

THE PETROGLYPHS OF THE RIVER VAUPES, COLOMBIA

Peter Jackson, St. Albans, Hertz, England

This paper resulted from a six week visit to the Vaupes River in S.E. Colombia, where for some distance it forms the boundary with Brazil. The Vaupes is a tributary of the Rio Negro, itself a tributary of the Amazon. The town of Mitu was my arrival point, and a few miles downstream was the base from which I made my journeys up and down the river.

Once one leaves the minute town, except for the occasional cleared riverside settlement of a "colonist", the vegetation is dense tropical forest, making travel by foot almost impossible. Before the days of aircraft, in order to reach the Vaupes, it was necessary to first cross the Andes from Bogota, and then journey for many weeks by horse and canoe. A full account of such a journey is given by Hamilton Rice in 1910, but two or three preceding accounts exist from the 19th century.

River travel was immensely difficult in the early days, and continues to present a number of problems. Between Yurupari and Yauarate, a distance of over 300 kilometres there are about 17 major rapids; (however, Dolmatoff mentions 70: it depends on the time of the year and one's definition of a rapid).

Previous Research

Previous research carried out on the petroglyphs of the Vaupes itself is very scanty; it mostly takes the form of references to them within the context of anthropological works on the present Indian people. Since my own research was somewhat limited by time and finances, I see one of the main justifications of this paper being to point out and guide future researchers to an extremely rich source.

Of importance is Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff's anthropological work. He enters into considerable discussion on the petroglyphs and does offer some interesting hypotheses on origins. I will return to his work later. Another important piece of research and documentation was achieved by Elizabeth H. E. von Hildebrand on the petroglyphs of the Rio Caqueta, approximately 300 kilometres directly to the south of Mitu. After my stay on the Vaupes I was able to make a visit to one of the sites at La Pedrera on the Caqueta, this gave me some useful comparative material.

In spite of the paucity of particular research, there has been work of a more general interest produced during this century and before, both on the rock paintings and engravings of Colombia. Notable are the writings of V. Restrepo, D. Roza, J.P. de Barrados, J. Nunez and W. Cabrera. They all provide useful discussion material on meaning and interpretation.



The Sites

The petroglyphs are mainly found on the rocks in the rapids of the rivers; sometimes on the banks, but also on rocky islets, or solitary rocks in the centre. Frequently they are engraved on flat horizontal surfaces, but at times on vertical slabs.

Since the river has a rise and fall of approximately fifteen feet, depending on the situation, the dry season of December, January and February is the best time to locate the petroglyphs, as at other times many are submerged.

Some reference needs to be made to the rock formation. Between Mitu and Yauarate the rock formation is known as the "Migmatite Complex of Mitu". This mainly consists of granitic gneisses, with very locally some amphibolite, all of Precambrian age. However, travelling up river from Mitu towards Yurupari one enters the sandstones of the Araracuara Palaeozoic formation. Whilst in comparison La Pedrera on the Caqueta is in the "La Pedrera Formation", mainly consisting of slightly metamorphic sandstone, but with some slightly metamorphic siltstones intercalated. Most of the outcrops in the river at La Pedrera are of sandstone, and thus tend to be a somewhat softer rock than that on the Vaupes, except for the region towards Yurupari. The rock does appear to influence style and technique to some extent.

*Figgs. 54-56
Yauarate, at the foot
of the path leading up
to the Colombian Po-
lice Inspector's bunga-
low. Rock engravings
are found on large rocks
and boulders by the river
(Bird 14 inches high;
figure 11 inches).*





Fig. 57
Bacaba. A large engraved surface is found a little upstream from the village, on the opposite side of the river.

Accessibility varies considerably; if near a village, paths, clearings or landing places may be available. Otherwise direct access by water is necessary. Often in the latter case the site may be overgrown by bush and lichen, making locating difficult. When petroglyphs are in the middle of rapids, expert canoe navigation is obviously essential.

I found no sites, or anyone who knew of them, between Mitu and Yurupari - approximately 100 kilometres - until reaching the Yurupari falls themselves, and there are others just above. However, between Mitu and Yauarate - about 200 kilometres - I was shown and located sixteen sites.

Quantity

It was not possible to be precise about the quantity of petroglyphs at each site, due to the unusual height of the river for the time of year. I can only relate what I saw, and the descriptions of my companions. Probably the most prolific area that I found was at Ananas. This was the one site that approached the quantity of engravings found at many sites on the Caqueta, well over fifty forms, with the possibility of many more to be found. They were set on slightly sloping rocks adjacent to the river and composed in a number of large groups, one stretching for over 124 inches. There was a variation in style and images. Matapi was another site with a similar concentration.

At some other sites the petroglyphs were solitary, appearing to be placed in a sentinel like position, virtually looking out. This was the case with those at Mitu, Ananas (opposite side of the river to those above), and Carura.

Frequently the separate boulders were only engraved with one petroglyph, as at the bottom of the falls at Yacare, and a little upstream opposite Bacaba.

In both these cases I was assured that there were considerably more engravings to be found at completely low water. In addition, apparently, more are to be found at Bacaba, where I only had time to record one clear but unidentifiable form.

On the whole I found little evidence of the intense adjacent overlapping build-up of engravings, which is found at the Caqueta sites. However, I was assured that there are great proliferations of petroglyphs on the Cuduyuri, a tributary of the Vaupes, downstream from Mitu.

Technique

The engravings tended to be linear drawings, mainly of a continuous groove. I saw no infilling by the picking of various textures, as found on the enclosure or dagger forms at, for example, Mt. Bego in France, or on many forms in the Camonica Valley in Italy. The lines themselves did vary in depth, and seemed often to be related to the hardness of the rock, but also of course de-

Fig. 58
Ananas. Opposite side of the river. Two or three miles downstream from Tipiaca, on the left bank looking downstream, flattish sloping rocks were recorded on the shore, among small trees.



Fig. 59
Matapi. Above the main rapids, on the left bank looking down river. About 400 yards around the bay from a small group of Indian houses above the river, several engraved rocks were identified.





*Fig. 60-61
Ananas. Opposite side of the
river. Two to three miles down-
stream from Tipiaca, on the left
bank looking downstream. Flat-
tish sloping rocks on the shore
among small trees have numerous
engraved figures.*

terminated by the amount of erosion. Some, like those at Mitu and at Waracapurú were extremely faint and mainly visible from discolouration. In the case of Mitu this seemed to be due to water erosion, and those at Waracapurú were executed on very hard coarse granite. In contrast to this, some of the engravings at Yauarate of the anthropomorphic figures, circles and birds, were up to half an inch in depth and almost as wide, thus approaching the feeling of a relief. Only the engravings at Umari were painted in red-brown earth pigment and were in a position removed from submersion. In this one example the pigment was complete and showed no sign of great ageing.

Style

Most of the petroglyphs were engraved in a plan view, and tended to be static. One exception was a lizard at Bacaba which had considerable life and vitality; also at Bacaba was the side view of a zoomorphic figure.

It seems that four broad styles can be identified. First, the rather simple direct line engravings made with confidence and skill, examples such as at Matapi, Yauarate, Cararu, Bacaba and Ananas.

Secondly, a more script-like flourishing and hesitant style, as also at Ananas and Arara. Often these were punctuated by small cupules, but not always. Thirdly, the more geometric infilled images as at Yauarate. Finally, there is the style of the faint but distinct examples at Waracapurú. These might have some affinity with the third group, except that they were executed on a very much harder, coarser rock, which tends to affect the style to some extent.

Motives and subject matter

There was a considerable variety and range of motives on the Vaupes; but the methodological hazard of forcing forms into categories is well known. Thus, I have tried to be tentative in decisions whilst using the categories - zoomorphic, anthropomorphic, geometric, vulva and phallus, unidentified.

Zoomorphic: This was the largest category and, within it, the frog or lizard form was the most common, but one must admit that confusion can occur between these and the very simple anthropomorphic. Frogs and lizards were found at Bacaba, Ananas, and Yauarate; the largest at Bacaba was 34 inches tall. Others at Matapi, between 17 and 25 inches high, were grouped in what might be intentional compositions.

The petroglyphs at Mitu could well fit either zoomorphic or anthropomorphic categories, but one at least could be a frog form.

Two bird motives in plan form were found at Yauarate, the smaller 18 x 14 inches, the other slightly larger 24 x 19 inches. Another possible bird form appeared in a different group of engravings at Yauarate, more geometric, with patterned infilling on its triangular wings and trailing feet, but this is a hesitant identification.

At Yurupari I found the only identified snake motive, and this happened to be the biggest petroglyphs of all - 186 inches long. Probably an Anaconda, which are quite common locally, about to swallow a smaller serpent. Here there was the incorporation of the spiral motive with the figure; a blending



Fig. 62
Yauarate. On the Brazilian side, but on the right bank of the river looking downstream. Below the "cooperative" shop. The figure is 76 inches long. "Bird" from 36 inches in length.

which occurs at Bacaba with the head of the animal in side view, at Yauarate with the anthropomorphic figure, and at Ananas as "hands" of the anthropomorphic figure.

One might well expect fish to be a common motive: the only example I found was quite large, 76 x 16 inches, and in the more geometric style at Yauarate.

Anthropomorphic: The engravings on the stone near the Mitu Internado school could be in this category, with the exception of the one already mentioned. One has a simple "U" face, basic features, with a head-dress or hat above it. The other has a head which appears to be equipped with horns, suggesting shamanist associations, like the clearer examples found at La Pedrera far south.

Four other forms I label anthropomorphic at Waracapury. These were upright on large curved granite boulders, and difficult to distinguish. They averaged 41 inches in height, and had their own particular abstract style. One could, of course, see them as spirit or supernatural beings.

A variety of other anthropomorphic forms were quite deeply engraved in curving linear forms at Yauarate.

At Umari I found three very basic linear forms of the lower body; no head, suggested legs and sex symbol; these were 35 inches and 27 inches in height. The simplicity was somewhat reminiscent of the earlier human figures at Valcamonica. These were the painted motives.

At Bacaba there appeared the only footprint form, apparently developed from a natural fault. At Ananas one of the larger imposing upright petroglyphs - a standing figure 74 x 39 inches on a large rock wall 8 to 9 feet high. A head, two eyes and an inverted tulip shaped body, with a single line lower half, terminating in a possible vulva symbol - as mentioned before, the large curling arms end in branching spirals.

I close this category by mentioning an enigmatic find at Kowai. A large loose recumbent slab tapering slightly either end, 64 x 38 inches. Engravings suggestive of an arm, body, feet, toes and head could be discerned, giving the loose impression of an anthropomorphic form. This was the only find which began to approach the concept of total sculpture.

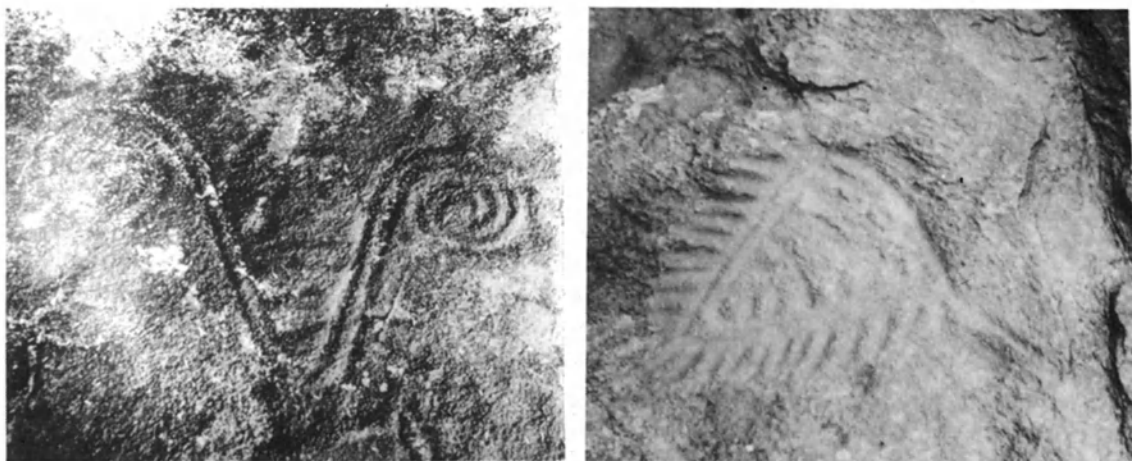
Geometric: The most common motive in this category was the spiral, sometimes found alone, doubled and interlocking; or in conjunction with other forms. At Umari one was alongside an "H"-like shape; at Matapi spirals end the "V" shapes of the vulva forms; at Yauarate, Yacare and Villa Fatima double and alternating solitary spirals appear. Nearly as common were concentric circles.

The only clear use of the triangle as an independent form was found in isolation, quite far from the river, on the edge of the forest at Kowai. Three equilaterals with curved bases and divided vertically; the two smaller of 6 inches overlapped, whilst the larger 9 inch was 4 inches apart from the other two. Single examples of a parallelogram-type form and zigzag lines were seen at Yauarate.

Fig. 63

Yacare. On the western Colombian side of the river, at the bottom of the main fall. Double spirals deeply engraved.





Figgs. 64-65
Above the main rapids, on the left bank looking down river. About 400 yards around the bay from a small group of Indian houses above the river.

Cupules: Three clear examples of regular groupings of cup-marks were at Arara, Yauarate and Ananas.

Those at Arara were linked with other forms, but were found isolated and separate at Yauarate and at Ananas. In both cases there are what appear to be intentional omissions in the rows of cupules, and at Ananas two are replaced by a bar of equivalent length. The other use of cupules was for termination points or punctuation with other motives, as at Ananas.

Finally, one of the more interesting finds, a roughly cubic rock of 24 inch dimension, lying in an apparently random position among others on the beach at Yauarate, looking not unlike a ruined capital. One side was covered by deep accurate carving of parallel grooves and cupules, another by regular cupules, and a third by an interlocking double spiral.

Vulva and phallus: The vulva forms at Matapi included three varieties in the triangular motive, the largest being 32 x 18 inches. Another possible vulva form was embedded in a more complex group at Arara. Phallus forms were less common, although phallic connotations could be attributed to some frog forms such as at Cararu. A clear example of the somewhat less common non-erect phallic form appeared at Arara.

Unidentified: A number of less geometric abstract symbols were found in groups, such as those flowing along a 3 foot high rock wall at Arara; or others at Ananas, and a form of meandering at Pacu. At Yacare were two complex forms with some similarity but not adjacent. One was 58 inches long and the other 25 inches. They could be labelled zoomorphic or "spirit" forms, since there are references to head and eyes. Another "spirit" motive, or possibly anthropomorphic, looking somewhat like an octopus or squid, was at Villa Fatima. Other motives could well fit into categories of tools, weapons or even musical instruments, but the clues are rather tenuous.

Interpretation and Dating

First, it must be admitted that even approximate dating of the Vaupes petroglyphs is almost impossible at the moment, and insufficient documentation has been made to allow links of common form or shape with other prehistoric data. Although, in some of the more abstracted unidentified forms at La Pedrera, the "greca" type motives in association with other shapes do bear some affinity to the pre-Colombian formalised jaguar-like symbols on sculpture and ceramics. However, in the Vaupes I found no obvious equivalent to this.

Some small clues as to sequence or age are available from cracked or flaked rocks across engravings. For example, at Yauarate one finds a decapitated figure by a large flaking or crack, yet another is completed across the fault suggesting that it could be of a later date. A similar observation was made at Bacaba.

As Reichel-Dolmtoff has pointed out, the present Indian inhabitants of the region do not make petroglyphs and have no memory of having done so. They are aware of the engravings and have built meanings for them into their own cosmology and mythology. The Indians have always made paintings and decorations for their houses and some of the forms do have an affinity with the petroglyphs. Dolmtoff's work inducing Tukarno Indians to draw whilst under the influence of "Banisteriopsis" showed the links between the drug induced images, and the phosphene after-images found by Knoll in this work on perception with a 1,000 people. In turn, many of the same forms appear as petroglyphs. Oster claims that drug induced images can be invoked up to six months after the drug from forms seen in the environment. For example, the spiral is a form appearing in Domotoff's findings and in Knoll's work. Also, it is constantly visible on the surface of the rivers.

This explanation, even if feasible as an account of origins, takes us no closer to original meaning. The Tukarno have definite meanings for the forms, but this is not necessarily the originator's meaning.

It was Jose Perez de Barrados who suggests that we must look much earlier for the originators; possibly the Arawacos. Since the question of meaning is so difficult, all clues and hypotheses are of interest, although some of the more general writers on Colombian rock art are somewhat slow to distinguish between paintings and engravings. I will look at three motives which appear in the Vaupes and are also mentioned in their work. They are the birds of prey, the frog and the cupules.

First the bird form. It is frequently found in American and Colombian cultures. According to Nunez, the Chibcha and Muysca Indian people of the higher and more central parts of Colombia believed that light was the origin of the world and this was represented by the "great bird of fire". It was related in the journals of the Conquistadores, and was believed by the peoples of the Atlantic coast of Colombia also, these were sun cults. These points are demonstrated by the representation of eagles and falcons, which were important motives in the works of silversmiths - the symbols themselves gave

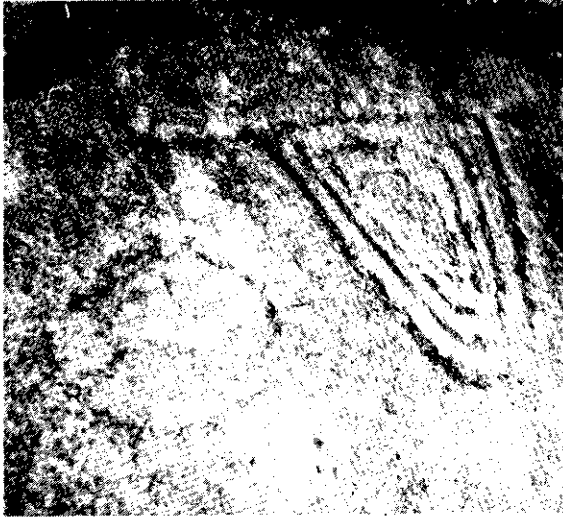


Fig. 66
Above the main rapids, on the left bank looking down river. About 400 yards around the bay from a small group of Indian houses above the river.

Fig. 67
Fuente de Lavapatos. At the Archaeological site of San Augustin, S.W. Colombia. Very deep engravings seem to have functional purposes.

extra value in exchange. The two figurative bird motives at Yauarate with curved outstretched wings and forked tail could fit the tradition.

The frog is seen by many cultures as a creature with mystical powers, and is hence raised to deification. Nunez, in his work on the rock paintings of "Sanctuario de la Rana" at Facatativa near Bogota, points to this almost universal reverence, due to the frog's ability to foretell rain and its sensitivity to seismological occurrences.

Frequently the frog is seen in relation to water divinities in a number of pre-Colombian cultures, such as Mayan or Tlaloc, the Aztec rain god. At San Augustin in the higher western region of Colombia, the "Fuente de Lavapatos" is credited by Nunez and others as being one of the most important sacred places for Rain God worship. Set in the midst of the carved water way alongside carved serpents, there was at one time a large sculptured frog. Naturally this only gives some hypothetical hints for the meaning of the frog petroglyphs on the Vaupes.

Finally, and again connected with the "Fuente de Lavatapas", the series of small cup-marks or cupules. These appeared in the phosphene patterns generated by "Banisteriopsis" among the Tukarno, but had no exact equivalent in Knoll's fifteen universal categories. However, they are a common form amidst rock engravings appearing at many European sites. As W.B. Morris states, they appear in every continent except Antarctica. Relying on Peyrony's work at La Ferrassie cupules may have been produced by man since the Mousterian era; Giedion says: "... with them the symbol finds its first objective expression". Dolmotoff found that the contemporary Tukarno meaning for the regular rows of cupules was "drop of semen", this being a vital aspect of their cosmology.

As Morris points out, many tentative hypotheses have been formed regarding the function and meaning of the European cupules; from astronomical pointers to magical rites in the search for copper or gold, but these are



usually when the cupules vary more in size, often have concentric and varied spacing. The latter use was not seen on the Vaupes.

Nunez again refers to the many examples of cupules included in the design and sculpture at "Fuente de Lavatapas", relating them to the cult of water divinities. The fine photograph of grouped cupules filled with rain water at Luine, Valcamonica (Anati, 1976), might well push one towards hypothesizing in this direction.

Conclusion

As mentioned at the beginning, this was a rather hasty journey, but enough insight was gained to realise that a great potential richness of varied petroglyphs forms is available for a more concentrated and intense research programme when this should prove feasible. In the first place, as indicated, considerable comparative data is available from the Caqueta petroglyphs. At the same time more general archeological work is progressing at La Pedrera on the earlier people.

The work of Dolmottoff, Oster and Knoll seems to be of considerable value and worthy of careful assessment and possibly more general application in other areas.

Although the country and travel present problems, these are far from insurmountable.

Résumé: L'Auteur décrit une visite à la rivière Vaupes, sur la frontière entre le sud-est de la Colombie et le Brésil. Pendant un voyage d'environ 600 kilomètres en canoë entre Yurupari et Yaurate, au retour, il nota 17 sites de pétroglyphes. Le nombre des pétroglyphes que l'on peut voir varie selon le niveau de la rivière, puisque pour la plupart, se trouvent sur ses rives ou sur les rochers dans les rapides.

Bien que les gravures aient été mentionnées par plusieurs auteurs, aucune étude ou inventaire n'était entrepris sérieusement. Dans ces ensembles on trouve une grande variété de formes et de styles. Toute tentative de datation reste très vague en ce moment, ce pendant l'article présente des hypothèses en ce qui concerne la signification et l'origine de certaines des formes. On se réfère au travail de Reichel-Dolmottoff sur des peintures exécutées par des Indiens sous l'effet de la drogue, se réfèrent aussi aux découvertes perceptuelles d'Oyster et de Knoll.

Riassunto: L'Autore descrive una visita al fiume Vaupes nel sud-est della Colombia, al confine con il Brasile. Viaggiando circa 600 km. in canoa fra Yurupari e Yauarate, registrò diciassette luoghi di petroglifi. Il numero dei petroglifi visibili varia con l'altezza dell'acqua del fiume perchè la maggior parte si trova sulle sponde dei fiumi o sulle rocce nelle rapide. Sebbene le incisioni siano state menzionate precedentemente da alcuni autori, seri studi o inventari non erano stati finora eseguiti. Vi si trovano varietà di temi, di forme e stili.

Ogni tentativo di datazione può solo essere molto vago al momento; ma ipotesi circa il significato e le origini di alcune forme sono avanzate.

Si fa riferimento all'opera di Reichel-Dolmottoff riguardo alle immagini indotte da droga che soffragano le percezioni scoperte di Oyster e Knoll.

REFERENCES

- ANATI E.
1976 - *Evolution and Style in Camunian Rock Art*, Archivi Vol. 6, Capo di Ponte (Edizioni del Centro).
- BARRADAS J.P. de
1941 - *El Arte Rupestre en Colombia*, Madrid (Ed. Diana).
- BREUIII. H. & BERGER-KIRCHNER
1961 - Franco-Cantabrian Rock Art, *The Art of the Stone Age*,
- CABRERA W.O.
1946 - Pictographs y petroglifos, *Buletin de Archeologia*, Vol. II, n. 3, pp. 231-253, Bogota.
- GIEDION S.
1962 - *The Eternal Present*, Oxford (Oxford University Press).
- GOMEZ L.D.
1965 - Prehistoria. Tomo I. Etno-Historia y Arqueologia. Academia Colombiana de Historia. *Historia Extensa de Colombia*, Vol. I, Bogota (Ediciones Lerner) 463 pp.
- GRIGSON G.
1957 - *The Painted Caves*, London (Phoenix House).
- HILDEBRAND E.H.R. Von
1975 - Levantamiento de los petroglifos del rio Caqueta entre la Pedrera y Araracua-ra, *Revista Colombiana de Antropologia*, Vol. XIX, pp. 303-370.
- HILDEBERTO R.B.M.
1959 - *El Arte Rupestre en Nicaragua*.
- MORRIS R.W.B.
1977 - *The Prehistoric Rock Art of Argyll*, Poole, Dorset (Dolphin Press).
- NUNEZ J.A.
1959 - *Facatativa, Santuario de la Rana, en los Andes Orientales de Colombia* (publicado originalmente en *Islas*, Revista de la Universidad Central de las Villas, Cuba) La Habana, pp. 96.
- OSTER G.
1970 - Phosphores, *Scientific American*, Vol. CCXXII n. 2, pp. 83-87.
- POWELL T.G.E.
1966 - *Prehistoric Art*, London (Thames and Hudson).
- RESTREPO V.P.
1895 - *Los Chibchas antes de la conquista Espanola*. Bogota (Imprenta de la Luz).
- REICHEL-DOLMATOFF G.
1971a - *Amazonia Cosmos* (University of Chicago Press).
1971b - Rock paintings of the Vaupes: an essay of Interpretation, *Folklore Americas*, Vol. 27, n. 2, pp. 107-113.
1978 - Drug induced optical sensations and their relationship to applied art among Colombian Indians, *Art in Society*, Greenhalgh and Megan, London (Duckworth), pp. 289-303.
- ROZO D.
1938 - *Mitologia y escritura de los Chibchas* Bogota (Imprenta Municipal).