

The Life-Force of Mayan Ceramics

The Maya civilization is a complex society with a host of ritual and aesthetic practices placed at the forefront of all mortal and supernatural relationships. This paper seeks to unpack these complexities and provide a glimpse into the proximate relationship of ceramics and spirituality. Through the research I have compiled on two Maya vessels held at the Williams College Museum of Art (WCMA)— one bearing the iconography of an anthropomorphic coyote, and the other petals of a flower— I will place the artistic aesthetics of these pieces in conversation with ritual practice. Ceramics provided a gateway into the realm of the mortal and supernatural, and I hope that, by and large, one is able to understand the awe-inducing influence these ritual practices leveraged on Maya society through these ceramics of the Classic period.

The Classic-period Maya civilization was constructed around small to large peer polities predominantly in the Maya Lowlands in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Belize.¹ The Classic period spanned from 300-1000 AD and is partitioned into three distinct stages of subperiods: Early Classic, Late Classic, and Terminal Classic.² Polity consolidation began by the Early Classic period (250-500 AD) primarily due to the intensification of a centralized agricultural system and trading economy in the hands of a priestly elite. While new townships and cities were forming rapidly in the Early Classic period, vast amounts of rural and small

¹ Antonia Foias, "Maya Civilization of the Classic Period (300-1000AD), *The Seeds of Divinity* (ARTH 281), Spring, 2019, Williams College.

² Ibid.

settlements remained at the fringe of city structures. Due to the isolation of these populations there was little consolidation of Maya polities into one empire. Urbanization in cities like Tikal, Calakmul, Yaxchilan, and Piedras Negras created and intensified social stratification and lineage-based power structures predicated on ritual practices and beliefs. In turn, the success of Maya polities was contingent upon a ruler's charisma and religious devotion to Maya deities. In fact, religion and ritual practice dictated the lives of the Maya.³ Every aspect of their lives, from the assignment of one's animal co-essence according to the sacred Maya calendar, paying homage to their inhabited land, and quotidian civilian life were rooted in the veneration of Mayan supernaturals and deities.

The demise of the Classic Maya civilization in the last 100-150 years of the Classic period (the Terminal Classic period) was due to complex forces, including possible droughts, the continuous war among the bellicose polities, and an overreliance on the priestly elite.⁴

During the Classic period, polychrome pottery rose to the forefront of artistic expression to convey ideas about Maya deities and supernaturals, souls, and ritual offerings. The Maya believed that everything in the world was animate and ceramics were the craft that brought everything from corn, cacao, and flowers to animal co-essences to life.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

Iconography & Symbolism

Orange Polychrome Vessel with Glyphs (WCMA 21.1.14)



Figure 1. WCMA orange-red petaled polychrome vessel.

The Williams College Museum of Art acquired this Maya terracotta vessel with hieroglyphic rim text (Accession number: 21.1.14) [Figure 1] in 1914.⁵ The bowl was donated by Herbert Jones, a Williams College graduate, in the Campeche region of Southern Mexico about twenty-five to forty miles north of the Guatemala border, where he excavated it in a mound which is believed to have been a forest cleared for corn cultivation.⁶ It dates to the Late Classic period and more specifically between 550-700 AD based on its shape, slip qualities and decoration.⁷ This vessel is inscribed with a hieroglyphic text which provides us with important information about the vessel's patron and commissioner, and the purpose and function of this vessel.

The lower two-thirds of the exterior of the bowl are painted red and modeled into a sequence of 10 raised bands with rounded ends at the top and with a thin vertical indentation

⁵ Zender, Marc, "Comments on the Inscription of the Williams College Vessel (K8713)", 1, Figure 1.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

decorating the middle of each band. The upper register of the vessel is painted orange and contains a series of 16 glyphs outlined in a black slip and filled with the same burnt red-orange hue of the basal portion of the vessel.

Hieroglyphics in Maya ceramics were employed as more than a means of communication. Text became an integral part of the ceramic composition and were “placed specifically to help define the internal tensions, balances and divisions within the pictorial field.”⁸ Compositionally, glyphs are usually isolated in the upper band of the vessel called the “upper register”. Artists utilized the rest of the pictorial plane for depictions of rulers, deities, or whomever the ceramic piece was commissioned for. One standard series of glyphs found on pottery is called the Primary Standard Sequence (PSS). Mark Zender deciphered the Primary Standard Sequence on this vessel, consisting of 16 glyphs around the upper register around the vessel’s rim.

Zender’s analysis and interpretation of the 16 glyphs rendered on this polychrome vessel,



Some of the individuals who took part in the discussion and made contributions are; Luis Lopez, Donald Hales, Barbara MacCleod, Hutch Kinsman, Bob Wald, and David Mora Marin. The drawing of the glyphs was done by Ivar Kronick.

Figure 2. Zender Glyphs for WCMA orange-red petaled polychrome vessel.

where each glyph is assigned a letter, segments the entire sequence into two smaller sequences where he focuses on Glyphs B-E, and Glyphs F-P [Figure 2]. Combined, glyphs B-E, can be translated as “yu-k’i-bi / ti-a-ch’a / ka / ka-wa,”⁹ which roughly translates to “his drinking-cup for new/fresh cocoa”.¹⁰ This interpretation was

⁸ Reents-Budet et al., *Painting the Maya Universe: Royal Ceramics of the Classic Period* (London: Duke University Press, 1994), 12.

⁹ Zender, 2

¹⁰ Zender, 2

derived namely from two fish glyphs that mean “ka”— the compound of two fish heads instead of one makes this sequence unique. The next section, Glyphs F-P, contains historical information, naming two different individuals. Glyphs F-L pertain to the names of the first individual who was the vessel commissioner, or, perhaps the owner. His name reads *Kohkan-K’ab* or “Spine Hand”. In this context, “Spine Hand” likely refers to the tool used in the ritual practice of bloodletting— perhaps signifying the piety of this particular individual to Maya deities and supernaturals. Another interpretation is that the commissioner or owner of the vessel was an elite priest dedicated to the acts of bloodletting during ritual practice.

Glyphs J-L in the latter half of the owner or patron’s name are his titles of “one-k’atun ch’ahoom”.¹¹ Additionally, we know that “ch’ahoom” translates to incense scatterer which could also signal to his status as an elite individual.¹² The identity of the second individual in glyphs O-P is perhaps the father of the commissioner or owner of the vessel, called only *Two-K’atun* “Lord of La Florida”.¹³ This glyph identifies this individual’s home site as La Florida and thus tells us that this vessel was quite likely made in La Florida for a royal noble, even though it was excavated in the Campeche region of Mexico.¹⁴

The Maya identified bowls and vases, such as the two in this paper, as the same form and shape as cylindrical vases which are called *uch’ab/uk’ib*, or “drinking vessel”.¹⁵ This common glyph for most deep bowls and cylindrical vases strongly suggests that the petaled red polychrome vessel was used for drinking liquids, and more specifically chocolate as spelled out in Glyphs D-E.

The Maya relished cacao as a ritual ingredient used to make special drinks by

¹¹ Ibid, 2.

¹² Antonia Foias, *The Seeds of Divinity (ARTH 281)*, Spring, 2019, Williams College.

¹³ Zender, 3.

¹⁴ Ibid, 3.

¹⁵ Ibid, 1.

blending the pulp of cacao with corn and other spices. Our inference that this bowl was used for ritual feasting is confirmed by the glyphs featured on the upper register of this vessel.



A rare intricacy of this vessel is a band of possible glyphs or other geometric motifs on its interior [Figure 3]. While these glyphs are not intelligible due to the wear and erosion of the interior of the bowl, it is very rare to find glyphs on the interior of a vessel. This series of glyphs is broken up into two registers.

Figure 3. Interior band of glyphs or geometric motifs on WCMA orange-red polychrome vessel.

The upper band is partitioned into a series of approximately five rectangles each containing four glyphs. Inside the boxes, the artist painted these glyphs in thin bands of black slip paint. In the lower band there is a repetition of the same glyph or symbol around the whole circumference which most clearly resembles a human eye. Although we cannot be certain about the meaning of these glyphs, their rarity suggests the importance of the figure the vessel was commissioned for.

The 10 three-dimensional modeled bands on this polychromic vessel most notably resemble the petals of a flower. Symbolically, flowers represent the *'ik* which is the wind or breath soul of an animate being.¹⁶ To David Freidel and his colleagues, a white flower is synonymous to the breath soul and illustrates the relationship between the white flower's metaphysical scent represented as the *'ik* and its connection to death. Freidel et al. contest that, "the keeper of the white-flower souls take them to dwell with First Mother in the Otherworld."¹⁷ Perhaps the modeling of flower petals on this vase invokes the notion that if a flower

¹⁶ Freidel, David, Linda Schele, and Joy Parker, "Chapter Four: Maya Souls." In *Maya Cosmos: Three Thousand Years on the Shaman's Path* (New York City: Quill: William Morro, 1993), 183.

¹⁷ Ibid, 184.

accompanies its patron to their burial site, then the patron's spirit (*'ik*) is transported to the First Mother, the original creator of life, in the Otherworld.¹⁸ *'Ik* is a soul similar to the *ch'ulel* which is the depersonalized blood life-force which originates in the human body on the tip of one's tongue where the breath is expelled.¹⁹ Because the Maya understood everything in the world as being animate, we can infer that the flower and its petals, perhaps resembling a cacao flower, imbue the vessel with soul, thereby bringing the vessel to life serving as a guarantee to its patron for a paradisiacal afterlife. Floral devices also act to purify the burial site of the noble with its scent as a notion towards an idyllic afterlife.

One similar bowl to this particular polychrome vessel is a bowl from Uaxactún, Guatemala from approximately 672-830 AD [Figure 4].²⁰ The physical qualities of this bowl resemble the WCMA vessel with a distinctive red petal-like pattern on the basal portion of the bowl even though the petals on this drinking bowl are not molded but painted in a deep red slip paint.

Additionally, the drinking bowl has two bands of glyphs in the upper register. The upper band has cream glyphs outlined in red slip on a dark black background. The lower glyph series features red glyphs outlined in a black slip paint on an orange background.

The sequence of glyphs denote the purpose of this bowl as a drinking vessel which suggests that it was also filled with cacao infused drinks and liquid foods. We can also infer that the bowl was extensively used due to the the marks of wear on the base, upper rim,

¹⁸ Ibid, 184.

¹⁹ Ibid, 184.

²⁰ Reents-Budet et al., *Painting the Maya Universe: Royal Ceramics of the Classic Period* (Londen: Duke University Press, 1994), 326, Figure 2.

and interior of the bowl. Additional wear is seen with the pock marks, scrapes, and black marks on the interior of the vessel.

Other bowls bearing very similar physical traits are three vessels from the Petexbatun Region of Petén, Guatemala.

Figure 5 is from the Late Classic Petexbatun Period 1 (Catalog No.: 609003)²¹ [Figure 5]. This vessel is not in excellent physical

condition and is extremely fragile but was nonetheless buried whole in the burial site of its

patron. Another bowl, (Catalog No.: 104004)²² [Figure 6] is a Palmar orange polychrome vessel from the Late Classic Nacimiento phase and was also placed whole in a burial with only two cracks on its facade.

The final vessel, (Catalog No.: 104009)²³ [Figure 7],

likewise is a Palmar or Zacatal polychrome bowl

from the Late Classic Nacimiento Phase. This

bowl was buried whole and has an identical counterpart from the

same burial suggesting that both vessels were painted at the same time and perhaps for the same

patron. All three bowls are rendered using the same colour scheme as the WCMA burnt red-

orange petaled polychrome vessel with a deep red hue used for the lower basal register of all

three bowls. There is a similar petaling pattern on all three Petexbatun bowls, although it is clear

that this flower symbolism is painted unto the bowls. Furthermore, all of these vessels have

significant erosion on their interiors. These similar physical qualities and the fact that they were

all excavated in burials strongly supports our analysis that the petaled polychrome vessel



Figure 5. Polychrome vessel from Petén Guatemala (Catalog No.: 609003).



Figure 6. Palmar orange polychrome vessel (Catalog No.: 104004).



Figure 7. Palmar or Zacatal polychrome vessel (Catalog No.: 104009).

²¹ Foias, Antonia E., and Ronald L. Bishop. "Ceramics, Production, and Exchange in the Petexbatun Region." 2013: 449, Figure 3.

²² Ibid, 499, Figure 4.

²³ Ibid, 500, Figure 5.

first functioned pragmatically as a drinking vase because of the cacao glyphs and usage marks, but was later placed in the burial of its patron.

Vase with Anthropomorphic Coyote (WCMA 21.1.11)



Figure 8. WCMA vase with seated anthropomorphic coyote (Accession number: 21.1.11).

The Williams College Museum of Art houses a second Late Classic ceramic *Maya Vase with Seated Anthropomorphic Monkey* (Accession number: 21.1.11)²⁴ [Figure 8] created between 700-750 AD. Very little is known about this vessel and its origins or usage, but we do know it was originally excavated in the Southern Campeche Lowland Maya civilization of Mexico by the same individuals who excavated the first WCMA polychrome pot.

The initial analysis provided by the Williams College Museum of Art identifies the main figure of this vessel as a seated anthropomorphic monkey which suggests a strong correlation to the Maya myth of the Hero Twins told through the lore of *Popol Vuh*. This assessment could be plausible because the half-brothers of the Hero Twins, *Hun Batz* and *Hun Chuen*, or ‘One Monkey’ and ‘One Artisan’ are some of the two most common iconographies rendered on Maya

²⁴ “Vase with Seated Anthropomorphic Monkey”, Williams College Museum of Art, Figure 8.

pottery.²⁵ Maya gods transformed the half-brother figures into monkeys as a punishment for their “arrogance and abuse of the Hero Twins”.²⁶ In ceramics portrayals of the Hero Twins, humans impersonating monkeys were marked by their exaggerated anthropomorphic features delineated through humanlike body posture.²⁷ Additionally, the body of an anthropomorphic monkey was depicted to mimic the characteristics of a spider monkey with a white chest and dark brown fur.²⁸ Throughout Maya lore, the monkey is a sacred character in rituals and the Carnival. They behaviourally embody the half-brothers of the Hero Twins through singing, dancing, and most importantly through crude jokes and improper mannerisms.²⁹ The supposition that the WCMA vase features an anthropomorphic monkey could be supported by the fact that at one point in time, there might have been two symmetrical supernatural figures on either side of the vessel. However, we cannot tell that today because the vase is missing a sizeable piece of the second scene.

Upon further inspection of the facial and physical features of the figure depicted on the WCMA vessel, I am compelled to believe that the figure is not indeed an anthropomorphic monkey but an anthropomorphic coyote. I reached this inference for a variety of reasons. Firstly, the anthropomorphic figure does not have a distinctly monkey-like face which is usually rendered as vertical and flat with no protruding snout. Rather, the WCMA vase figure has an elongated snout with slitted eyes. Monkeys, conversely, have sunken and round marble like eyes and a flat nose. Furthermore, the figure does not have the characteristic white chest of a monkey as suggested in the traditional pictorial renderings of supernatural monkeys. In addition, the lone

²⁵Reents-Budet et al., *Painting the Maya Universe: Royal Ceramics of the Classic Period* (London: Duke University Press, 1994), 45-46.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

figure in the composition is not partaking in acts of jest, song or dance, but rather sits cross-legged with his arms outstretched.

The anthropomorphic coyote's hand gestures suggest his status as a supernatural figure in a variety of ways. In his left hand, the figure is holding an object, perhaps a censor or another sacred object, with red volutes of a liquid, vapor, or gaseous emission emerging out of it. Meanwhile, his right hand is outstretched with his mouth open indicating that he's talking as if to narrate the experience transpiring in his left hand. From these gestures we can infer that the supernatural figure is giving an offering or performing a ritual.

According to the Maya, every entity or earthly thing has animacy made manifest through one or multiple souls. The soul of most importance in our analysis of the seated anthropomorphic coyote is the soul called the *chanul* or the *way* or *wayob* (plural). Fundamentally, the *chanul* is the animal co-essence of a mortal and is made manifest through the physical embodiment of an individual's animal or supernatural spirit by wearing masks and ritual paraphernalia of that animal. The *way* is the name given to the *chanul* by the Classic Maya, while *chanul* is the word used by the Tzotzil Maya of modern Chiapas.³⁰ During sleep and ritual, the individual can transform into their animal soul, or co-essence. For humans, an individual's *chanul/way* is assigned at birth according to the *Tzolkin* "sacred calendar" of 260 days which is based on 13 numbers combined with 20 named days in a 52 year cycle.³¹

The coyote figure rendered on this vessel, then, denotes the animal co-essence of a Maya elite. We can deduce this conclusion because there were originally two figures on either side of the composition. Two representations of this anthropomorphic figure may represent the coupling

³⁰ Gossen, Gary H. "Animal Souls, Co-essences, and Human Destiny in Mesoamerica." In *Monsters, Tricksters, and Sacred Cows: Animal Tales and American Identities*, University Press of Virginia, 1996, pp. 97.

³¹ Antonia Foias, *The Seeds of Divinity (ARTH 281)*, Spring, 2019, Williams College.

of the mortal individual and their animal co-essence. According to the Tzotzil Maya of the highlands of Chiapas, animal *chanuls* are partitioned into three tiers based on their power. The third level is the most powerful and is reserved exclusively for the jaguar which is only assigned to people with great wealth, power, and stature.³² If the individual is not an extremely high elite, their *chanul* or *way* consists of less powerful animals ranked in the second less prestigious tier that include the ocelot, coyote, fox, and weasel.³³ The ocelot, coyote, fox, and weasel were usually allocated to midrange elites or nobles, and/or upper echelon commoners. at least according to modern Tzotzil of the modern Chiapas.³⁴ For Maya individuals who are neither elite, nor in the upper echelon of commoners, their *chanul* and *way* animal assignments are the rabbit, skunk, raccoon, opossum, and squirrel.³⁵ This hierarchy of animal co-essences suggests that the individuals dressed as a coyote on the WCMA vessel was a lower-level elite or a wealthy commoner.

Aside from the identity of the iconographic coyote, we must also analyze the various paraphernalia the coyote *chanul* is adorned with in the pictorial plane of the WCMA vase. The figure wears an elongated necklace with a sumptuous jewel attached at the lower end. This statement piece of jewelry directly correlates to the figure's socioeconomic status, so while the associations of the coyote co-essence are in the middle tier, this coyote is of elevated status. The figure's awesome power is also made manifest through the adornment of bangles on both wrists. On the left wrist, there is an object attached to his bangle which could perhaps be a white jewel outlined in black slip paint. Freidel and colleagues might interpret the jewel at the end of the

³² ³⁴Gossen, Gary H. "Animal Souls, Co-essences, and Human Destiny in Mesoamerica." In *Monsters, Tricksters, and Sacred Cows: Animal Tales and American Identities*, 97.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴Gossen, Gary H. "Animal Souls, Co-essences, and Human Destiny in Mesoamerica." In *Monsters, Tricksters, and Sacred Cows: Animal Tales and American Identities*, 97.

³⁵ Ibid.

necklace worn by the coyote *way* to be the “kimi”, or the death signs adorning deities and spirits as a pectoral device or necklace which denotes the spiritual transformation into the individual’s *way* by means of dressing as a deity or *way*, dancing, and sacrificing or blood-letting.³⁶ The kimi is frequently depicted as pectoral device made from bundled cloth which could explain why the jewel appears to be large in the WCMA vessel.

Other objects symbolizing the coyote figure’s wealth and superior status is his headdress. This adornment begins with a headband of an ovular white gem of an unknown type. Emerging from this headband is a monumental balloonlike structure that is perhaps comprised of the same cloth used in the figure’s loincloth due to the speckled similarities between the headdress and the loincloth. Attached to the front of the balloonlike structure is a white element that may resemble a flower outlined in black slip. The emphasis on ritual head garb is of utmost importance to the Maya. According to the Tzotzil Maya of the Chiapas highlands as described by Gossen in his research, the head is where the *Ora* soul is stored and symbolizes the fate and destiny of a mortal. The *Ora* soul is described as a candle lit in the third level of the heavens to represent the individual’s fetal conception. In addition, the concentration of *ora* in the head is marked by an emblem or name placed in the headdress to help us decode the identity of the supernatural in the composition although a name of the anthropomorphic coyote is indecipherable to us. Usually, however, higher concentrations of *ora* are reserved for elites; thus our inference that the figure and their co-essence, or the individual for whom the vessel was commissioned for was of elite status because of its large headdress.

Another object emerges from the white flower on the headdress of the coyote supernatural. The oblong object extends horizontally from the white flower a considerable

³⁶Freidel, David, L. Schele, and J. Parker, *Maya Cosmos: Three Thousand Years on the Shaman’s Path*, 217.

distance and hovers over whatever object is held in the coyote's left hand. This unknown entity is outlined in black slip paint and is mostly filled with a red slip while the central circle is left white. While we cannot confirm what the *thing* emerging out of the white flower is, it most likely resembles a metaphysical object such as the scent of a flower because the scent of a flower is usually portrayed as a volute emerging out of the flower. The pertinence of flowers and volutes of metaphysical or metasensory objects in Maya religion were wholly intertwined with their perceptions of *'ik*, the breath soul. The metaphysical notion of the senses "invested vitality and meaning in the spaces it traversed and occupied,"³⁷ and furthermore conceived one's breath as the animacy of the Earth's wind denoted through "*-iik*'" (wind).³⁸ Elites are typically associated with the interconnection between the emittance of breath, particularly precious breath, because of a flower's divine smell and because elites were exclusively privy to valuable traits or objects in Maya civilization. Here we see how the ascription of physiological traits permeate artistic practice in the Maya civilization.

Going back to the WCMA vase with an anthropomorphic coyote, we see a structure harnessed to his back and torso resembling a backrack. In the Maya civilization, back-racks were used to carry items of importance— notably sacred bundles or other compact supernatural entities. It appears that a sack, or basket, is attached to the back-rack using ropes. The longest rope, rendered in a red slip paint, is attached from the back-rack to the figure's torso vis-a-vis his armpits. The lower connection of the back-rack to the figure is likely not a rope, but rather part of the figure's loincloth because it's rendered in a white slip while the other piece of rope is featured in a saturated red-black hue. The lower element of the back-rack is a basket structure

³⁷Houston, Stephen, D. Stuart, K. Taube, *Memory of Bones: Body, Being, and Experience among Classic Maya*, 138.

³⁸Ibid, 142.

holding a sack coming out of the basket carrying a sacred bundle or a supernatural. The other object at the top of the back-rack closest to the figure's head is outlined in black but has an unknown purpose or identity.

On the upper register of the vessel with the anthropomorphic coyote are two bands of glyphs. The glyphs rendered on this vessel, unlike those on the petaled polychromic vessel, are pseudo-glyphs, meaning that they cannot be translated. We can discern this because of their visual pattern. Rather than distinctive outlining and careful filling in, the lower band of glyphs on the upper register are blocky and have no distinguishable characteristics within each. The top band is a repeated series of small vertical line undulations.

A similar Maya vessel is this *Acasaguastlán Polychrome Vase* (Catalog No.: MSO255)³⁹ [Figure 9a, b] from the Acasaguastlán Region in the Middle Motagua River Valley located in Guatemala. The vessel dates to approximately 672-830 AD or the Late Classic epoch of the Maya civilization. The iconography on this vessel is remarkably similar to that of the anthropomorphic coyote.

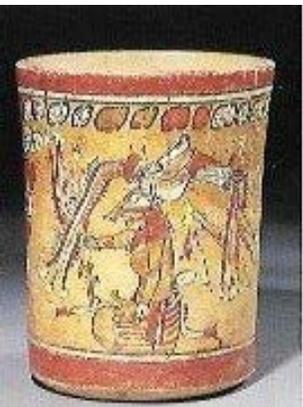


Figure 9a. Acasaguastlán polychrome vase (Catalog No.: MSO255) front profile

Although the animal co-essence in this Acasaguastlán vessel

features an anthropomorphic deer figure, he is also rendered in a seated profile position with an elaborate

headdress. Similarly to the WCMA vessel, there

are two figures presented on the exterior of the vessel on each side of the vase. The headdress on the deer figure is also embellished with a flower— a white water lily with red extensions which

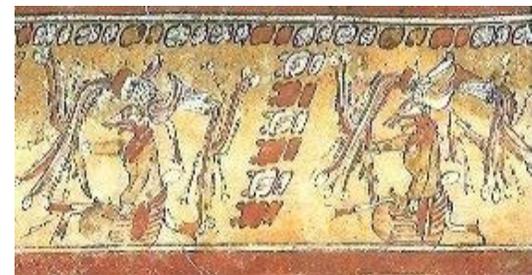


Figure 9b. Acasaguastlán polychrome vase (Catalog No.: MSO255) full scene.

³⁹ Ibid.

are possibly volutes of a metasensory substance like scent, cascading down in front of the figure. In addition, the elements protruding out of the back of the headdress of the deer *way* are similar to those appearing out of the headdress of the WCMA anthropomorphic coyote. Another similarity is that the figures in this vessel are seated in profile and also extend their right hands in a gesture towards the perhaps ritual objects cascading in front of the deer *way* figure. Reents-Budet et al. has identified that the *Acasaguastlán Polychrome Vase* (Catalog No.: MSO255)⁴⁰ [Figure 9a, b] is also defined by a pseudo-glyph repeat series around the upper register of the vase that vertically partition the scenes of the anthropomorphic deer. Although these glyphs do not bear any real meaning, they are still placed on the upper register of the vessel to closely resemble real writing. For this reason, pseudo-glyphs merely function for aesthetic purposes.

Another similar vessel is the *Dos Pilas Vase with Gods* (Catalogue No.: 620595) [Figure 10].⁴¹ The anthropomorphic figure in this particular depiction is also painted in a seated profile position. In this composition, the headdress is likewise a prominent component with an axe protruding from the mirror in the god's forehead, which is the emblem of God K. Out of the emblem of God K we can see an additional volute—perhaps a liquid, vapor, gaseous emission—that cascade up and down in front of the seated god. God K reaches out with his left hand towards an object that may be a white plate. These volutes are in a red slip paint and could portray *ch'u'lel*, again, the

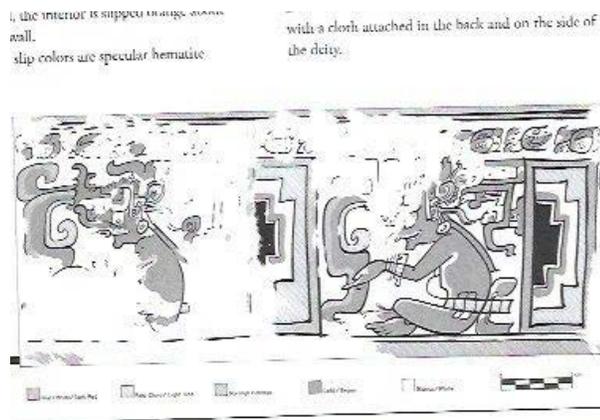


Figure 10. Dos Pilas vase with Gods (Catalogue No.: 620595).

⁴⁰ Reents-Budet et al., *Painting the Maya Universe: Royal Ceramics of the Classic Period*, 327, Figure 7.

⁴¹ Foias, Antonia E., and Ronald L. Bishop. "Ceramics, Production, and Exchange in the Petexbatun Region." 2013: 459, Figure 8.

depersonalized blood life-force. In a greater sense, the red volute expresses the excretion of supernatural significance. These volutes are also very similar to the ones in front of the seated coyote figure on the WCMA vase.

A third vessel similar to the anthropomorphic coyote is a vase with a drummer animal



Figure 11. Drummer animal figure vessel (Catalog No.: MS0245).

figure from the Chamá Region in the Guatemalan Highlands dating to the Late

Classic Period 600-900 AD (Catalog No.: MS0245)⁴² [Figure 11]. The

instrumentalist is seen playing a tall drum covered in jaguar skin. Although this

vase differs from the anthropomorphic coyote because the drummer is standing

and playing a musical instrument, the similar physical qualities to pay attention to

in this vase are the facial features. The head and face of this *way* are not like a

human but of an anthropomorphic supernatural resembling an armadillo.

Moreover, the figure wears a shell on his back that looks like that of an

armadillo. Although all of these vases were first used for pragmatic purposes such as in ritual

feasts, we can also infer that the recurrence of supernatural anthropomorphic figures in this vase

affirm its objecthood as a burial item to preserve and perpetuate a mortal's relationship with their

animal co-essence into the afterlife.

⁴² Reents-Budet et al., *Painting the Maya Universe: Royal Ceramics of the Classic Period*, 340, Figure 9.

Ritual and Function

Because of Maya ideas that the whole world was animate, vessels embody the life-force, soul, and vitality of the Maya deities, supernaturals, and animal co-essences depicted on them. Polychrome vessels, such as the two featured in this paper, were commissioned to pay homage to shamanist kings and elites whose power was made evident because they could embody gods and supernatural spirits. In practice, these vessels personify or embody the very beings depicted on them, be they flowers or *way/wayob*.

While we have been led to infer that the WCMA petaled vessel was placed in the burial of a prestigious commoner or noble, this was likely not its sole purpose as an object. There is a level of pragmatism to this vessel's function as well. The vessel bears signs of usage due to the dark black marks at the base of the interior, due to clay erosion, and the appearances of scratches on the interior. The scratches could, as noted earlier, indicate the presence of a food or drink substance in the bowl. Relics of food and drink usage, particularly that of cacao, on the bowl strengthens the assumption that the iconography featured on this vessel embodies the life-forces of gods, supernaturals, and animals during rituals. More specifically, the vessels and the drinks within them were used in rituals, possibly, in which the owners became transformed into their *way* or *chanul*. To drink cacao from this bowl signified eating the body of a god, and by proxy, imbue the same life-force into the body of the vessel. In addition, this food vessel was placed in the burial of an individual to provide them sustenance in the afterlife.

Pottery was not exclusively used for ritual services but also employed as social currency in exchanging and gifting regal ritual objects to one's allies. As mentioned earlier, this WCMA petaled vessel was commissioned for an elite in La Florida but was excavated in Campeche,

Mexico. One possible interpretation for this change in the vessel's final locus is that it was gifted away to another lord or elite in Campeche in an attempt to concretize an alliance between polities.

Another important function of Maya pottery was its role as funerary ritual gifts. Both vessels in this paper were excavated from burial sites in the Campeche region of Mexico. This type of pottery excavation insinuates that after these vessels had been used in quotidian life that they were placed in the burial sites of their patrons as postmortem gifts. The Maya firmly believe that an individual's soul and their animal spirit traveled to the "Otherworld".⁴³ To the Maya, vessels such as the two featured in this paper are envisaged as the portals to transport human spirits to the supernatural realm of the "Otherworld".

Medium, Construction, and Materials

Maya ceramicists, the artists who made these two vessels, practiced coiling as their primary mode of ceramic construction. During the Classic Period, the clay used for coiling pots was made from an amalgamation of local clays and tempering materials such as calcite, quartz, or volcanic ash.⁴⁴ Coiling is a painstaking process requiring precision to create a smooth and leveled surface. Potters did not have access to a pottery wheel, but instead utilized a wooden platform called a *k'abal* which allowed the potter to rotate the vessel resting atop the platform to perfect the smoothing process.⁴⁵ The potter had to carefully score and slip the coils so they

⁴³ Freidel, "Chapter Four: Maya Souls", 217.

⁴⁴ Reents-Budet et al., *Painting the Maya Universe: Royal Ceramics of the Classic Period*, 210.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

adhered together to prevent any residual air bubbles. If the potter was not careful and sloppily scored and slipped the coils, there was a high possibility that the vessel will explode in the kiln.

Prior to its firing in the kiln, the vessel needed to be air-dried to a point of being ‘leather-hard’. Once the vessel reached this state, the potter could paint the exterior of the pot with water-based slips. The potter again would use the *k’abal* platform to ensure an even slipping process. The combination of a low fire and the consistency of the paint slips used by Maya potters leads us to believe that the type of paint was *terra sigillata*— a slip based paint with added pigments.⁴⁶ This type of slip paint is created through the separation of tiny clay particles after the ceramicist adds copious amounts of water to a settling basin. The process by which the separation of clay particles occurs is called “deflocculation”.⁴⁷ During the firing session, many tiny clay particles disperse over the surface of the vessel due to the presence of potassium minerals. The result of this mineral dispersion in the slip create a durable and glossy surface and finish to the vessel.⁴⁸

Terra sigillata slip paints are renowned for their distinctively rich and vivid pigmentation. During the Late Classic period, reds, oranges, and taupes were the most predominant colors used on ceramic pieces. Hues could be enhanced by adding a variety of iron oxides and mixed at different concentrations to create a range of tints.⁴⁹ Most darker hues, like the burnt orange used on the petals of the vessel, the deep earthen orange/brown and red used for the anthropomorphic coyote vessel, and the black and brownish tone used for both vessel’s glyphs were enriched by painting over the base slip paint which was usually a white, cream, or taupe hue.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 211.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 212.

The petals on the orange polychromic vessel were 3-dimensionally modeled. This vessel is unique to many other Mayan vessels because petals were not merely painted on. Because the petals of this WCMA vessel are molded onto the vessel itself, the artist was engaging with space and imbuing more animacy into the vessel. The dimensionality of this vessel was either created by addition or subtraction of the clay. It is plausible that the artist sculpted additional pieces of clay which he added to the exterior of the vessel by scoring and slipping the surface to provide an adhesive glue for the new pieces. Conversely, the artist could have used a subtractive method with a stylus fashioned with a sharp edge or loop to shave off a desired amount of clay to achieve the effect of petals on the basal portion of the bowl.

Compositionally, the artists of both the vessels bisected the pictorial surface into two horizontal sections. The upper register of the vessel was reserved for the painting of hieroglyphic texts or pseudo-glyphs. Using the *k'abal*, the artist rotated the vessel to paint a continuous visual scene on the lower register of the vessel.⁵⁰ To the ceramicist, “this implies a personalized and intimate association with the object. The wraparound scenes represent both religious and historical events, and many provide extensive pictorial and hieroglyphic details concerning the depicted event.”⁵¹ What the wraparound scene indicates to us on the second WCMA vase, then, is that the chronicling of a mortal’s animal co-essence was an important event to the artist.

⁵⁰Ibid, 211.

⁵¹Ibid, 7.

Conclusions

The goal of this paper is to highlight how ceramics in the Maya civilization were an important form of expression in the social, spiritual, and economic spheres during the Classic period. Through the painting, ceramics were imbued by artists with the quintessence of supernaturals and animal co-essences. Furthermore, polychrome ceramics were used as a mode of social currency as they were frequently bestowed upon political allies as visible markers of these links. Finally, these pots were placed in the burials of their patrons to provide sustenance and companionship into a coveted afterlife.

Iconography and glyphic symbolism indicates much about the practical or ritual function of these vessel. The petaled orange polychrome vessel was a functional eating and drinking bowl as much as it served a funerary purpose in the tomb of a noble. Its naturalistic resemblance to the Maya landscape with its floral petaling on the basal register of the bowl strongly correlates to cacao and its objectivity as a bowl for drink and soft food consumption. The inscribing of the Primary Standard Sequence (PSS) on the upper register of the bowl mark it as a container for cacao, and “spine hand” as the second name of its owner may indicate he was a possible sacrificer.

The second WCMA vessel with the iconography of an anthropomorphic coyote, although it was also used for drinking, has a slightly different ritual function. After its practical use as a drinking vessel, this vessel likely served to bind the dead individual or his/her *way*, *chanul*, or *ch’ulel* into the afterlife. Depictions of metasensory forms such as the scent of a flower exuding from volutes attached to the headdress on the coyote’s head convey the importance of the noble’s animal co-essence.

Our fascination with ceramics from ancient civilizations like those of the ancient Maya abounds. The continued analysis of these ceramic masterpieces never ceases to reveal new interpretations and translations. The work to uncover Maya ritual practices and its intertwinement with gods and supernaturals scratches the surface of the awe-inducing complexities of this civilization. Only with a continued fervor to understand and regenerate the meaning of Maya ceramics can we reveal these complexities on a deeper level.

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