# La Belle et la Bête:
# The Everyday Life of Ceramics at Lamanai, Belize

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**Abstract**

In this paper I follow two Postclassic period ceramic vessels from Lamanai, Belize from their point of production, through their use-life (in terms of both their functional use and possible meanings), deposition, and excavation to their significance now. My discussion is framed theoretically by ideas about the "social lives of things" (e.g., Appadurai, Kopytoff) as well as approaches that consider objects as having forms of agency (especially the work of Alfred Gell). By comparing an elaborate mortuary vessel with a cooking pot, I make interpretations about everyday life at Lamanai in the past and present.

**Resumen**

En el presente estudio, trazo el rastro de dos vasijas de Lamanai, Belice, del Periodo Posclásico partiendo del lugar de su manufactura; prosiguiendo con la historia de sus usos (en términos de su valor utilitario y sus posibles significados), su deposición arqueológica y su excavación; hasta llegar a su significado hoy día. Esta contribución se enmarca tanto dentro de las teorías sobre "la vida social de las cosas" (*cf.* Appadurai, Kopytoff) como dentro de las aproximaciones que consideran los objetos como compartiendo formas de agencia (en especial el trabajo de Alfred Gell). Tras la exhaustiva comparación de una detallada vasija mortuoria y una cazuela, extraigo interpretaciones sobre la vida cotidiana en Lamanai del pasado y del presente.

"Ma chère mademoiselle, it is with deepest pride and greatest pleasure that we welcome you tonight. And now we invite you to relax, let us pull up a chair, as the dining room proudly presents: your dinner."

And so begins Lumière, the incendiary *maître d'* of Disney's animated version of the French fairy tale *Beauty and the Beast*, as a multiethnic cast of objects prepares to serve "a culinary cabaret." As I wrote this paper I was unable to get Lumière and his animated colleagues out of my thoughts because WAYEB 2008 was in France and I was considering three distinct but interrelated ideas in contemporary anthropology which take an active view of objects: (i) the importance of daily practices and routines to social relationships and meaning (e.g., Bourdieu 1977; Certeau 1984; Giddens 1979); (ii) a biographical or life history approach to objects (e.g., Appadurai 1988; Kopytoff 1988); (iii) the idea that objects have agency (e.g., Gell 1988; 1992; 1998).

Objects with agency and daily lives are not new in Disney, nor in anthropology: Durkheim, Frazer, Tylor, van Gennep, Mauss, and Malinowski, all studied objects as actors to some degree (see Myers 2001: 5). Recently, however, these approaches have seen a renaissance and, although they are not without critics (e.g., Steiner 2001: 210), I believe they can help us to think about the objects of Lamanai in new ways. I would like to demonstrate this by treating two objects from Lamanai – one significantly more beautiful than the other – as agents with daily lives and life histories.

Fig. 1. Gouged-incised pedestal dish or "chalice" typical of those found in Postclassic period burials at Lamanai (photograph by the author).

## The Production of Beauty

These Buk phase (ca. A.D. 960-1200/1250) (Graham 2008) chalices are some of the prettiest vessels found at Lamanai (Fig. 1). They were deposited with burials and probably held some sort of offering. In the Terminal Classic offerings tended to be pine, but we do not know yet what was placed in this style of chalice (see Aimers 2008; 2009; Graham 1987).

Although several people may have been involved in gathering the clay, processing it, forming the vessel, decorating it, and firing it, only one individual incised the complex designs. There has been a great deal of research in Mesoamerica and the American Southwest on design variability, and in a classic ethnoarchaeology article, Friedrich (1970) concluded that minor variations in the positioning and execution of design elements can be linked to small groups of potters who interact frequently, for example a family. This corresponds well with pottery learning studies cross-culturally. One of the interminable debates in archaeology has been the link between ethnic identity, however defined (see various chapters in Sachse 2006), and ceramics. One of the more useful conclusions has been that surface style is only very problematically linked to large group identity – surface style seems more closely linked to community-level identity (Aimers 2010). The Lamanai decorative style is related to those along the east coast of the Yucatan peninsula and even inland to Mayapan, Mexico, but has a distinctively local curvilinear style that appears to hybridize local and distant conventions, a tendency observed in historical contact situations as well (Lightfoot *et al.* 1998).

So, if these chalices had biographies, they were "born of" a small group of potters who may have been related and who worked near the site. I believe I can see the hands of individual potters in the execution of the motifs incised on Lamanai's various chalices, censers and other incised pieces. These stylistic and technological cues accord well the work of Howie (2005) who has attempted to identify production groups from materials science analysis of the ceramic fabrics. The result is, in a sense, "families" of objects born of individual potters. This is exciting since the individual is so often lost in prehistory (see various chapters in Hill and Gunn 1977). In Gell's words: "Each piece, each motif, each line or groove, speaks to every other one. It is as if they bore kinship to one another, and could be positioned within a common genealogy, just as their makers could be" (Gell 1998: 221). It is worth stating the obvious: of course objects are not "born" into "families", their makers are. As a metaphor, however, this concept works very well. For example, this metaphor has helped me realize that in type-variety taxonomic classification, the category of group is conceptually equivalent to the extended family in many kinship systems (Ball 1977: 3), and this provides a much less abstract way to understand the ceramic group concept and to define ceramic groups. In the words of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1968), this metaphor is "good to think."

Fig. 2. Postclassic period unslipped cooking pot from Lamanai (photograph by the author).

## Domestic Pots and Potters

The life story of a cooking pot (Fig. 2) is a humble one. Murdock and Provost (1973) found that in 76% of 105 pottery-producing societies, household pottery production was undertaken entirely or mainly by women, and potters "commonly circulate their wares within a 15 to 50 km radius of their homes, with a tendency toward the lower end of the range" (Stark 2003: 209). It was probably made by a woman in a household level workshop at or near the site (see also Schiffer 1989: 83). Such small-scale production is not easy, however: because of their technical requirements, cooking pots are often harder to produce than serving vessels. And, although this pot is not particularly attractive (it is the beast of this

piece) it is technologically sophisticated: the heavy temper of such pots would increase performance in cooking and sand temper in particular provides "better heating effectiveness than comparable untempered vessels" (Skibo and Schiffer 1995: 83). Like so-called "unskilled" laborers who toil in kitchens and restaurants around the world, a great deal of technological sophistication was needed for this pot to do its job.

This is also in some ways an immigrant pot because although it was made locally, it has foreign ancestry. This technological style was first identified in Preclassic samples from the coast of Belize by Elizabeth Graham (1994) and in the summer of 2008 I found that it was present at another coastal site near Belize City from the Preclassic to the Late Classic. What is interesting to me is that it appears suddenly and far inland at Lamanai and in the Belize Valley in the Early Postclassic period. Other ordinary cooking traditions enter the Belize Valley at the same time, including griddles for tortillas (Aimers 2004).

The Terminal Classic "collapse" period in the Maya lowlands is thought to have prompted significant population movements (Aimers 2004; 2007) and we can thus see the movement of this technological style as analogous to a migration stream. Cooking traditions are most useful in identifying population movements and immigrant identity archaeologically. Blinkhorn (1997: 124) reached similar conclusions about the ordinary pottery of early Anglo-Saxons in Britain and the tendency for immigrants to retain their traditions in domestic goods rather than public ones is well-documented historically (see e.g., Deagan 1983; Ewan 1991; Lightfoot *et al.* 1998; McEwan 1995). Cooking pots and everyday objects of all sorts are powerful manifestations of Bourdieu's (1977) habitus, "our internalized, embodied view of how the world works and how things should be done… constituted and manifest in daily practice" (Habicht-Mauche *et al.* 2006: 11).

Imported ceramics are also common at Lamanai and it appears that the people of Lamanai valued pots of varying origin, just as they welcomed people of varying ethnicities (see Aimers 2007; 2010). The clearest example of this at Lamanai is the "Loving Couple" who were buried in Structure N11-5 in the site core. Although none of the skeletal isotopic values of the couple are anomalous with individuals assumed to be local to Lamanai (White *et al.* 2009), their distinctive adornments and the woman's hair style suggest that contact with West Mexico must have been frequent enough for individuals from West Mexico to have settled and raised families at Lamanai, perhaps forming neighbourhoods in the way that is characteristic of Teotihuacan. The multiregional origins of the pottery at Lamanai is indicative of the cosmopolitan nature of the site itself which appears to have survived the collapse of so many of its neighbours in part due to its strategic location for interregional transport and trade (Graham 2004; Pendergast 1981; 1985).

## The Social Work of Pottery

What did these ceramics do? What were their jobs? The job of the cooking pot was for processing (e.g., soaking) and cooking (e.g., boiling) but like ordinary Maya people, the cooking pot was capable of a great number of activities, which might have changed during its life cycle. Deal and Hagstrum (1995: 122) estimate that about 20% of household pots are reused in contemporary Tzeltal Maya communities (see also Senior 1995: 95). If Maya pots are actors, they had, like Maya people, multiple roles. Cooking pots were used in the everyday *bricolage* of the Maya, creatively substituted from one role to another. 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. These pots, like ordinary people in most parts of the world, did something until the day they "died" (see also Braun 1983; Bronitsky 1986; Longacre *et al.* 2000; Schiffer and Skibo 1987; Shott 1996) and I argue below that they have roles beyond the grave as well.

Walker (1995: 76) suggests that the smashing of elaborate vessels in burials is similar to the sacrifice of people and Davenport's (1988) discussion of similar ideas includes the idea that the highly decorative nature of such objects signifies their role outside of ordinary economic exchange (see also Aimers 2010). Similarly, Gell (1998: 74) observed that "decorative patterns applied to artefacts attach people to things, and to the social projects these things entail." Decoration, for Gell, is a "technology of enchantment" (Gell 1992) and is functional "or else its presence would be inexplicable" (Gell 1998:

74): "Patterns, by their multiplicity and the difficulty we have in grasping their mathematical or geometrical basis (…) slow perception down, or even halt it, so that the decorated object is never fully possessed at all, but is always in the process of becoming possessed. This, I argue, sets up a biographical relation – an unfinished exchange – between the decorated index and the recipient" (*Ibid.*: 81).

Gell's idea here is clearly indebted to Marcel Mauss (1990 [1922]), and the idea of social exchange facilitated through objects makes me think of performative objects of all sorts, like musical instruments (see Aimers 2010). Lamanai's importance as a commercial and ritual center in the Postclassic period would have been manifest in ordinary everyday domestic and economic activities but also 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.

## Retirement, Death, and the Afterlife

Many ceramics die – they are still in the ground, and from a human perspective at least, they are dead. Yet, even excavated ceramics in storage have some agency. For example, they use up a great deal of Dr. Graham's time trying to find money for better storage and analysis at Lamanai. And some ceramics enter a new phase of their lives that might be compared to retirement. They no longer work in their original context but they are in active retirement in museums, much like the elderly docents who volunteer at museums and galleries throughout the world. Vessels from Lamanai in Belize's museums signify the Maya element of Belize's consciously crafted multicultural identity. The fact that visitors from Belize and beyond travel two hours upriver at great expense to see the site and the museum reinforces an important role for the Maya in the construction of the Belizean past and offers not-yet fully exploited opportunities for the contemporary Maya economically, politically, and socially.

Thus, for a great range of people around the world, including all of us who gathered in a room in Paris in December of 2008, the ceramics of Lamanai are still hard at work. The objects of Lamanai are manipulated by *bricoleurs* of all social statuses and backgrounds (e.g., tourists, local residents of varying ethnicity, artisans, politicians, makers of documentaries, art historians, archaeologists, etc.). Each of us manipulates, plays with, and changes the significance of the ceramics of Lamanai in ways that the makers of the objects certainly did not imagine. I think here about Certeau's comments on the creative and even subversive nature of consumption practices (Certeau 1984: xiii).

## Conclusions

A major reason for examining everyday life is that people of all sorts "repeatedly enact and reproduce their underlying structural principles and belief systems in the performance or ordering of their daily lives" (Lightfoot *et al.* 1998). But daily life doesn't just happen; it takes place embedded in a world of things. These things are so ubiquitous that, like the air we breathe, we sometimes overlook them.

The Maya Postclassic period was one in which power and prestige appear to have been more shared than in the Classic period. The system may have been more heterarchical than hierarchical, as Stark (1999) has argued for the Postclassic Mixtequilla region. The creation, acquisition, and display of objects was not just a by-product of this community and this system – the objects themselves helped bring the community into being and to assert its place in the Postclassic Maya world. Quite aside from their functions as cooking, serving, performance or mortuary vessels, their style matters: "style, as an outcome of a habitual manufacture process, can *determine* group identity, rather than the other way around" (Bentley and Maschner 2001: 51, citing Dietler and Herbich 1998). In Gell's words: "Artworks, (…) come in families, lineages, tribes, whole populations, just like people. They have relations with one another as well as with the people who create and circulate them as individual objects... Artworks (…) are, like people, enculturated beings" (Gell 1998: 153). Objects, like those in the Beast's castle, do social work and they do this work every day and potentially forever. Again, I cannot help but think of Lumière and the hard-working, intensely social objects of his multicultural culinary cabaret.

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