12 YOU ONLY LIVE TWICE: THE AGENCY OF RITUAL CERAMICS AT LAMANAI

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My work on the ceramics of Lamanai has been focused on classification, chronology, and comparison and as a result I have only rarely discussed the functions and use lives of individual objects. In this paper I examine a selection of Terminal Classic to Late Postclassic ceramics from Lamanai from their point of production, through their use-life (in terms of both their ritual use and possible meanings), deposition, excavation, storage, and display. My discussion is framed theoretically by ideas from material culture studies about "the social lives of things" (e.g., Appadurai 1986, Kopytoff 1988) as well as more recent approaches that consider objects as having forms of agency (especially the work of Alfred Gell). By integrating the analysis of a range of ceramics through time, I hope to elucidate more clearly the ritual activities of "Lameneros" and the central role of objects in the creation of identity. I will argue that the agency of ritual ceramics at and from Lamanai has been continually reincarnated in changing contexts to define the community identity of Lamanai through time.

Introduction

In this paper I discuss the functions and meaning of ritual ceramics at Lamanai with reference to ideas about the social lives and life histories of things as well as approaches that consider objects as having forms of agency. I use an expanded definition of ritual and give some examples of the active roles of ceramics in the creation and maintenance of identity in the past and the present.

Ritual and Agency

When we think of ritual, most of us think of religious ritual, but our secular lives are also quite ritualistic. Think of, for example, the banquet associated with the annual Belize Archaeology Symposium or even the ritualistic nature of many sporting events. Rituals of all sorts have formalized elements which include particular objects used in prescribed ways in particular places at specific times (Bloch 1989). Also important to this paper is the fact that rituals are social acts which say something about the identity of the participants. Victor Turner coined the term "communitas" to refer to the feeling of connectedness and group belonging that people get in rituals of all sorts, whether it is a religious service or a Madonna concert.

The idea that objects have forms of agency has been most forcefully developed in the work of Alfred Gell (e.g., Gell 1988, 1992, 1998). For Gell (1998: 96), "works of art, images, icons, and the like, have to be treated, in the context of an anthropological theory, as person-like; that is, sources of, and targets for, social agency." Appadurai and Koptyoff are most closely associated with a life history approach to objects (e.g., Appadurai 1988; Kopytoff 1988). These approaches are not new, however. Myers (2001: 5) has discussed the long history of agency-based approaches in anthropology. Even early discussions of archaeological taxonomy included the use of biological and evolutionary analogies in classification which to some degree approached objects as organisms. As early as 1915 Alfred Kidder (1915; 1917) implied relationships of descent among pottery types, although this view was later roundly rebuked by Brew (1946:53) and the use of anthropomorphic and evolutionary metaphors for understanding material culture went out of fashion for decades.

Recently, however, these analogies have made a comeback in several ways, for example in the increasing influence of evolutionary archaeology (see e.g., Shennan 2002) and in popular, even trendy, ideas that objects have life histories and agency. Predictably, there have been objections. For example, Philip Arnold (2007:110) noted that

> …one sees blithe reference in the archaeological literature to the "social life of things" (e.g., Appadurai 1986) as if inanimate objects experienced teenage angst or the heartbreak of psoriasis, ... I concur with Halperin (1994:110), who reminds us that things do not have a social life; things are used by people in social situations.

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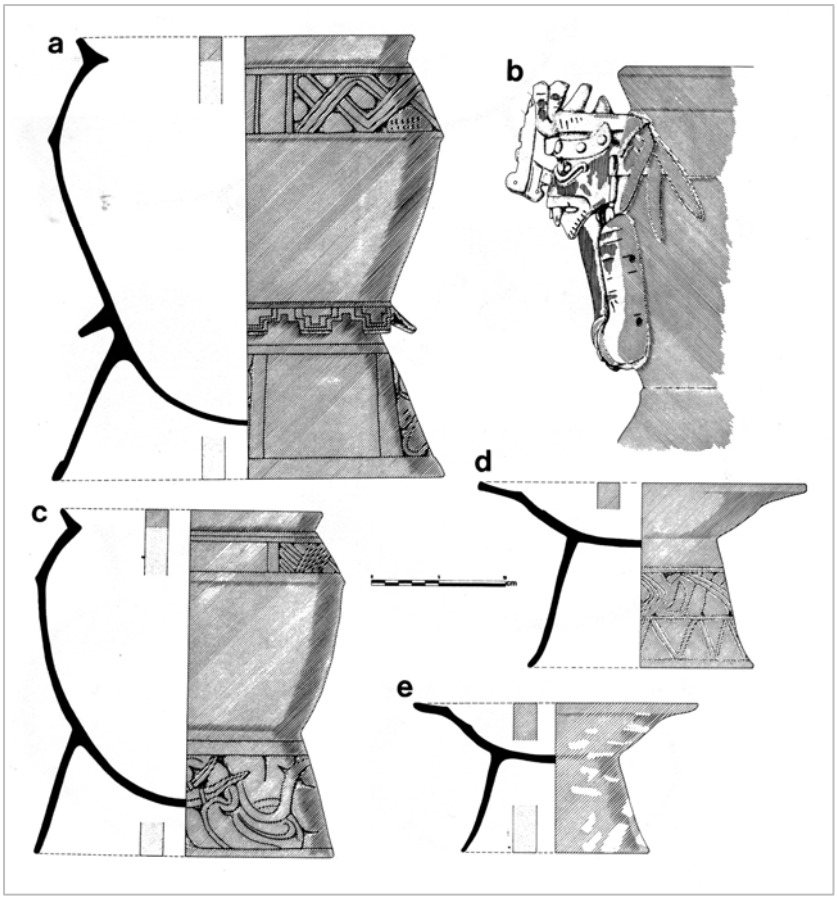

Figure 1: Large jars and high-pedestal dishes ("chalices") from Lamanai. The closest analogues are with Zakpah Group ceramics from Cerros (Walker 1990). (Illustrations by Louise Belanger from Graham 1987: Fig. 5).

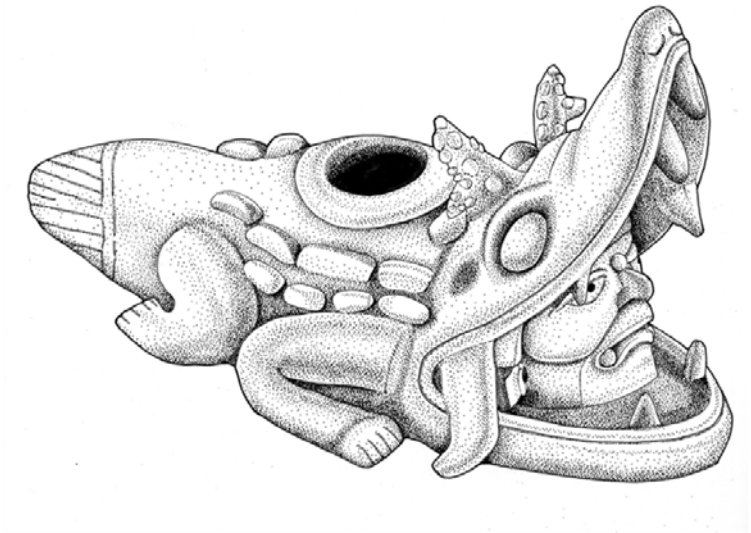

Figure 2: Effigy vessel from Lamanai from a cache in structure N11-4. Closest published analogues are with Cao Modeled from Santa Rita (see Chase and Chase 1988: Fig 5a, 15a, 35). Drawing by Louise Belanger.

For more along these lines see also Steiner (2001:210). These debates are, to me, relatively sterile and exist mostly in the realm of metatheory. Of course objects do not have social lives and they certainly do not reproduce; they are inanimate. Nevertheless, I do think that contemporary approaches which treat objects *as if* they have agency and life histories do add depth to our understanding of ritual at Lamanai.

Large highly-decorated jars and chalices, especially the members of the Zalal Gouged-incised ceramic system (Figure One) are so closely associated with the site of Lamanai that they are often called "Lamanai-style" although the type name was first assigned at Cerros (Walker 1990). This ceramic system is found along the east coast of the Yucatan peninsula and even inland to Mayapan but at Lamanai it has a distinctively local curvilinear style (see Aimers 2008). Davenport (1988: 106-7) has noted that heavily decorated objects like these are closely associated with ritual: "...aesthetically embellished objects signal ritual contexts and ritual utilization. It is as if a nonmaterial or spiritual dimension is added to an object, committing it to a domain in which social and religious values prevail over economic ones." Similarly, Gell (1992:40) called decoration a "technology of enchantment" which focuses attention on socially important objects. Many of the examples we have from Lamanai were deposited with burials and although we cannot be certain, it is likely that these vessels held offerings of some sort and were used in rituals at the graveside. In the Terminal Classic offerings tended to be of pine, but we do not know yet what was placed in these vessels.

Many of the vessels in Postclassic period burials at Lamanai appear to have been purposely smashed and in this sense they are comparable to the sacrifice of a person or an animal. William Walker (1995:76) has noted that "one can conceive of the ritual sacrifice of an object as a type of exchange technology that harnesses the object's underlying use-life ." Like the flawless young Aztec men reportedly chosen to impersonate the god Tezcatlipoca and then sacrificed after a year of godlike status (Klein and Quilter 2001), these vessels are exceptionally beautiful. Like a sacrificed slave, a chalice or large jar may have started life as a commodity, but it was "recontextualized" (Thomas 1991) as a "singularity" (Kopytoff 1988) and "enclaved" in a sacred burial (Appadurai 1988:24). The sacrifice of the pot is, like the sacrifice of an individual, a ritual act through which commitment to group identity is demonstrated. Since this vessel is from a burial in the site core, the person surely held some importance in the community, and aspects of personal and family or lineage identity are likely to have been emphasised at burial.

Figure Two shows another iconic artifact from Lamanai, a modelled effigy vessel showing an anthropomorphic figure emerging from a crocodile. As Prudence Rice (1983:867) has noted, reptilian motifs have been found "almost solely on artifacts with a distinctly ritual function" in relation to both religious and political offices, and Pendergast (1981:39) has noted that the crocodile seems to have "enjoyed an exalted status" at Lamanai.

In his work on totemism, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1968, 1971) examined how humans attach meaning to elements of the natural world such as plants and animals and how these in turn provide a structuring order for sociocultural relationships. As he famously noted, plants and animals are associated with groups of people such as clans or lineages not just because they are "good to eat" but because they are "good to think" (Lévi-Strauss 1968:162) as parts of systems of classification. We still use totem-like systems in sports mascots. The Florida Gators would of course exist without their mascot, but their mascot provides an instantly recognizable semiotic peg upon which to hang the varied and often abstract meanings of being a member of the Florida Gator "community" however vague and dispersed that entity may be in reality (including team members and fans of varying levels but also people on the edges of it, or even opposed to it).

Mascots and totems exist and are represented materially because it is much harder to conceive of a group of people without an image of some sort to identify that group. This is what material culture does—it gathers diffuse meanings into an instantly recognizable physical whole. In other words, the communication of

identity is a function of things. Given that we know the name of Lamanai meant "submerged crocodile" and crocodile imagery is found frequently at the site, it seems that the crocodile was used in a totem-like way as an expression of identity at Lamanai.

Performance and Communitas

Musical instruments are also important ritual objects which help create a sense of group identity through performance. Fragments of drums and ocarinas have been found in the site core, including in an extensive midden which may have been associated with feasting. These artifacts are more evidence of Lamanai's importance as both a commercial and ritual center in the Postclassic. This importance would have been manifest in recurrent domestic and public rituals which celebrated rites of passage for people of all sorts, and fostered communitas with music, food, drink, and dance.

Life, Death, and the Afterlife

Like many musicians, fragile ceramic drums may have lived fast and died young, but in approaching function and meaning in ceramic analysis, we should also think diachronically. For example, in its prime, the function of an ordinary cooking pot was for processing and/or cooking but it could be used for great number of activities from the time of its production to its deposition in archaeological context. For example, a base of a broken pot might have been used as a feeding dish for animals (Deal and Hagstrum 1995:114) while the body may have been used a chicken coop (for a longer discussion of these issues for domestic pottery see Aimers 2010)

Once ceramics are in archaeological context, they are in a sense, dead, but many vessels have use- lives beyond the grave as well. They no longer work in their original context but they are brought back from the underworld to be reincarnated to work in museums. Archaeological objects in museums attain a sacred quality—they signify a distant antiquity that creates an aura around them. The power of these objects is reinforced in many museums by their decontextualized display as singularities behind glass. At Lamanai, this aura emanates beyond the walls of the museum, in that local people use this power to persuade visitors that they will want to remember or, perhaps more importantly, concretely memorialize their visit to this ancient and powerful place with some sort of material reminder (a slate carving or a t-shirt, for example). Objects of all sorts bought at the site carry, *par por toto*, the meaning of the site to other places.

Unlike souvenirs, however, ancient vessels from Lamanai are not just a representation of Lamanai--they are in fact parts of Lamanai, what Gell (1998:221) has compared to a "distributed person." There is a reality to our idea of ancient Lamanai that exists with perfect ease in our minds in the absence of the ancient inhabitants themselves, but it is fair to say –in fact so obvious that it barely needs saying--that without the material culture we would have a much more difficult time conceiving of Lamanai even if we had much more information about the people themselves. Artifacts make Lamanai exist for us.

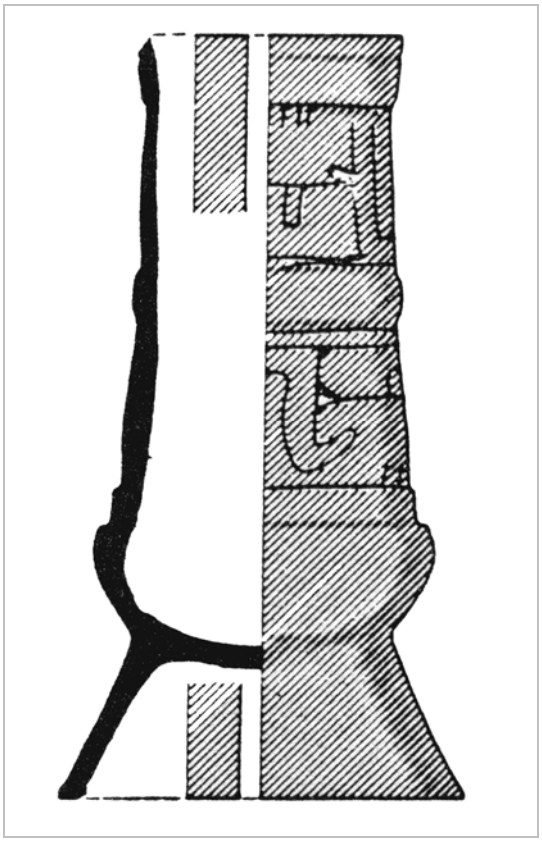

Figure 3: Silho Group Fine Orange Ware Vessel from a burial in Structure N10-1 (drawing by Louise Belanger from Pendergast 1985: Fig. 7.5)

The Foreign Diplomat

Figure Three shows the only Fine Orange vessel yet found at Lamanai. As a member of the Silho Group it was probably "born" somewhere around the Gulf Coast of Campeche or Veracruz and imported to Lamanai. Helms (1993) has written about how foreign objects are often invested with power. It is easy to imagine this vessel being used in a ritual interaction of some sort, perhaps a diplomatic or political one. It may have been a gift from or to someone with real or fictive ties to the Gulf Coast. Its deposition in a rich burial containing 14 other elaborate vessels shows us that foreignness was valuable to powerful people at Lamanai, as it was elsewhere in Mesoamerica.

I have noted on many occasions the great stylistic diversity of the ceramics of Lamanai, and Linda Howie is currently documenting what appears to be even more technological diversity in the pottery, suggesting that even ceramics in the same style were made in a variety of production loci. This means that different potters followed a relatively coherent and at times immediately recognizable set of conventions about how to produce a pot in terms of form, finish, and decoration even if their technological styles varied. Style is a way of doing that says something about relative identity (Wiessner 1990), and thus stylistic consistency is an expression of a widely shared identity. But which identity?

Wells (1998) has discussed the various forms of identity we try to isolate through archaeological objects, including individual identity, gender, status, family, community, and ethnic identity. He notes that ethnic identity has been particularly problematic and I agree. There is no room here for a discussion of the endlessly debated notion of ethnicity, but I will repeat what I have said before (Aimers 2008): the concept of ethnicity is not likely to be much more useful for understanding the ancient Maya than it is for understanding the Maya at conquest. Matthew Restall's work in particular (e.g., Restall 1998) has shown clearly that when the Spanish arrived the lynchpin of identity for the Maya was not ethnicity but lineage and community affiliation.

For me, what many of these vessels reveal is something more specific than ethnicity: Lamanai's community identity. Like the more problematic idea of ethnic identity, community identity is not purely personal, it is social, and it links Lamanai to a network along the coasts. Yet it is also distinctively "Lamanero". In the words of Bentley and Maschner (2001:51), citing Dietler and Herbich (1998), "style, as an outcome of a habitual manufacture process, can determine group identity, rather than the other way around." So, people in the community of Lamanai made (or acquired) objects, but in a very real sense, the objects of Lamanai made the community.

In an earlier paper (Aimers 2008), I argued that the multiregional origins of the pottery at Lamanai are indicative of the cosmopolitan nature of the site itself which appears to have survived the collapse of many of its neighbours in part due to its strategic location for interregional transport and trade. In fact, we have material and osteological evidence that foreign people probably lived there (White, et al. 2009). All of this suggests a certain amount of tolerance of diversity at the site. I have for a long time seen in this diversity a metaphor for the diversity of contemporary Belize. What is a Belizean is a difficult question in a young nation with a complex history and a diverse population, and how to create a sense of unity in diversity is an issue of more than casual importance to all nations. Its location alone makes it obvious that people of all sorts moved through Lamanai. In this diversity I see yet another opportunity for reincarnation of the objects of Lamanai in the present or the future and in this case, as agents of tolerance from a diverse community from Belize's distant past.

Conclusions

Rituals occur in all areas of our lives, whether around a dining table or at a funeral. Rituals do not just happen, however. Rituals take place in specific times and places and involve the use of specific things. I have argued here and elsewhere (Aimers 2010) that the objects we use are not merely expressions of various forms of identity, but are active agents in the creation of identity. The creation, acquisition, and display of objects was not just a

by-product of individuals, families, lineages, or the community as a whole - the objects themselves helped bring these social entities into being. Many different types of ceramic objects (compared here to workers, representatives of elite lineages, sacrificial victims, performers, and foreign diplomats) had a role to play in making the community of Lamanai a reality. To me, the objects of Lamanai live more than twice. They had agency in the past, they have agency in the present, and they will continue to have agency after all of us have died.

Acknowledgements The theme of life, death, and reincarnation in this paper is not accidental. As I prepared for my visit to Belize for the 2009 BAS I felt the loss of David "Ciego" Valencio even more acutely then I had upon learning of his death. It is difficult, I realized, for me to think of Belize at all without remembering some experience or another involving him since we met in 1991. In fact, many of the most memorable experiences in my life have been in Belize, and Ciego was often there to share them, especially in the earlier years. In conversations I have had since his death, particularly with Gyles Iannone who knew him so well, I have come to appreciate even more what a truly special man he was. Even on my worst days, Ciego's distinctively enthusiastic shout of' "Leche!" made me laugh, and I hope I can always hear it when I think of him, as I can now. Part of his comic genius stemmed from the fact that he was a deeply empathetic person who loved people and understood them intuitively. Everyone I know loved him back. I feel privileged to have known him, and I miss him.

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