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A Q'ero Offering

photo by J. E. Williams

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A halo of light surrounds Waynu Picchu, near the ruins of Machu Picchu.

Offerings for Pachamama: My Initiation into Q'ero Shamanism

Text and photos by J. E. Williams, O.M.D.

Before I began working with the Q'ero of Peru, I was aware of the principle of synchronicity—when two simultaneous events converge in ways that appear to have no causal relationship, but a meaningful connection exists nevertheless. Like many people, I had experienced synchronicity from time to time, but I didn't understand its universal extent. I have since learned that synchronicities occur routinely on the shamanic path, and that Q'ero *paqos* (shaman-priests) are experts in reading these patterns in events and letting the natural order of life unfold. When such events begin to occur consistently, they transcend synchronicity, approaching what I call shamanic resonance. This is the story of my initial encounters with the Q'ero *paqos* Sebastian Palqar Flores and Jorge Palqar Flores, who would in time become my teachers and friends.

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In October 2000, I arranged a trip to Peru, intending to visit Cuzco and Machu Picchu once again after an absence of four years and to learn about Andean shamanism. Unbeknownst to me, synchronicity was already at work, and I arrived in Cuzco

just in time to attend a ceremony about which I'd had no previous knowledge. While visiting one of Cuzco's cathedrals, I saw a flyer announcing that Peruvian anthropologist Maria Antonieta had organized a meeting between three Tibetan monks and three Q'ero shamans at Machu Picchu. The Tibetans, having traveled from India to Europe, were making their way across South America conducting ceremonies for world peace.

I had read that the Q'ero shamans—called *paqos*—were specialists in ritual worship and communication with Pachamama (the spirit of the earth), the *Awkikuna* (nature spirits), and the *Apus* (mountain spirits). Knowing that these shaman-priests rarely made the journey of several days from the high mountains to Cuzco, I was intrigued at the possibility of meeting them, so I phoned for information. Though we only had time to talk briefly, Maria and I had an immediate rapport, and she invited me to participate in the ceremony at Machu Picchu.

In Quechua, *picchu* means a pyramid-shaped mountain and *machu* signifies ancient or venerable, so the literal transla-

tion of Machu Picchu is "old mountain." However, because Quechua words often have multiple meanings, the name Machu Picchu can signify "sovereign guardian spirit of peace," which is why it has been called the City of Hope, the City of Light, and the City of Peace. The idea of participating in a ceremony for world peace at Machu Picchu appealed to me.

On the day of the event, I managed to catch the train to Aguas Calientes, the last stop on the way to Machu Picchu. By late morning, the monks, wearing maroon robes, arrived with an international group of eight Buddhist students from Spain, Mexico, and Peru who were sponsoring the Tibetans' tour. Then, a group of three Q'ero shamans appeared, all wearing alpaca ponchos, colorful knitted caps, and serious expressions.

Although both the Q'eros and the Tibetans were shy, the monks smiled and talked easily, in contrast to the reserved Q'eros. The Tibetans spoke no Spanish, and only one monk spoke English. Since I spoke Spanish, I was asked to translate from Spanish into English, while the monk translated what I said into Tibetan for the

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Ceremonial steps carved in stone rise toward Intiwatana, the solar stone at Machu Picchu.

other monks. Maria, in turn, translated from Spanish to Quechua for the Q'eros, so our conversations were constrained.

In keeping with Andean tradition, the ceremony was scheduled to take place at noon, so we climbed to a spot high above the ruins and waited for the sun to reach its zenith. The morning clouds and mist had disappeared, and the sun warmed us from a blue sky. When the sun was directly overhead, the Q'ero shamans invoked the spirits of Machu Picchu and the surrounding Apus by offering coca leaves. Then, the Tibetans offered their prayer for peace, chanting in deep bass voices and blowing long ceremonial horns. Finally, we all shared coca leaves. I was enthralled.

After the ceremony, Maria and the Q'eros mysteriously disappeared, and the group of sponsors announced they were returning to Aguas Calientes to catch the afternoon train back to Cuzco. I was left hosting the Tibetans.

Standing at a prominent point overlooking the ruins, with the river below and the mountains to the east, I discussed Buddhist philosophy with the monk who spoke English. We talked of the changes happening in the world, and the dilution of the dharma during the modern era. But it wasn't long before the surrounding natural beauty eclipsed our philosophical discussion, and we stood in silence, gazing down at the ruins.

"This may be the most beautiful place on Earth," the monk said after a while, with the utmost sincerity. He explained to me that, though he had been born in Tibet and raised in Nepal, and he had lived in the shadows of the Himalayas, he had never seen anything like Machu Picchu.

I agreed. No matter how many times I had visited Machu Picchu, it always seemed as magical and beautiful as the first time, and perhaps even more so. Set like a jewel atop a mountain in the midst of even higher green peaks, Machu Picchu is among the world's most visited archeological sites. Here, many of the natural elements crucial to Incan cosmology—mountains, rocks, sun, water, moon, and rainbows—converge with Incan structures to form a unified esthetic whole.

The Incan stonework at Machu Picchu remains surprisingly undamaged, making it one of the least spoiled of South America's ancient ruins. Based on the extensive number of carved stones and shrines found at the ruins, some say it was used to observe the passage of the sun. Others say Machu Picchu's primary purpose was as a sanctuary for *akllas* (divine virgins of the sun) and *mamakunas* (wise women), and it may have been the residence of the most powerful *layqas* (female sorcerer-healers) in the Incan empire. In any case, it served as a powerful ritual center for centuries, even before the time

of the Incas, and ceremonies and spiritual initiations still take place there today.

There was so much to see, and not enough time to experience it all. After the Tibetans announced that they had to leave in order to catch the afternoon train back to Cuzco, I tried to find Maria and the Q'eros, but they seemed to have vanished into the mountain mist. I was slightly disappointed that I had missed an opportunity to connect with the Q'ero shamans, but I consoled myself that there would be other times.

As I watched the clouds flowing like white streams through the mountain valleys, I realized that I alone remained among the stones of Machu Picchu. I knew it was time for me to head back to Aguas Calientes as well, but I couldn't pull myself away from the magnificent vistas. Suddenly, the late afternoon sunlight, shining from behind the mountains to the west, fractured into hundreds of luminescent rays, and I watched the landscape transform into a place of supernatural beauty. I felt my emotions, so conflicted over the previous months, settle so deeply that it felt like being in love.

Contented and at peace, I made my way down the mountain to Aguas Calientes, a charming place surrounded by majestic cliffs. This simple village become tourist hub was once a quick train stop on the way to Quillabamba, until a massive landslide tore an entire hillside out from under the tracks. Never completely rebuilt, Aguas Calientes was now a haphazard collection of structures at the end of the line, and served as the stopping off point for visitors to Machu Picchu.

In order to attend that day's ceremony, I had purchased a one-way ticket, the only passage available at the time, so now I needed to obtain another for my return trip. The current tourist train, operating under an efficient European-style system, ran several times a day from Cuzco, but it was typically booked to capacity days in advance. A local train also operated on the same track, but it was notoriously unreliable and always overcrowded.

At the ticket counter, the clerk informed me that there were no seats available on either of the remaining tourist trains, but he suggested an alternative. If I went to where the passengers boarded the local train, I might be able to purchase standing space on the train directly from a conductor—probably at a premium.

Following the clerk's directions, I walked past a row of shops, only to discover a crowd of some four hundred anxious people—all with the same goal as

mine. After speaking with a few, I discovered that some had been waiting for days and the last train was already two hours late. I could see that the swelling mass of backpackers, Andean farmers, and Indians was becoming more impatient by the minute. Getting a passage out of Aguas Calientes that day seemed hopeless.

Rather than compete with the crowds, I decided to head back into town, hoping to find a hotel for the night. Then, not more than ten steps away, I saw the three Q'ero shamans sitting on the ground, their ponchos wrapped around them.

Surprised to see them, and still wanting to talk with them, I went up to them and asked: "Do you speak Spanish?"

"A little," one of the men responded. Then, gesturing toward the oldest of the three, he added, "He doesn't speak or understand any."

Before coming to Peru, I had read that the Q'ero were legendary throughout the Andes for having preserved the purest traditional ways, and for having some of the most powerful shamans, but I knew they also had the reputation of being unapproachable. I was delighted that this Q'ero shaman remembered me from the ceremony and seemed willing to converse.

The oldest man, who spoke only Quechua, paid no attention to what we were saying and looked off as if seeing something in the distance. He had an otherworldly look, as if the mundane events going on around him were unworthy of his attention. I noticed the youngest of the three was watching us, but I assumed that either he didn't speak much Spanish or he was too shy to say he did.

"Have you eaten?" I asked.

They hadn't, so I invited them into a small restaurant, where I ordered us a meal. While we ate, they didn't speak. Once we had finished, they thanked me profusely in Quechua, and we walked back to the station to await the train.

There was nothing to do but stand and survey the crowd. The Q'eros exchanged a word or two in Quechua but otherwise waited in silence. Finally, the one who spoke some Spanish asked, "What do they call you?"

"Santiago," I answered, telling him the name I had used many years before in Mexico when I had apprenticed with *curanderos* to study healing plants. "And your name?"

"I am Sebastian, and this is my brother Jorge." He didn't mention the older man's name.

After what seemed like hours, the train rolled into the station. Well before it came



Q'ero paqos (shaman-priests) stand vigil at a cave entrance involved in cleansing rituals.

to a complete stop, the crowd swelled off the platform and onto the tracks. Blue-jacketed conductors yelling through bullhorns warned the crowd back. Only passengers holding valid tickets were allowed to approach the train, where the conductors scrutinized each ticket several times before handing it back to the passenger. I could see through the soot-coated windows that the train was already full, and I didn't see how more passengers could fit in.

An hour and a half passed. Meanwhile, the conductors continued checking tickets and boarding more passengers. Unexpectedly, the train lurched, and some people lost their balance and fell onto others. Fearing that the train was about to leave, several tried to force their way aboard—perhaps hoping to find some standing room. The cars jerked again.

Above the noise of the crowd, a conductor yelled that anyone with a reserved ticket should come forward.

The Q'eros waited stoically, watching from behind the crowd. In contrast, I grew anxious, still hoping against all odds that an empty seat would turn up at the last minute. But the wall of people in front of us suggested that we might all have to wait until the next day.

"Don't you have tickets?" I asked the Q'eros.

No," says Sebastian. He stood complacently, as if it mattered little if he got on the train that day, or the next, or even the

day after.

Unable to believe that the Q'ero shamans would be invited to conduct a ceremony and not be given return-trip tickets, I asked again, "Are you sure you don't have a ticket?"

He replied as before, "No."

I tried another line of reasoning. "Did they give you a piece of paper?"

"Yes," Sebastian said. "They gave us some slips of paper, but we don't know what they're for."

Realizing that the men might not read Spanish, I asked to see the papers. Sebastian opened a cloth bundle and handed me the papers—three return-trip tickets with seat reservations to Cuzco. I encouraged them to get on the train.

"But where will you sit, Santiago?" Sebastian asked.

"I don't have a ticket. I'll catch the train to Cuzco tomorrow or the next day."

In truth, I had no idea when I would get out, but I reassured him that everything was okay. There was no time for talk. The train lurched forward again, its iron wheels grating on the rusty tracks. Holding the three tickets over my head and shouting to the conductor on the last car, I pushed through the crowd with the three Q'eros behind me. The conductor waved me on, but as soon as he saw the Indians, his expression turned to disdain. He might as well have shouted that all Indians could wait. However, when I insisted that they had valid tickets with seat



The author (center) joins Sebastian's family for a group portrait at their home in the Andes.

assignments, he relented.

The train was already filled to overflowing, but the crowd surged forward, pressing the conductor against the car railing. When he ordered everyone back, I quickly pushed Sebastian, Jorge, and the third Q'ero from behind, squeezing them into the already overcrowded car. In the turmoil, there was no time for good-byes or to make arrangements to meet in Cuzco. I wondered if I'd ever see them again.

Then, to my amazement, just as the train started to pull away, a conductor in another car waved me onboard. Without hesitating, I hurried through the throng and climbed onboard. The conductor said, "You can ride as far as Ollantaytambo. We have ticketed passengers getting on there. You can get a bus to Cuzco tomorrow morning."

Clearing the Way for New Experiences

The next morning, as I walked into the center of Cuzco, I saw Sebastian and Jorge sitting on a bench in the Plaza de Armas. Before I reached them, they were on their feet, greeting me as if I were a distinguished but forgetful professor, late for an appointment.

"Santiago, we've been waiting for you," Sebastian said.

Jorge smiled shyly and nodded in agreement. I discovered that Jorge spoke a passable Spanish but was too reserved to speak to me. The third Q'ero was absent, and I did not see him again for several years.

"Haku," Sebastian said. "Let's go."

Without wasting time or waiting for me to reply, they picked up their bundles, slung them over their backs, and tied them securely in front with a knot. I followed them to a small café on a side street several blocks from the plaza.

At the café, they sat silently while I read the menu. I ordered soup with beef for them and *dieta de pollo*, a hearty chicken soup, for myself. While we waited for our food, we talked.

Sebastian asked how I knew the Tibetan monks, where they had come from, and what I was doing in Cuzco. I explained to Sebastian and Jorge that I hadn't known the Tibetans before meeting them at Machu Picchu. I had come to Cuzco to learn from the Apus, as I had been instructed to do during some ayahuasca visions. They comprehended immediately, and I realized further explanation was unnecessary.

I wanted to know how they knew where to find me that morning. Curious to find out whether they had intuitively known I would be there, I asked, "Were you waiting long?"

"Not very long. Only a half-hour," Sebastian replied.

I should have known better—they arrived, and I arrived. Later, I would learn that nature finds ways to maintain links between us and the underlying reality of the universe, which is hidden from our normal waking consciousness. At that time, I was still a typical impatient Westerner, continuously questioning, search-

ing for meaning, and uncomfortable with a process that seemed to operate intelligently but remained beyond the realm of my intellectual understanding. In contrast, the Q'eros were in harmony with the process.

Over the next six years, these coincidental meetings between us would become the norm. Though my Q'ero friends came to Cuzco infrequently, my arrivals—once or twice a year—always seemed to coincide with theirs. Either on the day I arrived or by the following morning, Sebastian simply showed up—sometimes alone and sometimes with Jorge—to welcome me back. At first, I found these inexplicable coincidences difficult to comprehend. Later, I learned that there are no coincidences, and in time, I grew accustomed to the synchronicity. Eventually, I realized that one is always where one is supposed to be at exactly the right time.

"I am a *paqo* and *hanpiq*," Sebastian informed me over his bowl of soup, made with meat, vegetables, and eggs. "We'll perform a ceremony for you to help clear the way for your journey. Now, we must attend to some sick people. Let's meet tomorrow."

When they finished eating, they rose from the table as one. Touching but not shaking my hand, they thanked me formally and slung their bundles over their backs. As they left, Jorge glanced over his shoulder and smiled. Then, they stepped through the doorway and vanished.

I sat alone for a time, pondering where these meetings with the Q'eros might take me. I seemed to be getting nowhere fast. That afternoon, I walked to the library on Calle Ruinas to read more about Incan healing. There were a few old and faded books, chronicles of the times after the Spanish conquest, but they had little information on healing practices or beliefs. Over my years with Sebastian, I would learn that *paqos* are often not only shamans but *hanpiqs* (experts in the use of medicinal plants). They are often called *curanderos*, a Spanish term for healers.

This was how I began my friendship with the Q'ero *paqo* Sebastian Palcar Flores and my apprenticeship in Andean shamanism. In time, he would become not only my friend but my primary mentor in Q'ero shamanic practices, and eventually I would make the difficult journey to Q'ero and become an adopted member of his family.

Though Sebastian was a well-known *paqo* and *hanpiq*, and his abilities as a diviner of coca leaves were in high demand even in Cuzco, there was nothing preten-

tious about him. Forty-four years old, he was as rugged as the mountains from whence he came. He wore a pre-Hispanic black tunic, or *unku*, under a handwoven beige poncho of alpaca wool decorated with a few thin, bright-colored stripes near the borders—the trademark style of the Q'ero. When performing ceremonies, he changed his plain poncho for a multicolored one displaying geometric designs symbolic of the sun, moon, lakes, and stars. He almost always wore the traditional knitted Incan cap, the *ch'ullu*, over his close-cropped black hair. He never wore shoes, preferring Andean sandals—even when walking through glacial streams, over jagged stones, and along dusty streets.

Sebastian's oval face with high cheek bones was classically Andean, but his hawklike nose revealed royalty. His demeanor in Cuzco was that of a humble mountain Indian, but his bearing was proud. In his own land, among his people, he was a prince, treating everyone with respect, as he was respected in return. Over the years, as we worked together, I would never see him get angry or display negative emotions. I saw him face numerous physical challenges and personal tragedies, but even under the most difficult of conditions, he never complained. I say these things not to paint a romantic picture of a modern-day "noble savage," but to tell the truth. Sebastian is by far a better man than almost anyone I've ever known.

In time, I would also become close to Sebastian's younger brother, Jorge Palcar Flores. The two often performed ceremonies together, but they worked separately as well because they lived in different villages, with a day's walk between them. Jorge's demeanor was less assuming than his brother's, but he was also a formidable *paqo*, and he emanated a sensitive, generous spirit that I felt very close to. Later, I would become the godfather of Jorge's daughter, Gloria, binding me ceremonially to his entire family.

Rituals of Reciprocity

Early the next morning, Sebastian and Jorge were waiting for me at the Plaza de Armas, and we began the routine that I would become used to over the next four years.

"K'uchi?" Sebastian asked. "Ready?"

We headed along the back streets of Cuzco toward the central market, walking briskly through the crowds that congested the streets and sidewalks. The markets spread out in a labyrinth of ramshackle stalls covered in sky blue and bright orange plastic tarps. In alleys so narrow that



Sebastian and Jorge prepare a despacho (offering) while the author watches them.

we had to walk sideways to pass, vendors hawked stacks of raw meat, mountains of eggs, and pyramids of tangerines. Potatoes, the staple food in the Andes, were displayed everywhere in all sizes, colors, and shapes. Pre-Hispanic vegetables, multicolored corn, dried beans, fruits of all kinds, and piles of coca leaves were heaped on plastic sheets—all were for sale.

The coca leaves were packaged in compressed bundles about the size of small papayas, or were sold loose by weight. We bought a large green plastic bag full of olive-colored leaves. The leaves are usually consumed with a pinch of limestone or a sticky black paste made from quinoa ash and various tree barks—providing catalytic chemicals that allow the body to absorb the active alkaloids in the leaves more easily. Quinoa (pronounced keen-wa) was one of the three staple foods, along with corn and potatoes, of the Incas, who referred to quinoa (*kiwina* in Quechua) as the "mother of all grains."

Sebastian explained the combination to me: "Mama Coca is alive and powerful. It's the ideal offering for the Apus. The paste and leaves together are *yanantin*, a sacred pair. Coca speaks the truth to man, reveals the unknown, and gives strength and health."

Over the years, Sebastian would share more of his vast knowledge of coca with me. I would learn that the quality, not the quantity, of the offering is most important. Leaves are carefully sorted to select the most perfectly shaped and the largest. Coca leaves are also used for divination, and Sebastian was an expert in this. Each

leaf represents a quality of life, and different shapes indicate health, money, love and relationship, the weather, good and bad fortune, animals, and natural events.

Coca, the divine plant of the Andes and the most important ceremonial plant of the Incas, was so highly valued by the ruling classes that its cultivation and use were once highly regulated. When the conquistadors arrived, they associated coca use with Incan religion and tried to eliminate it. However, its use was so vital to survival in the high Andes and so linked to the culture that the Spanish were unsuccessful in abolishing it.

Chewing coca leaves literally sustains life at high altitude. It wards off hunger, enhances endurance, defends against the cold, heightens the senses, lifts the mood, and promotes a sense of well-being. It opens the respiratory passages and increases the oxygen content in the blood. When used in a ritual context, it can expand one's consciousness and enhance communication with the gods.

Consumed in leaf form, coca does not produce toxicity or dependence. Its effects are distinct from those of cocaine, one of a dozen or so active compounds found in the leaf. It is only when coca is processed and chemically refined into a powerful stimulant that it becomes an addictive drug. For this reason, Q'ero shamans never use chemically concentrated drugs derived from the coca leaves.

Stashing the coca leaves in his bundle, Sebastian led me downhill to a side street where the shops of *curanderos* and *brujos* (sorcerers) were clustered. We entered



The Inca were skilled stonemasons, as evidenced in these carved stones at a royal burial site.

one not much larger than a car. On the walls were ocelot and other animal skins. Dark gray condor feathers—now illegal to possess because these birds are endangered—hung next to bright blue, yellow, and red macaw feathers. Dried iridescent hummingbirds—used to cure *el susto*, or soul loss—hung in bunches from the ceiling. Scented waters, religious relics, magical stones, resins for incense, and statues of saints and Andean deities were all packed onto the narrow shelves.

The Indian woman who ran the place looked at me as if I was a long-lost relative she couldn't place. Sebastian explained he was selecting ingredients for a *despacho*. The Spanish word *despacho*, as used in the Andes, means a ceremony of reciprocity. It is a symbolic offering given to Pachamama, for her nourishment and protection, and to the Awkikuna, the nature spirits that serve as protectors of caves, springs, unusual rock formations, large trees, and lakes. The entire Incan cosmic vision is represented microcosmically in the way the *despacho* is prepared. Gradually, over the years I worked with Sebastian, I would learn the significance and order of each component.

Sebastian handpicked dried grains and seeds, colored threads, metallic foil, brightly colored candy and other sweets, powdered metal, confetti, and other things. In passing, he pointed to some dried lizards. "We use these to cure broken bones," he said, thus beginning one of many lessons for me in Q'ero articles of healing and methods of ceremonial work.

Finally, he chose what looked like a mummified bird without feathers. As the

shopkeeper wrapped the object in newspaper, Sebastian said, "Llama fetus for Pachamama."

Over the next weeks, I would learn that Pachamama is the great Earth Mother who sustains life and supports the spirit world of the Apus and Awkikuna. I would also learn that maintaining a relationship based on mutual respect and reciprocity with Pachamama is central and vital to traditional Andean life.

In order to understand Q'ero thought and garner insight from their way of life, one must experience Pachamama not only as the nourishing Earth Mother but also as Earth-time. In Quechua, *pacha* means time and *mama* refers to mother. From the Andean worldview as most traditionally represented by the Q'ero, Pachamama is an all-encompassing sentient being. She encompasses both the spiritual dimension and the material world, life and death, and place and time—all aspects of one continuous interwoven reality. To the Q'ero, time is not linear—one minute does not precede another. Time is a process that spreads in every direction. It is multi-dimensional, interpenetrating the three worlds: *ukhupacha* (the interior world), *kaypacha* (the world we live in), and *hananpacha* (the highest world of spiritual beings). In the Andes, the individual is not the center of the universe but moves upon the earth in the matrix of time.

On a personal level, when Pachamama is approached in a respectful manner, routine consciousness becomes mystical. The shaman uses his ability to alter states of consciousness to slip between "cracks" in Earth-time in order to enter the reality

where the Apus, Awkikuna, and spiritual masters dwell. It may be that the thin air at high altitudes and the ritual chewing of coca leaves facilitate this sense of other-worldliness, but fundamentally, it is this ability to see the world differently, to acknowledge that a separate reality coexists, that distinguishes the Andean worldview from the Western.

I had been told that, in the Andes, a shaman's journey on the path of light begins by being struck by lightning. The highest initiations involve transforming the initiate's material body into a light body that is capable of leaving the limitations of Earth-time and traveling beyond. At the point of death, the Andean shaman's journey doesn't end; his luminous essence merges with the pure spiritual energy of the Apus. The Incas called such a one *intikana*, a being of light, limitless and one with Inti (the sun).

As if reading my thoughts, Jorge said, "Earth is our mother and Inti our father. We are *intiq churikuna*, children of the sun."

The morning lesson was over. Sebastian completed his transactions, and we made our way back through the maze of vendors and crowded streets to the Plaza de Armas. We agreed to meet later that afternoon, before the sun set, to perform ceremony at a *waka*.

Wakas are naturally occurring, unusually shaped rock outcroppings, caves, and springs that serve as portals through which the spirit world influences the earthly realms. Incan stoneworkers often enhanced caves and outcroppings by carving seats and designs into the rocks. Some *wakas* were used as astronomical sighting points to mark important celestial events on the Incan ritual calendar. Many served as burial sites housing mummies. The Incas practiced ancestor worship and developed the skill of embalming to a high art. Their mummies were revered and housed in special *wakas*, until the Spaniards destroyed them during their systematic destruction of all things indigenous.

Walking in the Footsteps of the Incas

Around four in the afternoon, I set out to meet Sebastian and Jorge. As I made my way through the narrow stone streets of Cuzco, I found them waiting for me a few blocks from the Plaza de Armas.

"This is a good place to start," Sebastian announced.

We begin our walk out of Cuzco at the first *waka*, Guaracince, now turned into a park with a small museum. During Incan times, it was located in Chuquipampa, the "plain of gold," next to Qorikancha, which

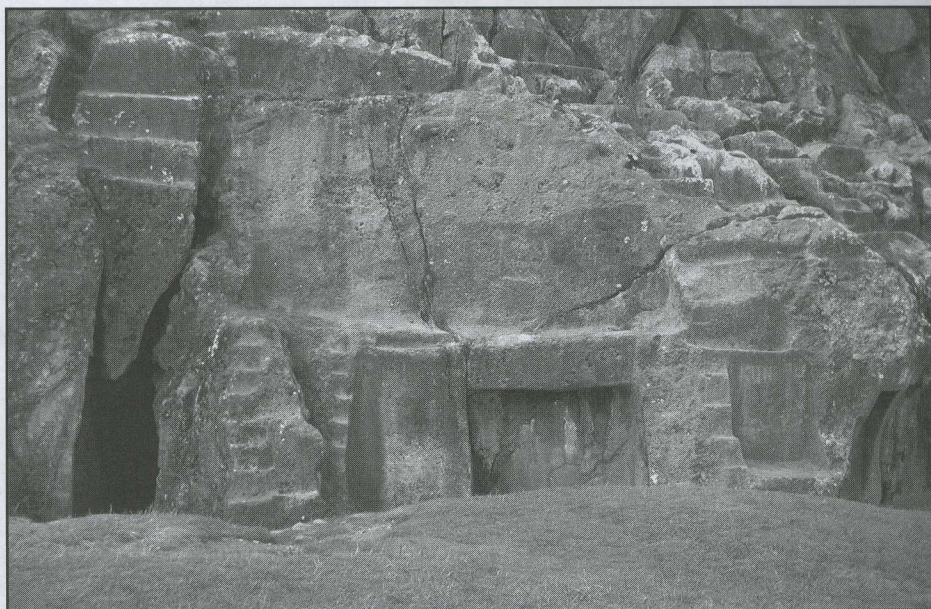
the Spanish called the Temple of the Sun. The most sacred spot in the Incan universe, Qorikancha is situated on a rise of land high enough to be visible from a distance and near the juncture of two streams that once flowed through the city. It is reported that Qorikancha housed the finest gold and silver objects, kept in numerous shrines dedicated to the sun, the moon, the stars, the thunder, the rainbow, and Wiraqocha (the ancestral god of the Inca). Legends say the fabled giant gold disc of the Inca was housed here.

From Guaracince, we made our way through the narrow cobblestone streets to the Plaza de Armas—Aucaypata, as it was called in Incan times, a place so saturated by history that the staccato beat of Spanish horse hooves could still be heard on moonless nights. On the northeast side of the plaza was the main cathedral, built in 1556 on the site of the palace of Inca Wiraqocha. On the south side was La Compañita, a church built by the Jesuits in 1668 on the site of the Incan temple of the serpents, Amaru Kancha, and the palace of another Inca (divine ruler), Wayna Qhapaq.

From the Plaza de Armas, we walked uphill through a residential area of colonial houses, many built upon Incan stone foundations and some with the original archways. Sebastian pointed to one archway that somehow had escaped the Spanish obsession with destroying anything bearing the image of snakes, thinking them representations of the devil. Facing each other over a green door were two snakes carved in bas relief from stone.

When we stopped at a vantage point above the city, Sebastian described how Cuzco is shaped. Pachakuteq, the ninth Inca, designed Cuzco to look like a puma with its head touching Sacsayhuaman—a renowned archeological site made of gigantic stones—and with its tail arching down Avenida El Sol toward the south. In doing so, he transformed Cuzco from a simple town into a sacred city. During the golden period of Incan history, it was known as the City of the Solar Puma.

Each year, on June 21, the winter solstice in the Southern Hemisphere, *pumarunas*—Incan shamans dedicated to ceremonies associated with the puma—conducted a ceremony known as Awakening the Puma. At this time, the Inca gathered the court, priests, astronomers, warriors, and the people of Cuzco in the great central square at the site of the current Plaza de Armas to begin the celebration of Inti Raymi, the beginning of the solar year. In the cold and darkness of the Andean early morning, thousands of people waited in



The entrance to the cave inside Killarumiyoc, the Temple of Moon, located near Cuzco.

silence for the sun to rise. Then, as the first rays of the sun touched the puma's head, a priest blew a conch shell, signaling an awakening. As sunlight fell progressively upon the many sacred sites within the city, each *waka* was awakened in turn. The belief was that, when the sunlight reached the puma's tail, the energy of the city and the empire was renewed and enlivened.

We climbed farther up the hill to Sacsayhuaman, where we rested among the rocks. The late afternoon sun gave the otherwise gray stones a golden cast. Blue and yellow wildflowers bloomed in profusion, and butterflies and hummingbirds indulged in bits of nectar before sunset.

Sebastian pointed to seats carved in the rocks by Incan stoneworkers. He explained that where we were sitting was a place for dreams and visions. It contained seven windows that the Incan priests used for ceremonies to see into the future. Now, they were covered over with grass and shrubs, making them difficult to distinguish, but when I looked carefully, I saw that, evenly spaced around the circle, there were indeed seven shrines carved from solid rock or made from stone slabs. Over the years, I would come back to this spot many times for meditation and to contemplate the mysteries of the Andes.

Just as the sun rested on the tips of the mountains, we rose. Sebastian wanted to take advantage of the remaining daylight, and he led us uphill to the southeast. This time, I was in the middle and Jorge walked behind. This pattern of walking would become our routine over the next several years until they allowed me to walk in front. For now, I followed in the shaman's

shadow as we made our way uphill past the stones of Sacsayhuaman and beyond to Killarumiyoc, the Temple of the Moon.

Illuminating the Cave of the Heart

Located above Cuzco, there is an immense rock outcropping set in the center of a large field, as if it fell from the sky. It contains one main cave, known as Killarumiyoc, or the Temple of the Moon, and over the entrance is a fossilized boa at least twelve feet long, now exposed in relief in the stone by eons of weathering. As noted, most Andean ceremonies are performed at noon when the sun, Inti, is at its zenith. However, those that honor the moon, Killa, occur at night, often during the full moon. In contrast to Incan sun temples, which are typically grand structures of huge precision-cut stone blocks, the moon temples are located in natural stone formations or in caves.

At Killarumiyoc, Sebastian led us through a fissure no wider than three feet, and down a narrow passage into the bones of the earth. The stone walls were cold to the touch. At the end of the winding passageway, there was a circular stone altar about six feet in circumference and three feet above the ground. Centuries of ceremonial use had worn the surface glass smooth. Above it, a natural fissure allowed sun or moonlight to illuminate the ceremonial section of the cave and caused the full moon to cast a single beam of light directly upon the altar.

Sebastian spread his ceremonial cloth of deep red alpaca wool on the stone altar. He counted out sacred coca leaves, meticulously selecting the most evenly



Sebastian presents an offering for burning at a rock shelter near the temple of Q'enco.

formed ones and those of the same size. Separating them into groups of three, the grouping called a *k'intu*, he arranged these along the border of the altar cloth. Then he took a carved rattle, stones, and other ceremonial objects from his sacred bundle and arranged them to form a simple *mesa*—the personal altar from which a *paqo* worships Pachamama, honors the Apus, and communicates with the Awkikuna.

In time, I would learn that, during Incan times, there were three levels of traditional Andean healers. The *watoq* diagnosed illness through divination with coca leaves or the entrails of guinea pigs, or through visions and dreams. The *hanpiq* was an expert in medicinal plants called *hampi*, who treated common ailments with herbal and mineral preparations. The highest level of healer was the *paqo*, who treated soul illness. By restoring balance between the body and spirit through complex rituals, using plant and animal medicines and healing stones, *paqos* treated the cause of illness rather than alleviating only its physical symptoms. In this respect, the *paqo* performed a function similar to that of shamans in other parts of the world. However, in former times, the Inca also had priests—specialists in ceremony and astronomy—who were organized into different levels, the highest being the *willaq uma*, a sage who could predict the future and cure illness with only his energy. Today, the Q'ero *paqos* assume the role of all

three types of healers, and sometimes they also perform some of the former priestly functions. Therefore, they are best called shaman-priests.

In Incan times, *willkamayoqs* were employed to coordinate ceremonial worship at these sites, while *wakamayoqs*—specialists in shrines and sacred objects—ensured that appropriate offerings were made to each resident spirit. These often elaborate ceremonies included the ritual sacrifice of llamas. In modern times, honoring Pachamama and making offerings to the Awkikuna are still carried out by *pampamayoqs* (ceremonialists) like Sebastian.

The Q'ero believe it is vital to nourish the spirits at *wakas*, maintaining through them the ancestral connections that shape the lives and destinies of the inhabitants of the surrounding region.

Interestingly, the traditional *mesas* of the Q'ero *paqos* are much simpler than those of mestizo *curanderos*. One reason is that the *paqos* must carry the sacred objects of their trade in a bundle that they keep by them at all times. Some of their objects they find in the mountains, others are said to manifest directly from other dimensions, and some are given to them by another shaman. Years later, Sebastian would give me several such objects for my own medicine bundle.

After sorting the coca leaves, Sebastian arranged the offerings that we had bought that morning in the market onto a sheet of

white wrapping paper. Carefully, he placed the dried llama fetus, sheets of gold and silver foil, colored thread, confetti, candies, alpaca fat, garbanzo beans, corn, and other objects into a pleasing pattern. He explained that by symbolic acts of reciprocity, we honor Pachamama and show our gratitude and appreciation—*agradecimiento*, in Spanish—for life. In this way, a *despacho* is not the offering of goods to totemic spirits for the purpose of appeasement, as Spanish chroniclers and modern anthropologists have thought, but a way of communication and connection with nature and life.

After the sun set, the cave was completely dark except for a funnel of moonlight coming through a fissure above the stone altar. The moonlight painted the walls of the cave opalescent. It was so beautiful and silent in the cave that I temporarily lost sense of where and who I was. Though this sense of timelessness is not limited to the Andes, it is very strong here. This night was full moon, and as the moon rose higher in the night sky, the light in the cave became luminescent. When the moon was directly overhead, a single beam of silver light fell upon the altar at the exact spot where Sebastian had placed the offerings. This is what we had waited for.

With the concentration of an artist, Sebastian completed each detail of the *despacho*. When finished, he carefully folded the corners of the white paper over the offerings and wrapped the whole tightly in the ceremonial cloth. Grasping the bundle in both hands, he held it up to the beam of moonlight. Forcefully blowing into the bundle several times, he prayed to the Apus, summoning the mountain spirits. I knelt on the stone altar as instructed. It was cold. He passed the bundle over my body, chanting in Quechua ancient words of protection and blessing.

Sebastian practices the art of his ancestors, a way that extends back to a time before the Incas. This cave symbolizes the womb of Pachamama, and the round stone altar reflects the roundness of the earth and the moon, as well as the wholeness of creation. The darkness in the cave is the void, and the spirit of the moon, *Mamakilla*, is the grandmother of creation. As the light of the full moon falls upon the altar, it awakens one's spiritual connection to Pachamama.

After finishing the moonlight ceremony, Sebastian and I emerged from the cave, carrying the offerings still wrapped tightly in the paper and covered with the cloth. In the light cast by the full moon,

we walked downhill into a valley, where Sebastian's brother, Jorge, had started a fire in a stone formation that looked like a chimney. After more prayers, Sebastian took the paper bundle and threw it on the fire. He explained that burning the offerings released their energy, which fed the spirits. The ceremony was complete, and we made our way back to Cuzco in the waning moonlight.

In Incan times, this ritual worship of the Apus and Pachamama was elaborate. Such worship occurred on a prescribed basis according to the Incan solar calendar and according to monthly lunar events such as the new and full moon. Participating in this ceremony, simple as it was, strengthened my bond with Sebastian and deepened my attunement to Andean ways. I sensed he was preparing me for something. By revealing his culture and Incan history, he helped me understand better that the Q'ero always place the earth first.

Stepping into Transitional Spaces

The following morning, we met again and walked to Q'enco, another impressive rock outcropping, situated between the Temple of the Moon and Sacsayhuaman. Though it is half the size of the Temple of the Moon, the energy it projects is impressive. Within Q'enco's many passageways and chambers, one encounters what Andeans call the finiteness of individuality. Here, Incan priests invoked the dead and conducted ceremonies for mummification, attempting to preserve individuality and defeat the permanence of death.

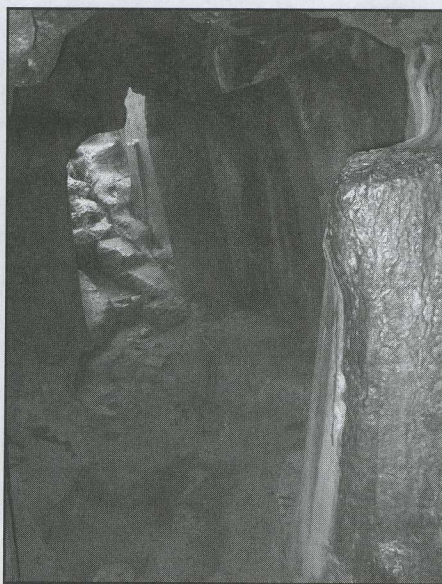
Before we entered Q'enco, we stopped to rest on the grass. Sebastian selected a *k'intu* of coca leaves and, offering it to the Apus, prayed for the spirits to help me understand the mysteries of this place.

Then he showed me how to use coca properly. "Choose three leaves without blemishes. The green side must face you," he said, showing me how to arrange them in cloverleaf fashion. "Offer them to the Apus before putting them in your mouth."

He took the cluster of three leaves, held them tightly between his fingers, and blew lightly on them. "*Phuku*," he pronounced, the Quechua word for the ritual blowing.

"In the same way, we show respect before drinking water or *aqha* [an alcoholic beverage, called *chicha* in Spanish, made from maize]," he said, pouring a small amount of the water I had brought onto the ground as a symbolic offering to Pachamama. I noticed that he only touched the water bottle to his lips. In this manner, he instructed me in Andean etiquette.

In the years we would be together, I



Carved altars and seats line the walls of the cave at the stone temple of Q'enco.

would learn from his example that respect and reciprocity are the cornerstones of the Andean way. One offers food to others before eating. Before drinking any beverage, one sprinkles drops of it on the ground, and before chewing coca leaves, one blows their essence to the world of spirits by performing the *phuku*. When done with respect and concentration, these acts align one's energy with Pachamama and the Apus. In this way, according to Sebastian, future problems are averted and obstacles avoided.

With the lesson complete, we lay side by side on the grass and looked at the blue Andean sky. After resting, we entered the stone temple of Q'enco. Inside the temple are passageways illuminated only by the light reflecting off the sand-colored walls. Incan masterwork is apparent in the meticulously carved altars and seats set high up along the wall of the cave. These subterranean passages are considered transitional spaces between the upper and lower worlds, and they have been used over the centuries for spiritual practices.

Sebastian pointed to a carved niche high on one wall and motioned for me to climb up there. I settled into a meditation pose, concentrating to sense the energy of this place. He waited for me outside.

When I'd finished and come outside, he said, "In our land, the energy is even stronger."

Following my meditation, I saw Q'enco differently. I noticed a number of stone steps that I hadn't seen at first. Each step was a series of three smaller ones.

"*Kaypacha*, *ukhupacha*, *hananpacha*," Sebastian said knowingly, pointing to each

step. Each step represents one world in the three-world system of the Incan cosmic vision. The first step represents the world in which we live, *kaypacha*. It also suggests the possibility of transcending the physical limitations of this world. The second step represents the interior world, *ukhupacha*. Through dreams, death, and shamanic experiences, we find ways in which to enter the interior world. *Ukhupacha* is also the bridge between *kaypacha* and *hananpacha*, the highest world of spiritual beings and universal energy, symbolized by the third step. I was beginning to understand the simple but rich meaning inherent in Andean thought. Later, Sebastian would teach me about the connections between the patterns in his *despacho* arrangements and those in the Incan stonework.

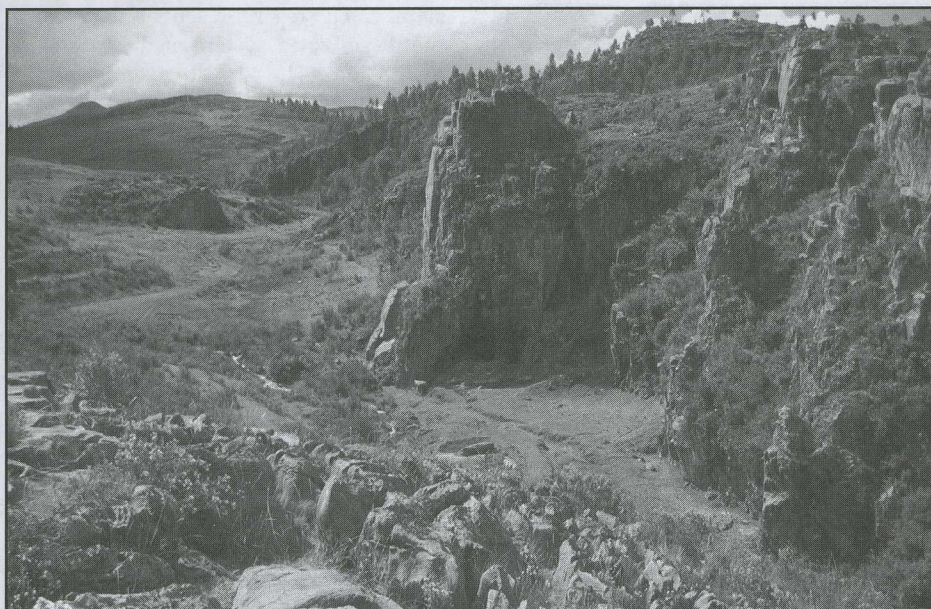
We climbed to the apex of the *waka*, where Sebastian pointed out carved stones once used to record astronomical events. He showed me a zigzag, tadpole-shaped channel carved in stone. At the time of the winter solstice, the rising sun settles on the head, a round depression carved into the rock. Liquids, such as *aqha* or the blood of sacrificed llamas, were once poured in the hollow forming the head and flowed down the channel making the body. The pattern left by the liquid was read as an oracle to foretell the outcome of future events.

The sun was setting over the mountains. From the top of Q'enco, I looked down on the red tile rooftops of Cuzco. The sky was clear and, to the south, the snowfields of Apu Ausungate turned first golden and then a deep blue as the sun dropped behind the mountains. We made our way downhill to Cuzco in the twilight. Sebastian moved silently. I plodded along behind him, lost in thought.

Slowly, I began to understand the guiding principles of the Andes. My experiences working with Sebastian and the energies of the Incan sacred sites instilled in me a new way of looking at the world. I was the same but different. I could not explain it. Years later, I would be able to fit the pieces of these experiences together like a puzzle. For the moment, I was only aware that visiting such places and making the *despachos* were of paramount importance to Sebastian, and I could feel that something good was occurring—something to pay attention to and learn from.

Listening to the Voices of the Awkikuna

The next November, the end of the dry season in the Andes, I returned to Peru. The seasons were in transition from win-



A variety of wakas (natural shrines) line a small valley that follows a seq'e (sacred track).

ter to spring. Only the peaks of the mountains were covered in snow. Cuzco was colored sepia, with dry grasses complementing the earth tones of adobe houses.

Sebastian met me in the same inexplicable manner. I no longer had the need to rationalize how this happened, and I no longer felt that it was a mystery beyond my ability to comprehend. I accepted that our separate lives in different parts of the world were connected and that, without planning, we synchronistically arrived at the same place at the same time. I began to trust the process and became more present in our work together.

This time, Sebastian was alone. We embraced. It felt good to be back. I invited him for breakfast at an inexpensive place near the market. He told me about events in Q'ero.

"Jorge is working in the fields, planting potatoes," he said. "The llamas are healthy, and the children are full of energy."

We arranged to meet the following morning. I rose early and found him already waiting for me. He told me that this time we were going farther out of town and we would need a car. Before hiring a taxi, we walked to the market to procure coca leaves and other items for a *despacho*. Sebastian wrapped the items in his bundle. I hired a taxi and we drove about ten miles into the hills away from Cuzco, then down a series of rugged dirt roads. Finally, we stopped at the edge of a rocky meadow. The high mountains that formed the upper end of this valley were visible in the distance. The day was warm, with thin white clouds scattered across a brilliant blue sky—a typical spring day in the

Andes. The wind blew steadily out of the northwest. Occasionally, unexpected gusts whipped up, forceful enough to form little whirlwinds.

Sebastian led the way across the meadow until we came to a stream of a type often found in the Andes. It was crystal clear, narrow but with deep pools, and bitterly cold. Having walked for some time, I found the stream inviting. I expressed a desire to take a plunge, but Sebastian advised against it. The ice-cold water, he explained, would chill my body.

When in the Andes, it is not advisable to lower your body temperature, as the weather can suddenly and without warning turn icy. If one is unprepared for such drastic changes, hypothermia can occur. I heeded his advice and only dipped my hands in the water and rinsed my face. Sebastian watched over me, making sure that I didn't drink any of the cold water, which he said could also chill the body. The Q'ero prefer to hydrate their bodies by drinking warm fluids such as herbal or coca leaf teas and potato soups.

After crossing the stream, we walked uphill across the open, rugged terrain until we stopped above a shallow valley. Sebastian explained that the valley lay along a *seq'e* (sacred track) and still held a large number of *wakas*. Below us, scattered along the valley, were large rock outcroppings, boulders, and clusters of gray stones carved long ago by Incan stoneworkers into seats and low tables. In the distance, a few eucalyptus trees dotted the lower end of the valley. Other than that, the landscape was covered in grass and wildflowers.

Sebastian pointed to one of the larger rock formations, part way down the valley. "That's our destination. It's a beautiful place, with very good energy, completely natural—you'll see."

Proceeding downhill, we moved quickly over the uneven ground. Just above the rock, Sebastian slowed and carefully descended along a narrow path that curved in a semicircle to the right and ended at the mouth of a cave. About fifteen feet high and twelve feet across, the opening faced east. Pink and lavender wildflowers and small bushes grew around the entrance. To the left of the cave were several large rocks with sculpted niches for ritual offerings and carved seats possibly used centuries ago to watch the ceremonies performed here.

We stood in silent awe for a few moments. The magic of the place was tangible. Three white butterflies appeared, first in bouncing flight, then in an orderly flight pattern. They circled my legs and then flew upward to my chest, over my head, and then to the top of the rock formation. Flying in opposing circles, they spiraled there for several moments and then did the same in the mouth of the cave before flying away up the valley.

Sebastian looked at me and said in his mixture of Spanish and Quechua, "It's a good sign. The energy is good. The Awki knows that you're here. It's a good day. It is beautiful."

Now that we had become friends, and he trusted that I was receptive, attentive, and respectful of his advice, I found that he often acknowledged such synchronistic moments with observations on the energy interactions between people and the environment. For him, out-of-the-ordinary natural occurrences had significance. This day, in his opinion, was a good day for ceremonial work. The weather was cooperating, and the wind calm, which is not always the case in the Andes.

Through these experiences of working at the *wakas*, I was learning that Andean mystical teachings are more than ethical and philosophical concepts—they derive from the living landscape. Pachamama communicates in an intuitive language that predates human speech but is still understandable to shamans. It is said that Quechua, or *runasimi*, the language of the Incas, derives from the sounds of nature. When we learn to listen, nature speaks. Nature's language is all around us—water running over stones, wind blowing through the grass, birds warbling to each other.

As we arrived at the cave entrance, the white butterflies appeared again. Such

auspicious signs informed Sebastian that the Awki of that *waka* approved of our presence, and we could begin our work.

Drawn to where the butterflies had hovered at the pinnacle of the rock, I climbed to the top. There was a flat spot, just large enough for me to stand on without losing my balance. I took out of my pack some Amazonian tobacco, *mapacho*, tightly rolled in a long cigarette. Lighting the *mapacho*, I offered thanks to the spirits of the valley and for the beauty of the day, and I blew smoke to the four directions. The smoke carried my prayers to the Awkikuna of the other shrines in the valley and the Apus of the surrounding mountains, and I asked their blessing on our ceremonial work. Gratitude filled my heart, and I lifted my arms to the sky and raised my voice in prayer to the Four Winds.

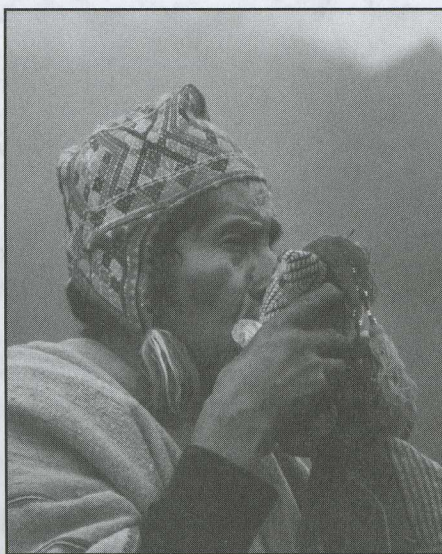
After offering my prayers, I climbed down and helped prepare a fire. Using a bundle of dry eucalyptus that we had collected on our way, I prepared some kindling and arranged the firewood in a spot chosen by Sebastian, just inside the cave.

He selected a place to make the *despacho*, on a grassy spot just above and to the right of the entrance to the cave. Here he spread out his ceremonial cloth on the grass, prepared the ritual offerings, and poured out coca leaves. Most Andeans typically keep coca in a small woven bag that they sling over their shoulders, so that the bag hangs to one side within easy reach and they can take leaves out without effort. In contrast, *paqos* use a special fur bag called a *ch'uspa*, made from the skin and soft fur of an alpaca fetus, to carry their coca leaves and ceremonial objects. Instead of slinging it over their shoulders, they keep it wrapped in a carry cloth.

Sebastian selected the best leaves and put the rest away. Arranging the coca leaves in several *k'intus*, he placed them and some sacred objects on a small cloth, creating his *mesa*. I offered him a *mapacho* cigarette, which he eagerly accepted. We smoked together in silence.

Though tobacco is native to the Amazon basin and is widely used by shamans in the rain forest, it is not a traditional part of Andean ceremonies. Still, in my experience, Andean shamans are knowledgeable about many plant medicines, including tobacco, and they welcome "imports" from other Peruvian shamanic traditions when these are offered.

The beauty of the day and sanctity of the moment helped still my restless heart. We smoked just enough to harmonize our spirits with the environment. After blowing smoke across the ceremonial space to



Holding an offering bundle, Sebastian blows on a k'intu, invoking the mountain spirits.

cleanse it, we extinguished our smokes before the powerful jungle tobacco made us drowsy. I sprinkled the remaining tobacco around the area as an offering for the nature spirits.

Sebastian carefully unwrapped tiny packets of paper filled with sugary sweets, gold and silver foil, and other elements for the *despacho*. As he went about his preparations, he again commented on the "good energy" of the day and thanked me for the tobacco. While he put some finishing touches on the offering, I stacked wood in preparation for the fire that would close the *despacho* ritual.

When his arrangement was complete, he folded the paper over the offering and wrapped the packet inside the small ceremonial cloth. Facing east, he blew three times on a *k'intu*, invoking the Apus. Then, using his rattle and other sacred objects, he prayed to Pachamama and the Apus. He included prayers for the mountain spirits in California, my home at the time. I stood, and he passed the ceremonial bundle across my body, stroking it down my arms and legs, then across my chest and back, cleansing me of heavy, negative energy. He also blew on the top of my head, into my cupped hands, and on other parts of my body, in order to impart the light, healing energy of the life-giving breath.

Once the cleansing part of the ceremony was over, it was time for Sebastian to light the fire and burn the offering. This was done to release the energy within it to feed the spirits, and it was the final act of the ceremony.

Sebastian straightened the wood to his liking, borrowed my lighter, and lit the

kindling. Flames immediately leaped across the eucalyptus wood. Once he was sure that the fire wouldn't go out, he lovingly placed the ceremonial bundle on top of the wood, and we watched it burn. As a final touch, he poured the entire contents of a bottle of red wine onto the ground around the fire as an offering to Pachamama. *Paqos* never drink liquor or wine, but, on rare occasions, they may drink warm beer or *aqha* if offered.

Pointing out to me how easily the wood caught fire and how well the fire burned, Sebastian commented again on how good the energy was that day.

"The *despacho* was very good," he said enthusiastically. "The energy was well aligned today. Did you see how powerful the fire was, and how eagerly it consumed the offering? The Awki was very pleased. It's a good day."

I was beginning to understand why synchronistic events factored high for Sebastian. Weather, especially wind, rain, and hail, and all animals convey messages from the Apus and Awkikuna. For me, it was like learning a new language.

Inside the Womb of Pachamama

When I next returned to Cuzco, in May (fall in the Andes), Sebastian was waiting for me, as usual. In the morning, he arrived at seven, and we headed once again into the hills above Sacsayhuaman. Our pace was brisk, and I had trouble breathing, as I had not acclimated to the altitude yet. I had to stop frequently, and I fell behind. I found Sebastian waiting for me at a stream with a narrow channel and a deep bed covered with pebbles. Having learned my lesson the previous year, I didn't even think about taking a swim, and I only splashed my face. The icy cold water refreshed me. Sebastian watched, expressionless. Then we rested on a large stone near the bank of the stream.

"Today we enter the earth," he said.

I assumed he meant metaphorically, but I was wrong.

"It's time for you to visit Pachamama on another level. Soon we will arrive at a cave that you haven't been to before, and we will go inside."

We resumed walking and shortly, we came upon one of many large rock outcroppings scattered over the area. I assessed the rocks. At first glance, they were not particularly interesting, certainly less impressive than the others he had taken me to. Again, I was wrong. My lesson was that I should never take anything for granted in the Andes.

Leading me around a larger rock, he

indicated that I was to go ahead. Pointing toward a narrow space between two boulders, he said, "There's the cave."

I couldn't see an entrance. As I got closer, however, I noticed a small fissure in the gray stone. There was nothing remarkable about it, and I was about to turn around when Sebastian motioned me forward. "It will be very dark in there. Be careful," he cautioned. "We will be inside for some time until we reach the other side. I will be behind you."

I looked inside, but I could only see ahead some six feet before the passageway turned a corner. We went in. The walls were very narrow, and my shoulders kept brushing against the granite sides. Pieces of stone crumbled and fell around my feet. My senses heightened, and each piece of granite falling sounded like an explosion. From past experience, I knew caves can start out narrow at the entrance and then open into large chambers. I had been in several such caverns in Mexico, and I expected this might be similar. Wrong.

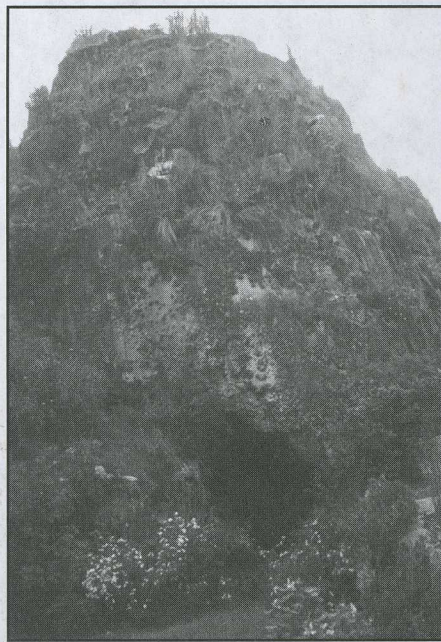
I inched forward into the cave. The darkness was complete, claustrophobic as a coffin. As the walls narrowed even more and the ceiling lowered, my heart beat faster with each step. My small backpack wedged between the rock sides, and I was unable to move forward or backward. Anxiety overwhelmed me. Though I tried to calm my racing heart by deep breathing, there was hardly any air, and I felt I was suffocating. For a moment, panic pulsed through me like electricity. Sebastian was so quiet that I forgot he was behind me. I was nauseous and dizzy, my mouth dry. I considered turning back, but the passageway was too narrow to turn around in, and my jammed backpack prevented me from walking backward.

"Keep moving," Sebastian said from behind me.

Though he spoke quietly, his words sounded like gun shots.

"I can't. My backpack is stuck."

I was wedged so tightly that I couldn't even move my arms to slip a strap off. With extreme effort, I stopped struggling and calmed myself. I was unable to advance, but I could slide down. In a squatting position, I again struggled with the pack. Then, just when the situation seemed hopeless, Sebastian lifted the pack up and slipped one strap and then the other off my shoulders. He passed the pack between my legs for me to carry. He instructed me to turn my shoulders sideways and to continue moving through the passageway.



An entrance into the womb of Pachamama.

There was no turning around now. The path descended, and the farther we went, the darker it seemed to become. The air turned progressively staler, until it was nearly impossible to breathe. The darkness was absolute, and I had no sense of direction. There was no up or down, only the void. An overwhelming dread was taking me over.

"We are deep inside the womb of Pachamama," Sebastian whispered. "Keep going."

His voice reassured me, but I didn't feel safe. As I inched forward, my body made scraping sounds against the rock walls. He moved in silence.

After what seemed like hours, the walls widened, and I could walk almost upright. Though it was still dark, fresh air came at me from down the passageway, and I gulped it as if it were a glass of cool water.

As we approached the end of the cave, Sebastian warned me that the light would be bright and that I should cover my eyes. But I was so thankful to be out of the cave and so eager to see the light that I didn't heed his instruction. When the sunlight hit my retinas, it felt as if someone had punched me in the head. I staggered backward and nearly fell over. Sebastian steadied me, and we sat for a while on the rocks until my eyes adjusted.

When one is stuck in situations such as I had just experienced in the cave, one can face the darkest fears imaginable. If one survives, fear has less power. That doesn't mean one permanently conquers fear, as life is long and there are many aspects of fear. Afterward, if the situation is negoti-

ated successfully, meaning can come in torrents. More often, understanding comes slowly, the way twilight slips into night.

The next evening, the day before I had to return to California, Sebastian and I were visiting at the house of a mutual friend, Jackeline. As she was Sebastian's *comadre* (godmother), Jackeline and I had become good friends, and she graciously let me stay in her home when I was visiting Cuzco. In the years to come, I would become closer to her family and eventually the godfather to her third child. In this way, we are all linked together in a bond of reciprocity.

Without any forewarning, Sebastian unrolled his ceremonial bundle and took from among his sacred objects what at first appeared to be a round stone. "Keep this with you at all times in the Andes," he told me seriously. "If lightning strikes you, it will protect you."

I turned the piece over in my hands. It was extremely heavy, and I could see it was not a piece of rock at all, but a metallic object, which I assumed to be some kind of iron ore.

Then he handed me a large chunk of white quartz. "This is from my land, Q'ero. Keep this in your home, and the energy of the Apus will be with you."

Thanking Sebastian for his generosity, I intuitively understood the unspoken message behind his gifts. I was already looking forward to my next visit and to experiencing more lessons with Pachamama, the Apus, and the Awkikunas.

J. E. Williams, O.M.D., has worked among Native Americans for more than thirty-five years. In 1967, he was adopted into a traditional Siberian Eskimo family on St. Lawrence Island in the Bering Sea. Since 1996, he has been studying Andean shamanism in Peru, where he is known as don Santiago. In 2002, he was adopted into a traditional Q'ero Indian family, and he is recognized as a member of the Q'ero Nation, a distinction qualifying him to teach and practice ancient shamanic ceremonies. Because of his traditional orientation, he waited to be called to teach, which happened after the release of his book, *The Andean Codex*, in 2005. Williams also has a distinguished career in Oriental and naturopathic medicine and is an internationally recognized expert in integrative medicine. He is the author of three health books and numerous scientific papers. A naturalist, published bilingual poet, and accomplished photographer, he resides in Sarasota, Florida, and in Peru.

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