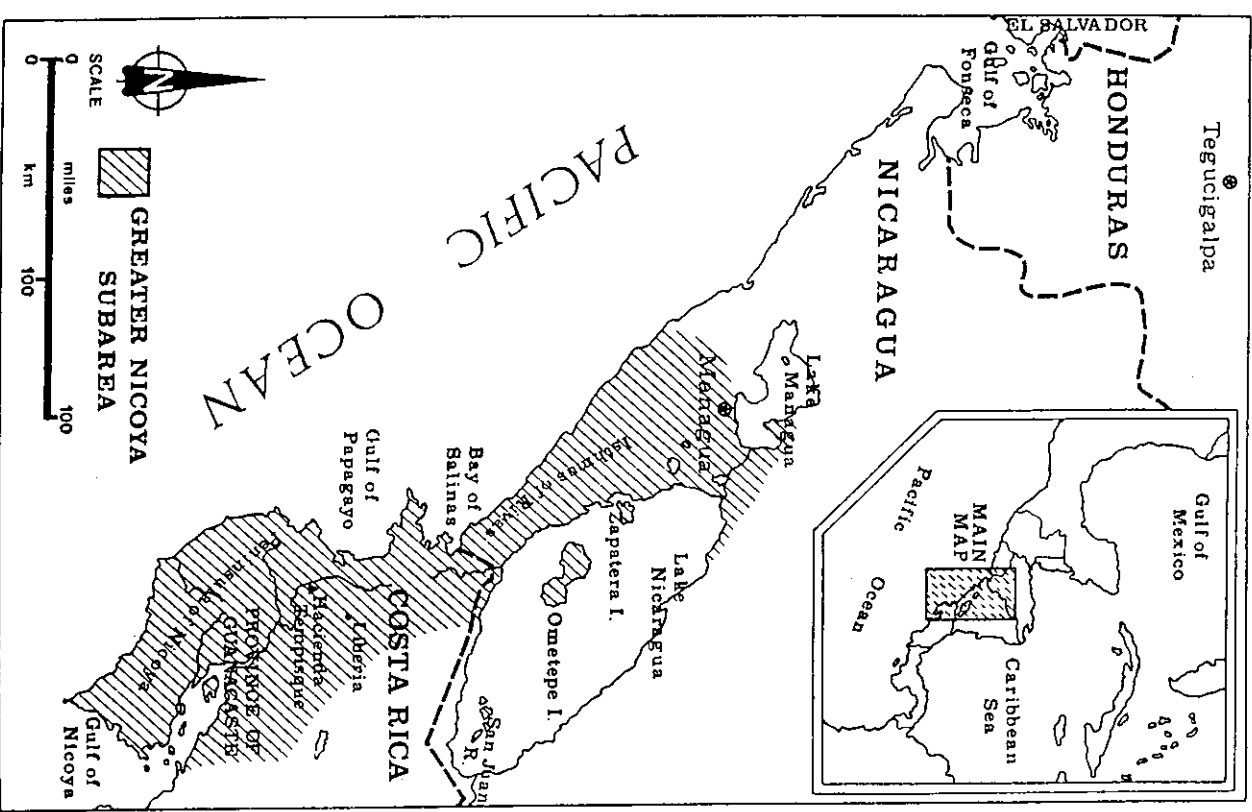


Figure 10.1 Map of Greater Nicoya area.

burial in the Tempisque period. Incense-burners for burning copal, bone tubes for sucking the evil spirits from a sick person's body, and smoothed stones, known locally today as sukia stones, are still in use by shamans and were recognized by Haberland's workers.

Ethnographers tell us that in lower Central America, a modern shaman's paraphernalia most often includes a wooden stool, a drum, smoothed stones, whistles or flutes, sucking tubes, and a wooden staff. Tobacco, feathers, conch shells, incense, rattles, and hallucinogens are also used (Stone 1962; Bozzoli de Wille 1975). Many of these objects are, of course, perishable and would not survive archaeologically, but some can be recognized among grave goods from precolumbian burials.

The designation of particular burial goods as attributes of shamanism in these early periods in Nicoya has been difficult to prove. Grieder (1975) suggests that the ethnological method, which accepts as its primary evidence written accounts from the Conquest period, indigenous myths, and ideologies of contemporary precolumbian societies, is a useful tool. In addition, ethnographic analogy, which attempts to associate the cultural traditions of current populations with peoples of the past, has been used successfully (Stone 1962; Bozzoli de Wille 1975). In Costa Rica, only a handful of indigenous people still remain. These are the Chibchan-speaking Talamanca groups who still live in the remote southern sections of the country. It is the ancient tropical forest customs and rituals of these BriBri and Cabecares peoples that have been associated with the beliefs of prehispanic Costa Rican peoples generally.

To better understand the analogies made here, it is important to note that although two native groups of the Nicoya zone spoke Mexican-related languages at the time of European contact, this was probably a fairly recent linguistic occurrence. Before the intrusion of northern peoples, the language of the Nicoya region was probably Chibcha, the most prominent lower Central American and northern South American language (Lothrop 1926:17; Ferrero 1981). Stylistic similarities in ceramic design and the use of broad-line incising during the Tempisque period support the linguistic evidence and suggest the existence in Greater Nicoya of strong cultural ties with southern tropical forest traditions during the Formative period (Ford 1969). These traditions are still reflected in the Talamanca tribes of southern Costa Rica, whose cosmic worldview provides the cultural associations for the ethnographic analogies in this chapter.

As was true in the past, the oral traditions among the BriBri and Cabecares are strong. Their myths, religious patterns, and rituals are stored not in books but in the minds of the shamans. These men and women are the tribe's spiritual leaders, whose training and personal mystical experiences have prepared them to contact the supernatural world, where they mediate with the spirits for the good of their community (Bierhorst 1990). This pattern of

thought and belief and the dependence upon shamanism has many similarities with other groups still found in the lowland tropical forests of South America and Central America—groups to whom the Talamancans and other precolumbian Costa Rican peoples were related through the Chibchan language (Stone 1962).

An understanding of shamanism and its ancient traditions is based in part upon a concept of spiritual energy or power. One definition by John Grim states (1983:3) that:

among tribal peoples the shaman is the person, male or female, who experiences, absorbs, and communicates a special mode of sustaining, healing power. For most tribal peoples the vital rhythms of the natural world are manifestations of a mysterious, all-pervasive power presence. This power presence is evoked by the shaman in ritual prayer and sacrifice—to sustain human life in its confrontations with the destructive forces of the surrounding world.

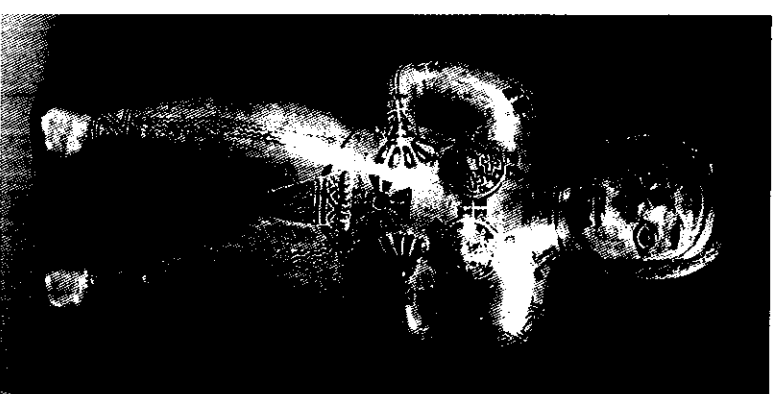
This power is manifested most powerfully in the shaman through an ecstatic trance, often induced by hallucinogenic substances and drumming, during which he or she leaves the body behind and makes a flight or journey into the supernatural world.

A group of large, strongly modeled ceramic female figures suggesting this trance-like state and the spiritual energy of the shaman have been recovered from burials of the Tempisque and Bagaces periods in Nicoya (Figures 10.2 and 10.3). These figures are unlike the female fertility figurines common in so many other cultures of the New World. They do not have the exaggerated sexual features that are characteristic of such figurines, nor are they found in domestic context or household debris. In Costa Rica these figures are unique to the Greater Nicoya area. They are hollow and either sit on stools (Figure 10.2), which are still associated with the practice of shamanism today, or stand in erect positions staring straight ahead as if in a trance (Figure 10.3). Their bodies are often decorated with tattoos or body paint, and the figures convey a sense of majestic dignity and commanding presence. The obvious power emanating from them is a quality usually associated with males in precolumbian societies. These large ceramic figures were a hallmark of early Nicoya burials, and even when they disappeared a smaller version continued to be made. These often depict a figure that is half woman, half jaguar (Figure 10.4), as if the image were caught in the midst of shamanistic change from human to beast. These unusual female figures, some perhaps in an ecstatic trance and others in association with a powerful animal form, surely relate to the local practice of Nicoya shamanism and suggest an unusually powerful position for women in prehistoric Nicoya. Ethnographers tell us



Figure 10.2 (above): Female shaman seated on stool.

Figure 10.3 (right): Standing female shaman.



that even today, Talamancan society is organized along matrilineal clan lines (Stone 1962:35), and the analogy seems to support the possibility that prehistorically women may have played an important ritual role in Nicoya society.

Power is also manifest in creatures other than humans. A vital part of the shaman's identity is his or her alter ego or spirit helper. This is usually a creature from the surrounding environment who acts as a guide or intercessor to the spirit world. Effigy vessels depicting howler monkeys (*Alouatta palliata*) (Figure 10.5) have been found in Tempisque period burials (Tillett 1988b). The effigies are shown in an apparent trance, indicated by blank staring eyes, the tension-filled posture of the body, and the upraised arm. To further stress a sacred role, designs are incised at shoulder, elbow, and hip. In Talamancan belief these still pinpoint the areas of the body that contain the soul, the magic "power" of the spirit (Bozzoli de Wille 1975:154). A transformative state between animal and human is suggested by the human-like seated position of the creature and the flat-topped hat he wears. The monkeys, still common in Nicoya, have physical attributes that must have



Figure 10.4 Female figurine: half woman, half jaguar.

recommended them as alter egos to the shaman. Not only do they appear to be part animal, part human, but their home in the upper branches of tall trees may also have connected them with the concept of the world tree, or axis mundi, and their hooting, which can be heard for great distances in the forest, heralds the coming of rain.

Ethnographers report today that monkeys still play an important role in the social structure of Talamanca. One legend recalls a mystical time when groups of monkeys were transformed into the Talamanca tribes, and in the recent past, war chiefs and shamans were selected from high-ranking clans identified with monkeys (Bozzoli de Wille 1975:31). In tropical forest mythology monkeys are believed to be the originators of fire (Levi-Strauss 1969:126), the symbolic act signifying a transition from the primitive state of the animal world to the society of humans. Other ethnographers of the



Figure 10.5 Howler monkey effigy vessel.

tropical forest report an association between monkeys, particularly howler monkeys, and the underworld of the dead (Roe 1982:234).

In precolumbian times monkeys appeared prominently in the mythology and art of many cultures throughout Mesamerica. The Olmec, for instance, carved monkey figures from sacred jadeite. The Maya portrayed

scribes and artisans as monkey gods (Schele and Miller 1986:139), and monkeys play a prominent part in the Popul Vuh (Tedlock 1985:120–124) as the transformed brothers of the Hero Twins. Thus both ancient and contemporary concepts of the sacred monkey relate it to the Nicoya shaman's choice of the creature as an alter ego.

The monkey's humanlike qualities must have endowed it with particular significance for shamans. Any creature possessing both human and animal traits would be believed to have ready access to the supernatural world. It is this unique combination of human and animal characteristics that suggests transformation, the state of the shaman as he or she makes contact with the spirit world through trance. It is this transformation from human to animal and vice versa that Peter Furst (1968:143–178) and Kent Reilly (1990:5–19) describe from an analysis of the Olmec shaman and his alter ego, the jaguar. Both propose that in trance the two are one—inseparable and interchangeable; each can be transformed to the other. When the shaman makes this transfer to an alter ego state, he is believed to have flown to the world of the dead. While in this netherworld, he bargains with spirits for the success of the crops or the hunt and does battle with the evil demons of sickness and death. When the trance is broken, his return to consciousness and the human form is thought to be an actual rebirth from the womb of the underworld back to the living world.

In addition to the burial effigies of monkeys and impressive female figurines, another dramatic component of burials in the Greater Nicoya during this time period are elaborate, domed incense-burners. The domes or lids of these incense-burners are decorated with a modeled animal image (crocodile, jaguar, or bat) in either anthropomorphic or full zoomorphic form (Figure 10.6). A Nicaraguan legend telling of an old woman shaman, half animal and half female, who lives on top of a volcano, gives us a clue to the ethnographic meaning of these unusual incense vessels. Presented in anthropomorphic form the creatures seated on these incense-burners again suggest the transformation of human into animal alter ego.

Shamanism is also evidenced on other ceramic items from Nicoya tombs. A Rosales Zoned Engraved plate in the collections of the Peabody Museum at Harvard is decorated with the symbolism of shamanism and death (Figure 10.7). On its rim band is the engraved silhouette of a shaman. He wears a hornlike protrusion on his head which, though rare in Nicoya, often identifies the shaman in precolumbian Mesoamerica (Furst 1966:361). His body is painted black and red, the colors of the underworld. His feet seem to move, as if ecstatically dancing. As with the monkey figures, scroll designs are seen at shoulder, elbow, and hip. It has been suggested elsewhere (Tillett 1988a:63) that the plate represents a graphic picture of the cosmos related to beliefs of the Desana of the Vaupes area of Colombia, who see their world as a plate floating in the blood-red sea of the underworld (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1971:24). We can speculate that the shaman pictured on the rim of this plate



Figure 10.6
Domed
incense-
burner
with seated
bat.

is waiting to escort the soul of the deceased on the dangerous journey through that sea to the afterlife.

Another primary figure associated with shamanism is the bat. During the Tempisque period the bat appears on jade pendants and pottery. Though in the following period jades disappear from Nicoya graves, the bat continues as a decoration on Bagaces period ceramic vessels. In Nicoya jadeite objects took a number of forms, but the most numerous were the axe gods. These highly polished, celt-shaped pendants utilized the upper half of the celt form for decoration of the ornament, leaving what was obviously the blade section as a smooth, polished element (Figure 10.8). Recent research (Day 1993:305) suggests that the bat is the most important motif found on the Nicoya jade pendants. Depicted in a stylized manner, the creature crouches on the top half of the polished celt. At times a long tongue, used by vampire bats for lapping blood (Hill and Smith 1986), descends from its mouth

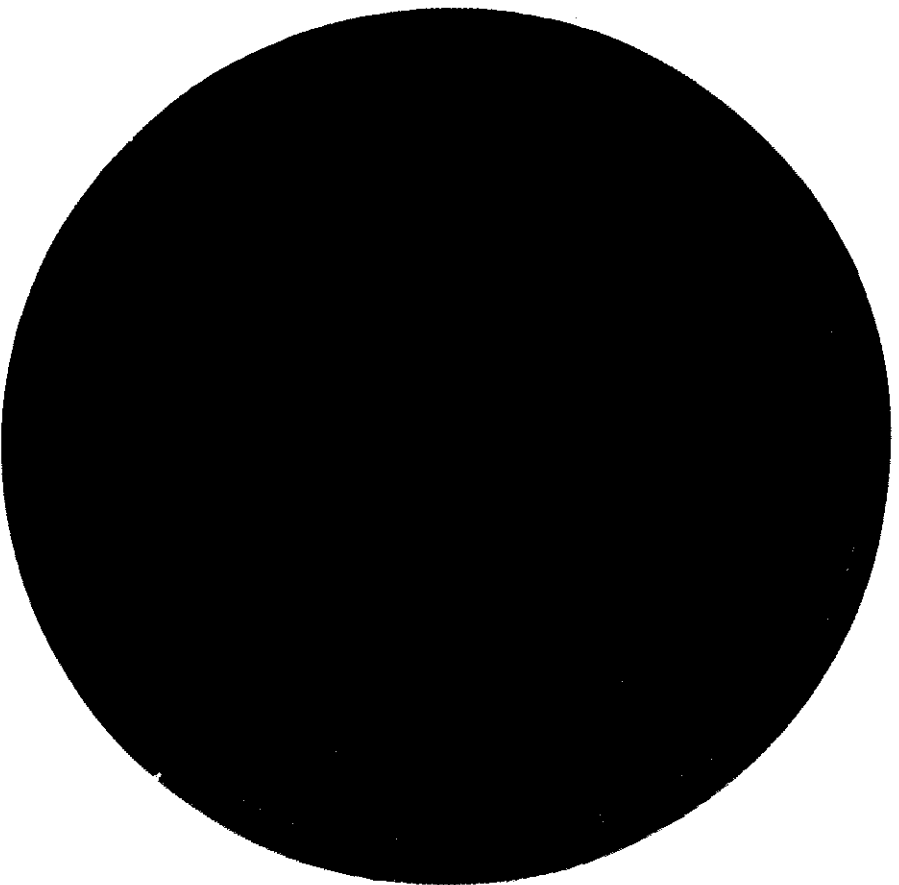


Figure 10.7 Rosales Zoned Engraved plate with dancing shaman. Courtesy Peabody Museum, Harvard University. Photograph by Hillel Burger.

(Figure 10.8). The identification of these jade celt figures as bats rests on their upturned leaf noses, in either rounded or triangular form, wings folded tightly at the sides, menacing teeth, clawlike feet, and depictions of the claw-like upturned bat thumb. These clearly depicted traits are characteristic of leaf-nosed, vampire, and fruit bats of the family Phyllostomidae, native to Central America (Hill and Smith 1986).

An interesting attribute associated with these bat figures is a distinctive layered hat (Figure 10.8). Although not always present, it appears often on both jades and ceramic bats, suggesting that it must be part of shamanistic attire worn by these anthropomorphic creatures. Tillet (1988a), in her study of Tempisque period figures, considers hats to be an important component of shamanistic regalia, and recent research (Day 1993) supports her interpretation.

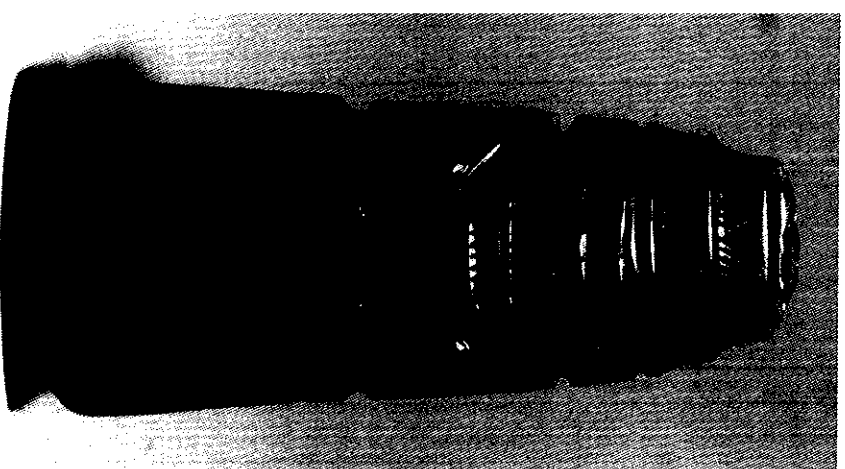


Figure 10.8 Jadeite ax-god bat pendant.

Abundant bat images are also found on pottery in the Nicoya area of Costa Rica (Figure 10.9). These are clearly related to the imagery found on the jade pendants, and they make a strong case for the presence of a cult focused on this nocturnal creature, with its special physical adaptations for darkness and night hunting. In addition, the vampire bat was surely also connected with blood, death, and probably regeneration as well. On both jade pendants and ritual pottery the creature most often appears as an anthropomorphic figure. Its human qualities combine with batlike characteristics and a layered textilelike hat to suggest the importance of shamanistic practices in this early culture and the association of the bat as an important alter ego of the shaman. Continuing manifestations of shamanism in contemporary Costa Rican aboriginal populations, documented by Stone (1962), show that among the Talamancan tribes where there is a lingering

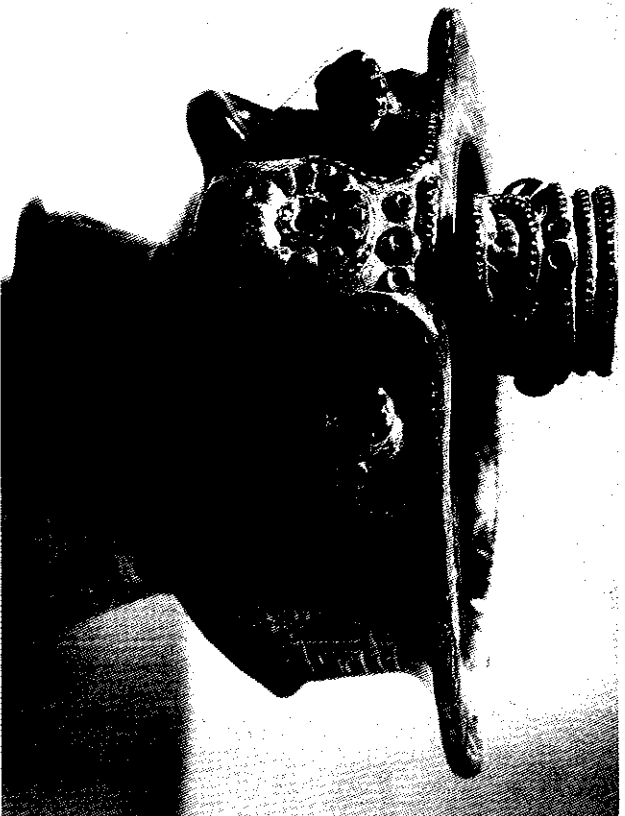


Figure 10.9 Ceramic bowl with bat effigy.

preference for medicine men or shamans as healers, ancient legends still connect the guano of bats with the fertility of earth and plants.

Bat imagery is also found in many other areas of New World culture. In Colombia a recent publication focuses on the mythical animal world of the Tairona (Legast 1987). Using prehistoric artifacts of gold, ceramic, and stone, the author identified the most important prehistoric animal icons and interpreted their meaning by relating them to living myths among the Kogi people of the area today. Interestingly, in Tairona as in Nicoya, the bat is one of the most common cult images. The Kogi consistently associate the creature with first menstrual blood and fertility.

Elizabeth Benson has compiled archeological and ethnological evidence concerning bat imagery in South America (1987) and among the Maya. On the north coast of Peru bat iconography is particularly important. There the creature is depicted as an agent of human sacrifice, with a knife in one hand and a human head in the other. Among the Maya the sign or place-glyph for the ancient site of Copán was a bat's head, and on classic Maya pottery bats often appear in underworld contexts. Today in modern Chiapas the Tzotzil people of Zinacantan still consider themselves the people of the bat, and folklore continues to associate the bat with the underworld, caves, and shamanism.

As keen observers of nature precolumbian peoples of Nicoya could not have failed to be aware of the habits of the creatures around them. Bats, in particular, with their night flights from caves (often considered portals to the underworld), consumption of blood, and uncanny sense of direction may have developed a special significance. As the only flying mammals, they must have seemed strangely related to shamanistic nocturnal flights between the sky and the underworld and the powerful trait of transformation from human to animal forms. The legends concerned with this mysterious relatedness between bat and human shaman are, of course, lost. However, the jades and ceramic ritual vessels and effigies continue to document the significance of this creature in the Nicoya region and the prehistoric importance of shamanistic practices.

Other ritual objects from early burials in Nicoya also document rituals connected with shamanism. Musical instruments such as ceramic drums, whistles, ocarinas, and whistling vessels have been recovered from graves. From these objects, apparently important both historically and prehistorically, we can conclude that sound was an important component of a shaman's ritual. Modern tribal peoples claim that the spirits send sound signals to the shaman. In the past these messages may have come through the whistling of libations poured from ancient vessels or the piping sounds of whistles and ocarinas. Like present-day Bri Bri burial singers, perhaps ancient participants in burial ceremonies blew the ocarinas during mortuary rituals, then left them in the grave. The Marbella-type ocarinas decorated with rocker-stamping and applied bird and animal heads and the somewhat later Corozal type modeled in the form of animals would have been used for this purpose. Documented evidence for their presence archaeologically can be found in Hartman's writings. He excavated several of both types at the cemetery of Las Huacas in Nicoya (Hartman 1907:pl. 2). Drums were another important instrument. Wooden drums have not survived, but ceramic ones have, and they must have produced rhythms and sounds vital to the shaman's ritual. For many shamans today it is the continuous beat of the drums, often combined with a potion of a psychotropic drug, that creates the transformative mood for the healer and his or her patient (Grim 1983).

Other artifacts recovered from burials also indicate the presence of shamanistic practices in prehistoric Nicoya. Ceramic nasal snuffers (Figure 10.10) and miniature lidded lime pots suggest the use of hallucinogenic drugs and bone-sucking tubes (Figure 10.11), and smooth rounded stones are clearly similar to those excavated by Haberland on Ometepe Island and identified by his workers as shamanistic tools still used in healing practices.

CONCLUSIONS

The evidence presented in this chapter indicates that in Greater Nicoya during the Tempisque and Bagaces periods, shamans played a major role in the life cycles of the people. We have seen that various animals such as bats and

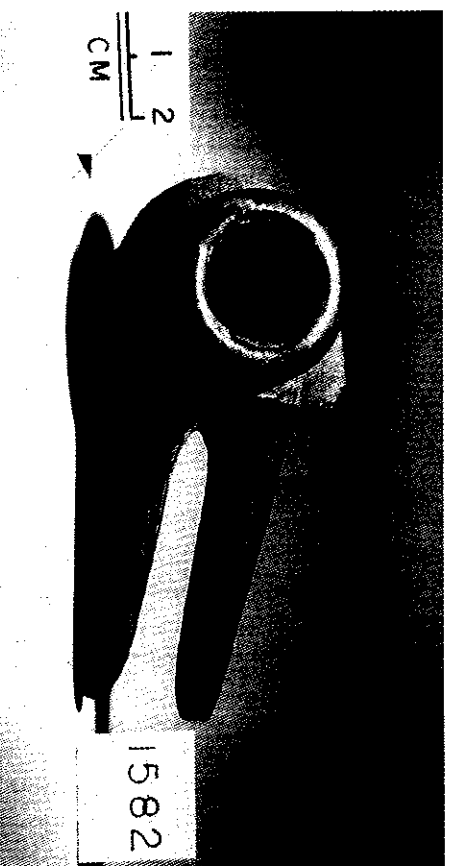
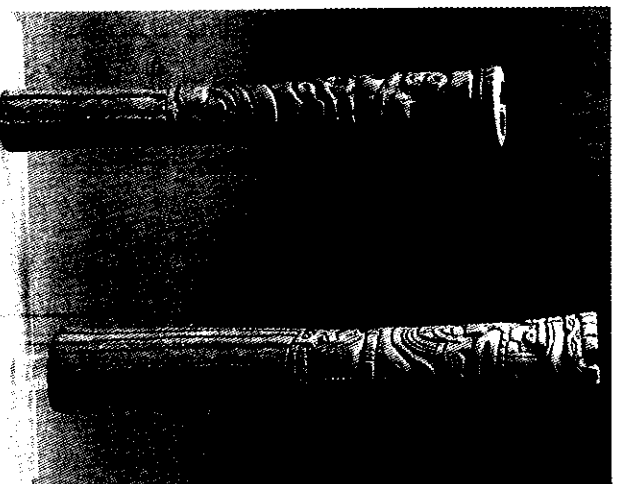


Figure 10.10 Ceramic snuffing instrument.

Figure 10.11
Bone-sucking tubes.

monkeys served as alter egos; that incense and music set the mood for ritual activities; that distinctive costume (headgear) set the shaman apart from the rest of the population; and that women appear to have played a significant role in the religious life of the community.

Clearly, Haberland's excavation led us to recognize a number of archaeological items that can be compared in form and function with objects

still used by shamans today. However, the majority of the jade, ceramic, and bone artifacts upon which the evidence in this chapter rests were recovered not in the northern sector of Greater Nicoya where Haberland's work was done but in the southern sector, across the modern Costa Rican border. How can we explain why graves and mortuary items were richer and more abundant there than in Nicaragua? Perhaps the difference is simply due to the much greater amount of recent archaeological activity in Costa Rica (see, for example, Lange, Bishop, and Lange 1990; Sheets, ed., 1984; Guerrero 1986a). However, the evidence also suggests the interesting possibility that there may have been a greater concentration of population, wealth, and chiefly power in the southern sector during the years between 300 B.C. and A.D. 800. Certainly the fact that spectacular jades were found in Costa Rican burials during this period but were absent in Nicaragua, supports the possibility of greater access to this important source of status and wealth—yet burials in both regions contained shamanistic equipment. It seems worth considering that in early Nicoya society, shamans might also have been the chiefs. Ethnographic investigations in southern Venezuela (Sullivan 1988) demonstrate that the shaman also serves as headman of the local groups. He wards off disease, recounts the myths, presides over initiation rites, and organizes the festivals. His superior knowledge and power unite the community. In Mesoamerica, recent archaeological research in the Olmec area makes a strong case for a relationship between shamans and kingship during the Formative period (Reilly 1990), and even as late as the Aztec period aspects of shamanism underlie the personality of Tezcatlipoca, the god of kings (Day 1991).

Based on its contents and their interpretation, Haberland's excavated grave in northern Nicoya appears to have been a simple shaman burial. Although many burial objects of the same time period from the southern sector of Nicoya also relate to shamanistic practices, other associated items seem to indicate wealth and secular power. Perhaps the actual tools of the shaman found buried with the elite dead in Costa Rican graves gave visual proof of the supernatural powers of the occupant, and the rich jades and pottery decorated with the iconography of death may have declared their owner's chiefly status. The evidence of this preliminary study certainly seems to suggest that in early Nicoya culture, the shaman and the chief may have been one and the same.