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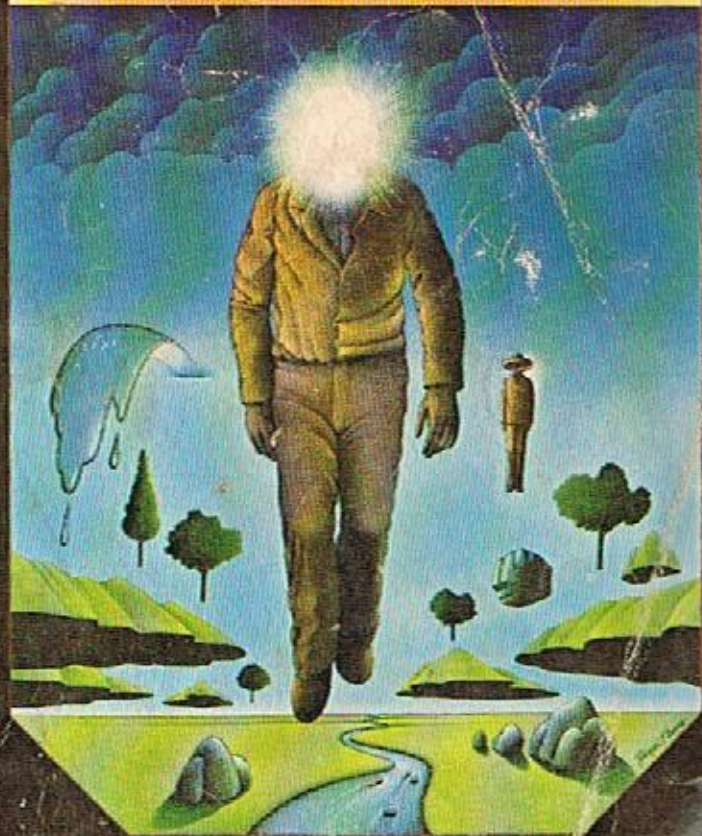
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author of
The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge

A SEPARATE REALITY

Further Conversations with Don Juan



A SEPARATE REALITY

"A man of knowledge is free . . . he has no honor, no dignity, no family, no home, no country, but only life to be lived."
—don Juan

A SEPARATE REALITY

Further Conversations with Don Juan

In 1961 a young anthropologist subjected himself to an extraordinary apprenticeship to bring back a fascinating glimpse of a Yaqui Indian's world of "non-ordinary reality" and the difficult and dangerous road a man must travel to become "a man of knowledge." Yet on the brink of that world, challenging to all that we believe, he drew back.

Then in 1968, Carlos Castaneda returned to Mexico, to don Juan and his hallucinogenic drugs, and to a world of experience no man from our Western civilization had ever entered before.

"One can't exaggerate the significance of what Castaneda has done . . . *A Separate Reality* is extraordinary in every sense of the word."

—from the review by Roger Jellinek
in *The New York Times*

Introduction

Ten years ago I had the fortune of meeting a Yaqui Indian from north-western Mexico. I call him 'don Juan'. In Spanish, *don* is an appellative used to denote respect. I made don Juan's acquaintance under the most fortuitous circumstances. I was sitting with Bill, a friend of mine, in a bus depot in a border town in Arizona. We were very quiet. In the late afternoon the summer heat seemed unbearable. Suddenly he leaned over and tapped me on the shoulder.

'There's the man I told you about,' he said in a low voice. He nodded casually towards the entrance. An old man had just walked in.

'What did you tell me about him?' I asked.

'He's the Indian that knows about peyote. Remember?'

I remembered that Bill and I had once driven all day looking for the house of an 'eccentric' Mexican Indian who lived in the area. We did not find the man's house and I had the feeling that the Indians whom we had asked for directions had deliberately misled us. Bill had told me that the man was a 'yerbero', a person who gathers and sells medicinal herbs, and that he knew a great deal about the hallucinogenic cactus, peyote. He had also said that it would be worth my while to meet him. Bill was my guide in the South-west while I was collecting information and specimens of medicinal plants used by the Indians of the area.

Bill got up and went to greet the man. The Indian was of medium height. His hair was white and short, and grew a bit over his ears, accentuating the roundness of his head. He was very dark; the deep wrinkles on his face gave him the appearance

of age, yet his body seemed to be strong and fit. I watched him for a moment. He moved around with a nimbleness that I would have thought impossible for an old man.

Bill signalled me to join them.

'He's a nice guy,' Bill said to me. 'But I can't understand him. His Spanish is weird, full of rural colloquialisms, I suppose.'

The old man looked at Bill and smiled. And Bill, who speaks only a few words of Spanish, made up an absurd phrase in that language. He looked at me as if asking whether he was making sense, but I did not know what he had had in mind; he then smiled shyly and walked away. The old man looked at me and began laughing. I explained to him that my friend sometimes forgot that he did not speak Spanish.

'I think he also forgot to introduce us,' I said, and I told him my name.

'And I am Juan Matus at your service,' he said.

We shook hands and remained quiet for some time. I broke the silence and told him about my enterprise. I told him that I was looking for any kind of information on plants, especially peyote. I talked compulsively for a long time, and although I was almost totally ignorant on the subject, I said I knew a great deal about peyote. I thought that if I boasted about my knowledge he would become interested in talking to me. But he did not say anything. He listened patiently. Then he nodded slowly and peered at me. His eyes seemed to shine with a light of their own. I avoided his gaze. I felt embarrassed. I had the certainty that at that moment he knew I was talking nonsense.

'Come to my house some time,' he finally said, taking his eyes away from me. 'Perhaps we could talk there with more ease.'

I did not know what else to say. I felt uneasy. After a while Bill came back into the room. He recognized my discomfort and did not say a word. We sat in tight silence for some time. Then the old man got up. His bus had come. He said goodbye.

'It didn't go too well, did it?' Bill asked.

'No.'

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'I told you, he's very eccentric. The Indians around here know him, yet they never mention him. And that's something.'

'He said I could come to his house, though.'

'He was bullshitting you. Sure, you can go to his house, but what does it mean? He'll never tell you anything. If you ever ask him anything he'll clam up as if you were an idiot talking nonsense.'

Bill said convincingly that he had encountered people like him before, people who gave the impression of knowing a great deal. In his judgement, he said, such people were not worth the trouble, because sooner or later one could obtain the same information from someone else who did not play hard to get. He said that he had neither patience nor time for old fogies, and that it was possible that the old man was only presenting himself as being knowledgeable about herbs, when in reality he knew as little as the next man.

Bill went on talking but I was not listening. My mind kept on wondering about the old Indian. He knew I had been bluffing. I remembered his eyes. They had actually shone.

I went back to see him a couple of months later, not so much as a student of anthropology interested in medicinal plants but as a person with an inexplicable curiosity. The way he had looked at me was an unprecedented event in my life. I wanted to know what was involved in that look. It became almost an obsession with me. I pondered it and the more I thought about it the more unusual it seemed to be.

Don Juan and I became friends, and for a year I paid him innumerable visits. I found his manner very reassuring and his sense of humour superb; but above all I felt there was a silent consistency about his acts, a consistency which was thoroughly baffling to me. I felt a strange delight in his presence and at the same time I experienced a strange discomfort. His mere company forced me to make a tremendous re-evaluation of my models of behaviour. I had been reared, perhaps like everyone else, to have a readiness to accept man as an essentially weak and fallible creature. What impressed me about don Juan was the fact that he did not make a point of being weak and helpless, and just being around him

ensured an unfavourable comparison between his way of behaving and mine. Perhaps one of the most impressive statements he made to me at that time was concerned with our inherent difference. Prior to one of my visits I had been feeling quite unhappy about the total course of my life and about a number of pressing personal conflicts that I had. When I arrived at his house I felt moody and nervous.

We were talking about my interest in knowledge; but, as usual, we were on two different tracks. I was referring to academic knowledge that transcends experience, while he was talking about direct knowledge of the world.

'Do you know anything about the world around you?' he asked.

'I know all kinds of things,' I said.

'I mean do you ever feel the world around you?'

'I feel as much of the world around me as I can.'

'That's not enough. You must feel everything, otherwise the world loses its sense.'

I voiced the classical argument that I did not have to taste the soup in order to know the recipe, nor did I have to get an electric shock in order to know about electricity.

'You make it sound stupid,' he said. 'The way I see it, you want to cling to your arguments, despite the fact that they bring nothing to you; you want to remain the same even at the cost of your well-being.'

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'I am talking about the fact that you're not complete. You have no peace.'

That statement annoyed me. I felt offended. I thought he was certainly not qualified to pass judgement on my acts or my personality.

'You're plagued with problems,' he said. 'Why?'

'I am only a man, don Juan,' I said peevishly.

I made that statement in the same vein my father used to make it. Whenever he said he was only a man he implicitly meant he was weak and helpless and his statement, like mine, was filled with an ultimate sense of despair.

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Don Juan peered at me as he had done the first day we met.

'You think about yourself too much,' he said and smiled. 'And that gives you a strange fatigue that makes you shut off the world around you and cling to your arguments. Therefore, all you have is problems. I'm only a man too, but I don't mean that the way you do.'

'How do you mean it?'

'I've vanquished my problems. Too bad my life is so short that I can't grab on to all the things I would like to. But that is not an issue; it's only a pity.'

I liked the tone of his statement. There was no despair or self-pity in it.

In 1961, a year after our first meeting, don Juan disclosed to me that he had a secret knowledge of medicinal plants. He told me he was a 'brujo'. The Spanish word *brujo* can be rendered in English as sorcerer, medicine man, curer. From that point on the relation between us changed; I became his apprentice and for the next four years he endeavoured to teach me the mysteries of sorcery. I have written about that apprenticeship in *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge*.

Our conversations were conducted in Spanish, and thanks to don Juan's superb command of that language I obtained detailed explanations of the intricate meanings of his system of beliefs. I have referred to that complex and well-systematized body of knowledge as sorcery and I have referred to him as a sorcerer because those were categories he himself used in informal conversation. In the context of more serious elucidations, however, he would use the terms 'knowledge' to categorize sorcery and 'man of knowledge' or 'one who knows' to categorize a sorcerer.

In order to teach and corroborate his knowledge don Juan used three well-known psychotropic plants: peyote, *Lophophora williamsii*; jimson weed, *Datura innoxia*; and a species of mushroom which belongs to the genus *Psilocybe*. Through the separate ingestion of each of these hallucinogens he produced in me, as his apprentice, some peculiar states of distorted perception, or altered consciousness, which I have called 'states of non-ordinary reality'. I have used the word 'reality' because it was a

major premise in don Juan's system of beliefs that the states of consciousness produced by the ingestion of any of those three plants were not hallucinations, but concrete, although unordinary, aspects of the reality of everyday life. Don Juan behaved towards these states of non-ordinary reality not 'as if' they were real but 'as' real.

To classify these plants as hallucinogens and the states they produced as non-ordinary reality is, of course, my own device. Don Juan understood and explained the plants as being vehicles that would conduct or lead a man to certain impersonal forces or 'powers' and the states they produced as being the 'meetings' that a sorcerer had to have with those 'powers' in order to gain control over them.

He called peyote 'Mescalito' and he explained it as being a benevolent teacher and protector of men. Mescalito taught the 'right way to live'. Peyote was usually ingested at gatherings of sorcerers called 'mitotes', where the participants would gather specifically to seek a lesson on the right way to live.

Don Juan considered the jimson weed and the mushrooms to be powers of a different sort. He called them 'allies' and said that they were capable of being manipulated; a sorcerer, in fact, drew his strength from manipulating an ally. Of the two, don Juan preferred the mushroom. He maintained that the power contained in the mushroom was his personal ally and he called it 'smoke' or 'little smoke'.

Don Juan's procedure to utilize the mushrooms was to let them dry into a fine powder inside a small gourd. He kept the gourd sealed for a year and then mixed the fine powder with five other dry plants and produced a mixture for smoking in a pipe.

In order to become a man of knowledge one had to 'meet' with the ally as many times as possible; one had to become familiar with it. This premise implied, of course, that one had to smoke the hallucinogenic mixture quite often. The process of 'smoking' consisted of ingesting the fine mushroom powder, which did not incinerate, and inhaling the smoke of the other five plants that made up the mixture. Don Juan explained the

profound effects that the mushrooms had on one's perceptual capacities as the 'ally removing one's body'.

Don Juan's method of teaching required an extraordinary effort on the part of the apprentice. In fact, the degree of participation and involvement needed was so strenuous that by the end of 1965 I had to withdraw from the apprenticeship. I can say now, with the perspective of the five years that have elapsed, that at that time don Juan's teachings had begun to pose a serious threat to my 'idea of the world'. I had begun to lose the certainty, which all of us have, that the reality of everyday life is something we can take for granted.

At the time of my withdrawal I was convinced that my decision was final; I did not want to see don Juan ever again. However, in April of 1968 an early copy of my book was made available to me and I felt compelled to show it to him. I paid him a visit. Our link of teacher-apprentice was mysteriously re-established, and I can say that on that occasion I began a second cycle of apprenticeship, very different from the first. My fear was not as acute as it had been in the past. The total mood of don Juan's teachings was more relaxed. He laughed and also made me laugh a great deal. There seemed to be a deliberate intent on his part to minimize seriousness in general. He clowned during the truly crucial moments of this second cycle, and thus helped me to overcome experiences which could easily have become obsessive. His premise was that a light and amenable disposition was needed in order to withstand the impact and the strangeness of the knowledge he was teaching me.

'The reason you got scared and quit is because you felt too damn important,' he said, explaining my previous withdrawal. 'Feeling important makes one heavy, clumsy, and vain. To be a man of knowledge one needs to be light and fluid.'

Don Juan's particular interest in his second cycle of apprenticeship was to teach me to 'see'. Apparently in his system of knowledge there was the possibility of making a semantic difference between 'seeing' and 'looking' as two distinct manners of perceiving. 'Looking' referred to the ordinary way in which we are accustomed to perceive the world, while 'seeing' entailed

a very complex process by virtue of which a man of knowledge allegedly perceives the 'essence' of the things of the world.

In order to present the intricacies of this learning process in a readable form I have condensed long passages of questions and answers, and thus I have edited my original field notes. It is my belief, however, that at this point my presentation cannot possibly detract from the meaning of don Juan's teachings. The editing was aimed at making my notes flow, as conversation flows, so they would have the impact I desired; that is to say, I wanted by means of a reportage to communicate to the reader the drama and directness of the field situation. Each section I have set as a chapter was a session with don Juan. As a rule, he always concluded each of our sessions on an abrupt note; thus the dramatic tone of the ending of each chapter is not a literary device of my own, it was a device proper of don Juan's oral tradition. It seemed to be a mnemonic device that helped me to retain the dramatic quality and importance of the lessons.

Certain explanations are needed, however, to make my reportage cogent, since its clarity depends on the elucidation of a number of key concepts or key units that I want to emphasize. This choice of emphasis is congruous with my interest in social science. It is perfectly possible that another person with a different set of goals and expectations would single out concepts entirely different from those I have chosen myself.

During the second cycle of apprenticeship don Juan made a point of assuring me that the use of the smoking mixture was the indispensable prerequisite to 'seeing'. Therefore I had to use it as often as possible.

'Only the smoke can give you the necessary speed to catch a glimpse of that fleeting world,' he said.

With the aid of the psychotropic mixture, he produced in me a series of states of non-ordinary reality. The main feature of such states, in relation to what don Juan seemed to be doing, was a condition of 'inapplicability'. What I perceived in those states of altered consciousness was incomprehensible and impossible to interpret by means of our everyday mode of understand-

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ing the world. In other words, the condition of inapplicability entailed the cessation of the pertinence of my world view.

Don Juan used this condition of inapplicability of the states of non-ordinary reality in order to introduce a series of pre-conceived, new 'units of meaning'. Units of meaning were all the single elements pertinent to the knowledge don Juan was striving to teach me. I have called them units of meaning because they were the basic conglomerate of sensory data and their interpretations on which more complex meaning was constructed. One example of such a unit is the way in which the physiological effect of the psychotropic mixture was understood. It produced a numbness and loss of motor control that was interpreted in don Juan's system as an act performed by the smoke, which in this case was the ally, in order 'to remove the body of the practitioner'.

Units of meaning were grouped together in a specific way, and each block thus created formed what I have called a 'sensible interpretation'. Obviously there has to be an endless number of possible sensible interpretations that are pertinent to sorcery that a sorcerer must learn to make. In our day-to-day life we are confronted with an endless number of sensible interpretations pertinent to it. A simple example could be the no longer deliberate interpretation, which we make scores of times every day, of the structure we call 'room'. It is obvious that we have learned to interpret the structure we call room in terms of room; thus room is a sensible interpretation because it requires that at the time we make it we are cognizant, in one way or another, of all the elements that enter into its composition. A system of sensible interpretation is, in other words, the process by virtue of which a practitioner is cognizant of all the units of meaning necessary to make assumptions, deductions, predictions, etc., about all the situations pertinent to his activity.

By 'practitioner' I mean a participant who has an adequate knowledge of all, or nearly all, the units of meaning involved in his particular system of sensible interpretation. Don Juan was a practitioner; that is, he was a sorcerer who knew all the steps of his sorcery.

As a practitioner he attempted to make his system of sensible interpretation accessible to me. Such an accessibility, in this case, was equivalent to a process of resocialization in which new ways of interpreting perceptual data were learned.

I was the 'stranger', the one who lacked the capacity to make intelligent and congruous interpretations of the units of meaning proper to sorcery.

Don Juan's task, as a practitioner making his system accessible to me, was to disarrange a particular certainty which I share with everyone else, the certainty that our 'commonsense' views of the world are final. Through the use of psychotropic plants, and through well-directed contacts between the alien system and myself, he succeeded in pointing out to me that my view of the world cannot be final because it is only an interpretation.

For the American Indian, perhaps for thousands of years, the vague phenomenon we call sorcery has been a serious, bona fide practice, comparable to that of our science. Our difficulty in understanding it stems, no doubt, from the alien units of meaning with which it deals.

Don Juan had once told me that a man of knowledge had predilections. I asked him to explain his statement.

'My predilection is to *see*,' he said.

'What do you mean by that?'

'I like to *see*,' he said, 'because only by *seeing* can a man of knowledge know.'

'What kinds of things do you *see*?'

'Everything.'

'But I also see everything and I'm not a man of knowledge.'

'No. You don't *see*.'

'I think I do.'

'I tell you, you don't.'

'What makes you say that, don Juan?'

'You only look at the surface of things.'

'Do you mean that every man of knowledge actually sees through everything he looks at?'

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has his own predilections; mine is just to *see* and to know; others do other things.'

'What other things, for example?'

'Take Sacateca, he's a man of knowledge and his predilection is dancing. So he dances and knows.'

'Is the predilection of a man of knowledge something he does in order to know?'

'Yes, that is correct.'

'But how could dancing help Sacateca to know?'

'One can say that Sacateca dances with all he has.'

'Does he dance like I dance? I mean like dancing?'

'Let's say that he dances like I *see* and not like you may dance.'

'Does he also *see* the way you *see*?'

'Yes, but he also dances.'

'How does Sacateca dance?'

'It's hard to explain that. It is a peculiar way of dancing he does when he wants to know. But all I can say about it is that, unless you understand the ways of a man who knows, it is impossible to talk about dancing or *seeing*.'

'Have you *seen* him doing his dancing?'

'Yes. However, it is not possible for everyone who looks at his dancing to *see* that it is his peculiar way of knowing.'

I knew Sacateca, or at least I knew who he was. We had met and once I had bought him a beer. He was very polite and told me I should feel free to stop at his house any time I wanted to. I toyed for a long time with the idea of visiting him but I did not tell don Juan.

On the afternoon of 14 May 1962, I drove up to Sacateca's house; he had given me directions how to get there and I had no trouble finding it. It was on a corner and had a fence all around it. The gate was closed. I walked around it to see if I could peck inside the house. It appeared to be deserted.

'Don Elias,' I called out loud. The chickens got frightened and scattered about cackling furiously. A small dog came to the fence. I expected it to bark at me; instead, it just sat there looking at me. I called out once again and the chickens had another burst of cackling.

An old woman came out of the house. I asked her to call don Elias.

'He's not here,' she said.

'Where can I find him?'

'He's in the fields.'

'Where in the fields?'

'I don't know. Come back in the late afternoon. He'll be here around five.'

'Are you don Elias' wife?'

'Yes, I'm his wife,' she said and smiled.

I tried to ask her about Sacateca but she excused herself and said that she did not speak Spanish well. I got into my car and drove away.

I returned to the house around six o'clock. I drove to the door and yelled Sacateca's name. This time he came out of the house. I turned on my tape recorder, which in its brown leather case looked like a camera hanging from my shoulder. He seemed to recognize me.

'Oh, it's you,' he said, smiling. 'How's Juan?'

'He's fine. But how are you, don Elias?'

He did not answer. He seemed to be nervous. Overtly he was very composed, but I felt that he was ill at ease.

'Has Juan sent you here on some sort of errand?'

'No. I came here by myself.'

'What in the world for?'

His question seemed to betray very bona fide surprise.

'I just wanted to talk to you,' I said, hoping to sound as casual as possible. 'Don Juan has told me marvellous things about you and I got curious and wanted to ask you a few questions.'

Sacateca was standing in front of me. His body was lean and wiry. He was wearing khaki pants and shirt. His eyes were half-closed; he seemed to be sleepy or perhaps drunk. His mouth was open a bit and his lower lip hung. I noticed that he was breathing deeply and seemed to be almost snoring. The thought came to me that Sacateca was undoubtedly plastered out of his mind. But that thought seemed to be very incongruous because only a few

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minutes before, when he came out of his house, he had been very alert and aware of my presence.

'What do you want to talk about?' he finally said.

His voice was tired; it was as though his words dragged after each other. I felt very uneasy. It was as if his tiredness was contagious and pulling me.

'Nothing in particular,' I answered. 'I just came to chat with you in a friendly way. You once asked me to come to your house.'

'Yes, I did, but it's not the same now.'

'Why isn't it the same?'

'Don't you talk with Juan?'

'Yes, I do.'

'Then what do you want with me?'

'I thought maybe I could ask you some questions?'

'Ask Juan. Isn't he teaching you?'

'He is, but just the same I would like to ask you about what he is teaching me, and have your opinion. This way I'll be able to know what to do.'

'Why do you want to do that? Don't you trust Juan?'

'I do.'

'Then why don't you ask him to tell you what you want to know?'

'I do. And he tells me. But if you could also tell me about what don Juan is teaching me, perhaps I will understand better.'

'Juan can tell you everything. He alone can do that. Don't you understand that?'

'I do, but then I'd like to talk with people like you, don Elias. One does not find a man of knowledge every day.'

'Juan is a man of knowledge.'

'I know that.'

'Then why are you talking to me?'

'I said I came to be friends.'

'No, you didn't. There is something else about you this time.'

I wanted to explain myself and all I could do was mumble incoherently. Sacateca did not say anything. He seemed to listen attentively. His eyes were half-closed again but I felt he was peer-

ing at me. He nodded almost imperceptibly. Then his lids opened and I saw his eyes. He seemed to be looking past me. He casually tapped the floor with the tip of his right foot, just behind his left heel. His legs were slightly arched; his arms were limp against his sides. Then he lifted his right arm; his hand was open with the palm turned perpendicular to the ground; his fingers were extended and pointing towards me. He let his hand wobble a couple of times before he brought it to my face level. He held it in that position for an instant and then he said a few words to me. His voice was very clear, yet the words dragged.

After a moment he dropped his hand to his side and remained motionless, taking a strange position. He was standing, resting on the ball of his left foot. His right foot was crossed behind the heel of the left foot and he was tapping the floor rhythmically and gently with the tip of his right foot.

I felt an unwarranted apprehension, a form of restlessness. My thoughts seemed to be dissociated. I was thinking unrelated nonsensical thoughts that had nothing to do with what was going on. I noticed my discomfort and tried to steer my thoughts back to the situation at hand, but I couldn't in spite of a great struggle. It was as if some force was keeping me from concentrating or thinking relevant thoughts.

Sacateca had not said a word, and I didn't know what else to say or do. Quite automatically, I turned around and left.

Later on I felt compelled to tell don Juan about my encounter with Sacateca. Don Juan roared with laughter.

'What really took place there?' I asked.

'Sacateca danced!' don Juan said. 'He *saw* you, then he danced.'

'What did he do to me? I felt cold and dizzy.'

'He apparently didn't like you and stopped you by tossing a word at you.'

'How could he possibly do that?' I exclaimed incredulously.

'Very simple; he stopped you with his will.'

'What did you say?'

'He stopped you with his will!'

The explanation did not suffice. His statements sounded like

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gibberish to me. I tried to probe him further, but he could not explain the event to my satisfaction.

Obviously that event or any event that occurred within this alien system of sensible interpretation could be explained or understood only in terms of the units of meaning proper to that system. This work is, therefore, a reportage and should be read as a reportage. The system I recorded was incomprehensible to me, thus the pretence to anything other than reporting about it would be misleading and impertinent. In this respect I have adopted the phenomenological method and have striven to deal with sorcery solely as phenomena that were presented to me. I, as the perceiver, recorded what I perceived, and at the moment of recording I endeavoured to suspend judgement.