“Catholic & Fun”:

An Ethnographic Exploration of Two Peruvian Festivals

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INTRODUCTION

“In some cases, tourism might also reinforce existing social relations, particularly where traditional social activities such as festivals and performances become tourist attractions—although in such instances, the local meanings assigned to these events might well be altered as a result of the participation of outsiders.”

During my time in Peru for the Ethnographic Field School, I had the opportunity to attend four different Peruvian festivals: El Festival de Huaman, El Festival de San Pedro, El Festival de San Juan Bautista, and El Festival de Municipalidad Provincial de Julcán. In Peru, there are approximately 3,000 popular festivals that are celebrated annually, including patron saint feasts, processions, carnivals and rituals, encompassing the expression of faith in a god, respect for nature, and the celebration of freedom. Many of the Peruvian festivals demonstrate the fusion of Catholicism with the region’s pre-Hispanic traditions. The lack of research done on these festivals inspired me to conduct my own research. I was flabbergasted to learn that there was little to no ethnographic research about Peruvian festivals which is the reason why I decided to conduct my own ethnographic research regarding the festivals in Peru.

Due to the limitation of time, I decided to focus on two Catholic religious festivals: El Festival de San Juan Bautista and El Festival de San Pedro. The purpose of my research sought to better understand the purpose of the festivals and the significant meaning it had to participants who attended these festivals. I compared the similarities and differences of how the celebration of two Catholic Saints differed in the coastal town of Huanchaco and the mountain town of

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Júcán. Additionally, I assessed if tourism played a part in how these festivals are celebrated and whether tourism in general impacted the local meaning of the festival.

METHODS

For my research, I used three methods: participant observation, unobtrusive observation, and informal interviews with participants of the festival. I attended both festivals accompanied with a Spanish translator when it was possible. I asked participants a series of questions if they were willing to talk to me about their involvement in the festival (see Appendix 1). I conducted a series of unobtrusive observations throughout many of the different events. During my unobtrusive observations I documented my thoughts, feelings and observations in my notebook as well as took photos to better ensure that I would not forget fleeting details. I also had the opportunity to actively participate in these events and receive a first-hand experience of what occurs during the many events that are taken place during these festivals.

BACKGROUND

I used online resources along with informal interviews with informants to gather information regarding information about the field sites, history of both saints, and the festivals. The first individual I talked to was Rafael Vasquez, a cultural anthropologist and the file schools in-country guide. In Júcán, Rafael was also able to help connect me with Rodolfo Aguillar, the chief of social and economic development of Júcán. Rodolfo was in charge of organizing El Festival de San Juan Bautista.
Site Description

My fieldwork took place in Huanchaco and Julcán which are two towns located in La Libertad Region. The Region is separated into twelve provinces and eighty-three districts (see Fig 1).\(^3\) La Libertad is the only Peruvian Region that includes all three national regions of the nation: the coast, the *sierra* (highlands), and the *selva* (rainforest). The capital of La Libertad Region is Trujillo, which is strategically placed near where the Andes come closest to the coast.\(^4\)

**Figure 1.**
Map of La Libertad Region
*Source: Wikipedia*

Julcán is a mountain town located in the Andes with a population of 11,622 people as of June 30, 2015 (see Fig. 1).\(^5\) The town is very traditional in clothing and customs. The areas’ economy is largely stemmed from its farming and agriculture. The town only receives about 100 tourists annually. Most of my research in Julcán took place in the Plaza which is located in the middle of the town (see Fig. 2).

**Figure 2.** Plaza de Julcán
*Source: Municipalidad Provincial de Julcán Facebook Page*


Huanchaco is a relatively small coastal town that is eight miles north of Trujillo with a population of about 68,104 as of June 30, 2015. Most of my research in Huanchaco took place on Avenida la Ribera, the long road that runs parallel to the ocean shore. The strip of road is full of restaurants, hostals, and shops (see Fig. 3). In Huanchaco, the town’s economy is based on the livelihood of fishing. Unfortunately, the fishing industry has been fading as a result of many things such as tourism, younger generations don’t want to fish, the presence of commercial fishing, and the decline of good fish harvests.

**Figure 3.** Map of Huanchaco
*Source: Mapio*

**History of the Saints & Festivals**

According to the Catholic Church, a “saint” is anyone in Heaven, whether recognized on Earth or not, who form the “great cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1). Particular saints, also called patrons, are believed to intercede to God on behalf of the believers. Each saint that the

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Catholic Church honors is believed to have responded to God’s invitation to use his or her unique gifts and abilities, and for each of these saints a day is designated in their honor.

*San Pedro*

San Pedro, also known as Saint Peter, is the Catholic Saint of the Fisherman whom is primarily honored and celebrated in port towns. San Pedro was elected to be the first apostle by Jesus himself. Pedro was not always a saint, he was first a very successful fisherman. Jesus chose him to be the first apostle because he wanted Pedro to collect his people and bring them to the church like Pedro did with the fish he caught. Saint Peter and Saint Paul (San Pablo) presumably on the same day died keeping their faith presumably on the same day as martyrs—Saint Peter was crucified while Saint Paul is believed to have been beheaded—resulting in celebrating both together on one day.⁹

> “Every June 29, it is celebrated in our country, the Day of Saint Peter and Saint Paul, in which the martyrdom of the apostles of Christ, Simon Peter and Paul of Tarsus is remembered, being declared a non-working holiday.”¹⁰

Although EL Día de San Pedro y San Pablo is a Peruvian National Holiday, towns on the coast have larger celebrations, because fishing is the main livelihood. Catholics, the Chimú civilization, and fisherman honor San Pedro in hopes of a good fishing season. ¹¹ The funding for

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¹¹ “San Pedro y San Pablo- Festivals.” Perutravels.
the festival comes primarily from fundraising and sponsors. Unfortunately, the festival is dying due to lack of funds from sponsors, so the fisherman cover most of the funds.

San Juan

San Juan Bautista, also called John the Baptist, is the cousin of Jesus. He converted to Catholicism and was appointed by God to become “The Baptizer” and baptize Jesus. San Juan Bautista is the Saint that is primarily worshipped in the mountains and rainforests because he would baptize individuals in the rivers through the mountains rather than in the ocean. San Juan Bautista is the patron saint of the Amazon because he is associated with water particularly in the jungle regions of Peru, where rivers are vital to the economies of many communities. San Juan Bautista is celebrated every year on June 24th where there are lots of festivities held such as music and dance competitions, marathons, drinking, and when the biggest market of the year occurs. Individuals all over Peru come to Julcán to celebrate and to sell the food that they grow. Every year one family pays for the funding of the festival. This year, it coincidentally happened to be the mayor’s family that was picked from the prior year to be in charge of the funding this year. The family pays for all the festivities, the cash rewards for the competitions, and the food. Families who fund the festival are picked on a volunteer basis and volunteers to show respect to their Catholic faith.

DATA

The first festival I had the opportunity to attend was the “Gran Fiesta Patronal en Honor a: San Juan Bautista” in Julcán, Peru that took place on June 22nd-25th. Since there are not many tourists that come to Peru, the children tended to flock around my field school classmates. They

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were quite fascinated with us and was always wanting us to help them with their English and questions that they had about the United States. I thought that it was intriguing that they were so fascinated to learn more about us, just like we were interested in learning more about them, their culture, and their way of life. When we did arrive in Julcán, the festival of the creation of the Providence of Julcán had already began.

The mayor came to meet us personally at our hostal and following behind him was a huge band. The mayor shakes each of our hands and leads us to the front of the line. We are walking towards the Plaza around the block while the band plays upbeat music behind us. There are so many curious eyes, but with these curious eyes I see true excitement and happiness of our presence. I can’t help but feel that we are welcomed in this small mountain town.” We are led to the stage to be recognized before the town and then are welcomed to participate in dancing and drinking beer. After the first couple of songs I am exhausted. I can already begin to understand that music and dance is very important in the Peruvian culture. I find myself getting more excited for the next festival. (observation, 06/18/18)

The second festival that I participated in was the Festividad del apóstol San Pedro located in the port town of Huanchaco, Peru that took place on June 19th-30th. Both festivals took place for many days and knowing that it was infeasible to attend all the events, I used the program itineraries to help choose which events to attend. I chose the events that were most pertinent to my research (see Fig. 4).

Figure 4. The Program for the Festivals
Festival de San Juan Bautista

Events, Competitions, & Contests

One aspect of the San Juan Bautista Festival that I thought was fascinating was that each year one family funds for the entire festival, including all the money that is rewarded to the winners of the competitions and contests that are held during the festival. One of the events I had I had looked forward to the most was the *burrocross.* The *“burrocross”* is like motocross, but with donkeys that race. Unfortunately, there were not enough participates to sign up, so the event never happened. One event that I had really enjoyed watching was the beer drinking contest. It was wonderful to watch because one of my fellow American classmates decided to be the only American and the only woman to participate in the event. Even though she didn’t win, it was enjoyable to watch her and the rest of the contestant’s chug down two beers in hopes of winning some reward money. Other events that occurred during the festival included: music competitions, dancing competitions, marathon races, and motocross.

Mass and the Procession of the Saint

“I am sitting on the steps outside of the church observing the festival [Festival de San Juan Bautista] when suddenly I hear a commotion coming from the church. I decide to slowly make my way inside the church to see what is going on. I see that there are a handful of people attending mass. I make my way towards a dusty brown bench in the back of the chapel... my attention is drawn towards the group of kids in bright colored traditional clothing in two separate lines down the aisles...a drumming noise appears...the congregation stands...The kids standing in the aisles begin to chant something in Spanish. I have never felt so inadequate in my Spanish skills than I do in that moment...
As the kids are chanting they start to sway back and forth to the rhythm of the drum. Occasionally, the kids will bow then kneel on their knees... the rhythm of the drumming and the mood of the mass makes me feel that there is a sacrifice about to be made. I glance around the audience and they do not seem to be aware of the children... their eyes are fixated on a man wearing a green poncho in the front of the church. I don’t know much about Catholic churches, but I believe that he is the Pope. To his right, is where the patron saint, San Juan Bautista sits. He is clothed in a beautiful aqua robe with gold accents. He is surrounded by candles that light around him. My attention is suddenly drawn to a man walking up to the saint, I recognize the man as the mayor of the town. He lights a candle in front of the patron saint. The pope says something in Spanish and the crowd begins to clap... The drumming begins, and the congregation begins to exit the chapel....”

Above is an excerpt of my unobtrusive observation during the Catholic mass service at the San Juan Bautista Festival that I had the opportunity to attend (see Fig 5). Both festivals hold a mass in honor of the patron saint that they are honoring as well as have an event called “the procession of the saint” where they take the saint from its spot in the chapel and they carry it to a designated spot in the town. In Julcán, I had observed the proceedings of the mass service, but unfortunately was no there to attend the procession of the saint. From my research, I believe that the what occurs during the procession of the saint, is that they remove the saint from the church and descend the church stairs and carry the saint around the plaza in Julcán. In Huanchaco, I did not have the opportunity to attend the mass services but was able to attend the procession of the saint. Although both festivals hold these events they do differ dramatically.
The night before the procession of the saint, there is an event where about ten fishermen take their *caballito de tortoras* (reed boats) to show off their *farolitos*—small lantern-like figurines assembled from bamboo and colored plastic, which holds a candle inside for illumination. The fishermen then begin to row out to the sea with the *farolitos* faintly illuminating the dark ocean. It is such an amazing sight to see the colorful glowing lights in the distant dark ocean. The boats start to row in a circle where you can see the colors of blue, orange, red, yellow, and purple start to create a spinning rhythm.
During the festival, I began to ask a few individuals on why they hold this event and none of them could really explain to me the exact reasoning behind it. One individual told me that it’s a more modern-day activity that is done—only about 10-14 years old. This event is used to show how the fishermen would go out at night on their *caballito de tortoras*. While doing some research online, I discovered there is a legend behind the idea of the *farolitos*. Before there was electricity in Huanchaco, *farolitos*, or “little lights” would appear out in the sea just off the horizon, but no one would know why or what they were. Once electricity finally came to Huanchaco, the *farolitos* slowly disappeared. The legend of the lights holds a strong legend for the community and the fishermen, which is why the recreate the *farolitos* each year.  

*The Building of the Patacho*

The *patacho* is a boat constructed from totora reeds and balsa wood for the procession of the saint in the San Pedro Festival. El Festival de San Pedro has both Catholic and Chimu inspired backgrounds. The Chimu “origin God,” *Tacayamo* is believed to have come by sea on a reed boat and is the inspiration behind the idea of using reed boats in the festival as well as using balsa wood to build the boat. The *patacho* is approximately 25 feet long and 4 feet wide and built similarly to a canoe (see Fig. 6). In the *patacho*, there are few seats, and in the center of the boat is a platform that the saint is tied to during the procession. Generally, there are only a few people who accompany the patron saint on the *patacho*: The mayor (and their spouse), a priest, a few fishermen to sail the boat, the festival queen, and a Chimu man in traditional dress (this year there wasn’t a traditional Chimu man on the *patacho*).

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In Huanchaco, the most important and most attended event in the San Pedro Festival is the procession of the saint. At 10:00 am, a mass in honor of San Pedro is held at the Huanchaco church. The saint generally sits behind the pulpit in the church, then after mass ends he is removed and carried down from the church to the coast by fisherman. Unfortunately, I was unable to attend the mass, but I did go to the coast of the ocean to observe the patacho (see Fig. 7) and wait for the patron saint to be carried down from the church.

As I was waiting for the procession of the saint, I would hear the faint sound of a firework that sounded like a cannon. I leaned over to Rafael and asked him why individuals would be setting off fireworks during the day when you couldn’t see them. He told me that they...
use the fireworks to track down the path of the Saint and where he is during his travel to the coast. Finally, the saint comes into my view (see Fig. 8).

“I finally see San Pedro being carried into my sight of vision. He is clothed in a gold and white robe. He is wearing a hat on his head with a cross on it, one that I preacher would wear. As the fisherman bring him down towards the patacho, I start to see others surrounding him. First person who comes to view is the festival queen. Wearing a beautiful sparkly white dress and a stunning tiara in her hair. Next, I see an older gentleman dressed in a white and red robe—he must be the priest. Following the priest, comes the mayor and his wife. The fisherman lifted the saint into the patacho. They remove is beautiful robe to prepare to sail him out to sea. The mayor, his wife, the festival queen, the priest, and a few fishermen to sail the patacho load the boat. They tie the saint down and prepare for sail…”

**Figure 8. Procession of the Saint**
SIMILARITIES

During my research, I observed many similarities and differences between the two Catholic Festivals (see Appendix 2). I have already discussed many of the differences between the festivals, but now I will talk about some of the similar events that are held at both festivals.

There are many similarities between the San Juan Bautista Festival in Julcán and the San Pedro Festival in Huanchaco. Both are religious festivals that honor one specific Catholic saint through a series of different events that occur during the festival. Although there are events all throughout the day such as Catholic mass, contests, markets, and concerts, there is a bigger turnout of people that attend the festival at night for the Castillos (firework towers) and the late night of drinking and dancing.

Markets/Vendors

Street markets and food vendors were the first thing that I noticed that both festivals had. Something that I had noticed during my research was that the street markets in Julcán, Peru were more targeted towards the locals by selling items that the locals may want or need rather than things that tourists may want because there are not very many tourists in Julcán. Some of the things that I noticed that were being sold were things such as: DVD’S, kitchen utensils, agricultural food – such as bread, cheese, potatoes, meats, and vegetables, modern-day clothing (brands such as Nike & Adidas), kitchen utensils, and school uniforms. The biggest market of the year takes place during El Festival de San Juan Bautista in Julcán, Peru. People come from all over the country to Julcán to sell their items because many people come to Julcán for the festival (see Fig 9).
On the other hand, the markets in Huanchaco aim to sell products targeted towards tourists such as handmade items, traditional clothing, magnets, keychains, and other tourist items which is why most of my souvenirs came from the markets in Huanchaco rather than Julcán. El Festival de San Pedro has increasingly has become a huge tourist attraction over the years, which is most likely the reasoning for the large quantity of markets selling more traditional items specifically made from Peru or other souvenirs aimed for tourists (see Fig. 10 & Fig. 11). The one thing that you could count on to be sold in the markets during the festivals was the large quality of alcohol and the delicious street food. Many of the locals prefer to drink Pilsen Trujillo beers or Pisco Sours. The Pisco Sour is a popular alcoholic cocktail that originated in Peru (see Fig. 12). I am not much of a drinker, so I tended to lean towards the street food, I preferred Picarones. Picarones are a Peruvian dessert that resembles a donut with a sweet syrup (see Fig. 13).

Figure 9. Pictures of Markets in the Plaza at the San Juan Bautista Festival in Julcán, Peru

Figure 10. Street Market in Huanchaco, Peru
Music and dance is a very important part of Peruvian culture. Throughout both festivals there were many events that involved dance and music competitions. In my interview with Rodolfo, he stated that the reason that there is music playing throughout the day during the festival, is so that people will be drawn to the music and attend the festival and participate in the dancing.

In Julcán, the Huayno is a popular dance. The Huayno is a traditional Andean couple dance where participants wear traditional colorful traditional Andean clothing. Little physical is made in the Huayno and the couples who perform the dance make turns and movements featuring hops and foot stamps which mark the rhythm (see Fig. 13).  

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“Pachamama Peruvian Arts: Dance.” Pachamama Peruvian Arts Artes Peruanas Pachamama RSS.
Another dance that I had seen at both festivals was La Marinera (see Fig 14). La Marinera is an elegant dance that represents courtship and love that was developed during Peru’s colonial period (1532-1821) and was later given the name Marinera in honor of the Peruvian Marines victory over the Chile in the war of 1879. La Marinera was originated on the coast of Peru is considered the national dance of Peru. The dance is performed by couples who dance around each other moving in and out, back and forth, swooping around a white handkerchief that float around above them like birds.

Figure 14. La Marinera at the San Pedro Festival


18 “Pachamama Peruvian Arts: Dance.” Pachamama Peruvian Arts Artes Peruanas Pachamama RSS.
Castillos

Of all the events that I attended during the festivals, my favorite had to be watching the castillo’s or firework castles. These handcrafted firework castles are made of wood that are layered with colorful fireworks that have mechanical engineering that make parts of the tower spinning with fireworks that are displayed in the town’s plaza (see Fig. 15). In the festival, there can be anywhere between one to ten of these spinning firework towers and crowds come from all over the country to view them. Families in the towns take the time to build these dangerous towers for the amusement of the festivals participants.

Figure 15. Castillos at the San Juan Bautista & San Pedro Festival
CONCLUSIONS

Themes & Observations

Through my own observations and interviews with participants I have been able to compile a list of themes that each festival had and what participants had felt the purpose of the festival was as well as some of my own observations to reach conclusions about the purpose of the festival and the future of the festivals.

Festival de San Juan Bautista

My first observation that I made about the San Juan Bautista Festival was that rather than it be used to unite the community it often segregates the community because of the different religions in the small town of Julcán. The locals who are not Catholic do attend this festival, but only to sit on the steps of the church and observe the festival rather than participate in the dancing and drinking. In most religions the drinking of alcohol is considered sinful, but also in some religions dancing is not allowed. Therefore, there is a large quantity of people who are just standing around not participating in the festival but just watching and observing. Some people that I interviewed stated that they were only there because the festival provides a source of entertainment for the community and is there to show support to the town. Most of the people who attend this festival are from Julcán and often travel back from where they are currently living because it’s a source of tradition to come back to their hometown for this festival, but also because it’s a great time of the year to come back and be united with their family. A high majority of the people that I interviewed were not there for the festival, but were actually there as vendors to sell their items because this festival is the biggest market of the year for locals. This
festival is not centered on tourists, but rather a celebration for the locals in the town. One interesting aspect is that none of the people that I interviewed mentioned being there in order to honor the saint.

From my observations, I have concluded that although this festival did originate with a Catholic background it is no longer as strong in the religious aspect as it had used to be. Most of the people there were there to have fun, drink, and dance. In my interview with Rodolfo he said the following in Spanish which I had translated into English:

“I am a very catholic man… but on the contrary, I am not that sad about the festival not being as religious as it used to be. I think that it a wonderful thing that the festival has become more modern over the years, but still holds onto some religious aspects. If the festival was solely religious only, not as many people would come because of the wide variety of religions in Julcán…. First and foremost, we are Peruvians. We like to dance and drink and have a good time. Second, we are Catholic… which is why this festival is Catholic and fun!”

*Festival de San Pedro*

Through my observations, the San Pedro Festival is considered more religious than the Julcán festival, but it has also lost a lot of its true religious meaning. Rather than the festival being celebrated by Catholics to honor the saint it has turned into a festival being celebrated by fisherman to honor the Catholic saint in hopes of having a good fishing season. Many of the people I interviewed during the San Pedro festival were not event there for the festival itself, but was there for shopping, drinking, and just eating some street food. Many people who were attending the festival were there not because they were catholic but because they were either
tourists like myself, or if they were locals it is a tradition of the town. I believe through my research, I can safely assume that the meaning of this festival has changed because of the mass media attention to tourism in Huanchaco, in particular to attend the San Pedro Festival.

**Limitations**

Like all research, I need to acknowledge the potential limitations of my research. There were a lot of obstacles when completing my research about the festivals. The first limitation that I had was understanding and speaking the Spanish language. Although I had taken five years of Spanish in junior high and high school, it did not prepare me for the obstacles of being able to confidently and fluently speak to native speakers. I had intentions of having a translator with me during the festival, but due to circumstances beyond my control, there was difficulty in providing a translator for all of my interviews. The fact that I did translate many of these interviews by myself using Google Translate there is room for error in translation.

The second limitation that comes to mind was that even though I did have a program itinerary for both festivals, they were hardly ever followed and due to my time restraints, I was unable to attend all events that I had wanted to because they ended up starting or ending much later than expected. Along with events following “Peruvian time” I had not expected to be out so late for the festivals. In the program, an event would state it started at 10pm, but in “Peruvian time” would mean that it doesn’t start until about midnight.

I also hadn’t expected how difficult it would be to take notes and pay close attention to specific details during the festival while also actively participating in the festivities and enjoying myself. I chose to live in the moment and later recant notes in my phone or notebook and chose to conduct interviews later when the festivities had died down a bit more, which was also a
limitation. By the time I had tried interviewing participants of the festivals individuals either
didn’t want to be interviewed or were not in attendance for the festival, but rather was in town
doing other things, such as shopping, eating, etc.

**Broader Impacts**

This research has provided insider knowledge to help build the understanding of the
culture surrounding two Peruvian Catholic festivals of the San Juan Bautista Festival and the San
Pedro Festival. It has acknowledged both similarities and differences within the festivals in two
different communities in Peru. The knowledge gained from this research can help us to help
preserve the traditions that come with these festivals while also considering the rapid growth of
tourism in both communities.

**Avenues for Further Research**

If I had more time, I would have liked to dig deep into the history of the very first San
Juan Bautista & San Pedro Festival and to see how dramatically they have changed over the
year. I also would want to do more research about ways that the locals can preserve their
traditions for the festivals without having to change any aspect of the festival for tourists. In
other words, I think there is room for research to see what can be done to promote tourism in
both these communities without having to change the traditional meanings and purposes behind
the festivals.
References


“Pachamama Peruvian Arts: Dance.” Pachamama Peruvian Arts Artes Peruanas Pachamama RSS. http://www.pachamama/peruvianarts.org/dance/


APPENDIX 1: Participate Questionaire

1. ¿De dónde eres?
2. ¿Cuál es su religión?
3. ¿Cuál es el propósito del festival?
4. ¿Por qué viniste al festival?
5. ¿Qué el festival significa que usted?

APPENDIX 2: Venn-Diagram of Similarities and Differences of the Festivals

San Juan Bautista Festival
Julcán, Peru
- Celebrated in the Mountains
- San Juan Baptista
- Segregated
- Funded by one family every year
- Biggest Market of the year for locals
- Source of Entertainment – not as religious
- Competitions & Contests

San Pedro Festival
Huanchaco, Peru
- Celebrated on the Coast
- Religious Catholic Festival
- Celebration of the Saints
- Mass & Procession of the Saint
- Castillos (fireworks)
- Music & Dancing
- Many events; multiple days
- Celebrated on the Coast
- San Pedro- Saint of the Fisherman
- Unified
- Chimú/Catholic Traditions (Tacayamo & Jesus)
- Reed Boats (Patacho)
- Farolitos
- Fundraising
- Markets for Tourists