OF SHELLS, SODA STRAWS, CAVES, AND KINGS: CRAFTING, BODY PRACTICES, AND IDENTITY MAKING AMONG THE ANCIENT MAYA OF PACBITUN, BELIZE

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Introduction

Archaeological research at the ancient Maya site of Pacbitun on the outskirts of San Antonio village has been undertaken periodically over the last 30 years (Figure 1). The Pacbitun Regional Archaeological Project (PRAP) has been investigating the site and its surrounding landscape for the past five years. Overall, the research spanning this time has shown that Pacbitun was initially inhabited around 900 BC in the Middle Preclassic period and abandoned around AD 900 in the Postclassic period, a span of nearly 2000 years (Healy et al. 2007). Excavations at the site have shown that body ornament production was a major focus over that time. Our evidence indicates that some of these objects were traded away from the area (Hohmann 2002; Wagner 2009) while others were retained for personal use as social identity markers, particularly during later times. Marine and freshwater shells represent the most common permanent media from which these ornaments were produced, followed by greenstone, or jade. Archaeological investigations at Actun Lak cave in the site’s periphery have uncovered ornaments made from other media, particularly limestone and soda straw cave formations that were likely part of a royal costume. This paper discusses some of the finds from the thirty years of excavations in and around Pacbitun, and what these objects tell us about shifting identity practices among the people who inhabited and used the landscape in the past.

Theoretical Overview

Our discussion is founded on the idea that craft production plays a significant role in identity formation and maintenance (c.f. Costin 1998), and on Turner’s (1980:114) concept of the “social skin,” which is an individual’s costume, decoration, and body modifications that symbolically communicates their social status in a particular setting. This type of signification via body practice was prevalent throughout Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica and continues to exist in many of the descendant communities today. For example, some Formative period age groups in Mexico distinguished themselves using particular hair treatments that included shaving, parting, and the wearing of headdresses (Joyce 1998:156). For the Classic period Maya, identity was understood to be located in an individual’s head, and rulers were frequently depicted in art wearing headdresses that bore their names (Houston et al. 2006:68), a practice that may have roots dating back to Olmec times (Kelley 1982). Today, the Maya communities that surround Lake Atitlan, Guatemala distinguish themselves from their neighbors by their clothing designs (Hendrickson 1995).

Hieroglyphic and iconographic evidence from the Classic period Maya Lowlands also offer examples of body decoration signifying...
social status. For example, one of the hieroglyphs used for accession roughly translates as “to tie the headband,” suggesting that wearing a particular headpiece demonstrated whom the king was. Meskell and Joyce (2003:23) note that Maya rulers depicted dancing on monuments are costumed so heavily with the regalia of their statuses that their physical bodies become subordinate to the ornamentation. In other words, the costume objects were just as significant, if not more so, than the regent’s physical body to the identity of that social station.

Archaeological Investigations
Middle Preclassic Period (900-300 BC) at Pacbitun

The best evidence for Middle Preclassic shell bead production at Pacbitun comes from the excavation of several building platforms below Plaza B, such as Sub-Structure B-2, which produced a total of 8,722 freshwater and marine specimens. That total includes 5,657 artifacts showing evidence of intentional modification and 3,065 pieces of fragmented marine shell detritus (Powis 2010). A total of 378 chert microdrills and macroblade spalls were also recovered alongside the shell deposits (Figure 2). These data clearly demonstrate that the early Maya at the site were focused on shell bead craft production. All of these remains were found in direct association with one another. They were regularly embedded into structures’ floors and in the alleyways between platforms. We know that the Maya during this time wore these objects in at least one case because we excavated a feature where 52 shell beads were found as if strung together like a necklace. Nonetheless, Pacbitun was not the only site in central Belize to produce shell beads at this early time. Other sites like Barton Ramie (Willey et al. 1965), Blackman Eddy (Cochran 2009), Cahal
Pech (Awe 1992), Caracol (Cobos 1994), Chan (Keller 2008), Dos Chombitos (Robin 2000), and Zubin (c.f. Ferguson 1995) also produced them. In all of these cases, the numbers of beads produced far outweighed local demand, and many were destined beyond the local market. But, the question remains as to where? We argue that they were mostly traded further inland to the Peten, to large sites like Tikal where they have been found in abundance (Moholy-Nagy and Coe 2008), and because very few to none have been found to the north or south of central Belize at this early time. Overall, the early artifact assemblages from throughout central Belize suggests a more regional identity based on shell bead production than is seen later on.

Archaeologists have long recognized the relationship between production and identity because the act of crafting materializes social relationships, mores, customs, etc. We follow Costin (1998) who argues that the act of crafting creates and reinforces specific social roles, or identities. In the case of Pacbitun and the other sites in central Belize mentioned above, the identity that was created was based on shell bead production. Therefore, we tentatively suggest that one of central Belize’s prominent identities during the Middle Preclassic period was as a shell bead-manufacturing region for the Southern Maya Lowlands.

Classic Period (AD 250-900) at Pacbitun

Craft specialization continued to play a prominent role in identity production at Pacbitun during the Classic period though it became more diverse as indicated by a slate workshop in the site’s epicenter (Healy et al. 1995) and a ground stone production area recently excavated by PRAP in the summer of 2012 (Ward and Powis 2013), and a possible shell workshop discussed below. Nonetheless, shell remained one of the most commonly crafted objects from permanent media, but its role in identity production changed as overt symbols of social status became prominent. These symbols likely began to manifest during the Late Preclassic period, though we currently have little evidence from that time. The prominence of shell beads as social status markers is present in the Early Classic period, but reaches its peak in the Late Classic. Social and architectural changes abound at Pacbitun during this latter time. Several monumental construction projects were realized, caching activities increased, and burials became more elaborate, all of which suggests more complex social stratification compared to the preceding periods (Healy 1990:257; Wagner 2009).

A significant difference exists between the Core and Periphery Zone shell assemblages in terms of the quantity of material, and in the varieties of species and artifact types represented. Excavations in the Periphery Zone recovered several hundred specimens of shell though less than 5% were recovered from burials, and all but two were from freshwater sources. On the other hand, marine shell ornaments dominate the Core Zone assemblage, and most were recovered from burials.

Two Spondylus sp. disk pendants were recovered from an elite female’s crypt dating to the Early Classic period (ca. AD 250 to 500). The pendants are incised with a representation of
a human figure, possibly a ball player, with a bead at the tip of the nose (Figure 3). This individual’s high-ranking status can be inferred from hers being the only known Early Classic period burial at Pacbitun, and her elaborate burial goods, including the intricately carved pendants. *Spondylus* shell is known to be a prestige material that is regularly found resting atop the skulls of interred elite individuals for example at Pacbitun (Healy et al. 2004:231), Tikal, (Moholy-Nagy and Coe 2008) and Piedras Negras (Coe 1959:56).

Rosemary Joyce (1992:5) has observed that ancient Maya art depicts females wearing their labor products such as elaborately decorated cloth, and more extensively modified materials than their male counterparts. On the other hand, she argues that male costumes reinforced an association with nature because the materials are typically minimally worked or in a raw state, such as drilled, whole shells. This pattern is consistent with the shell artifacts recovered from Pacbitun’s Early Classic period elite burial from which highly modified *Spondylus* shell artifacts were recovered in a female burial. Nonetheless, Joyce’s (1992:5) observation is neither supported nor rejected by the material remains from Paibitun Burial 1-1 dating to the Late Classic period. This later internment held an individual’s remains tentatively identified as female, and it contained the largest quantity of shell ornaments recovered from any context excavated throughout the site’s settlement. More than 2,500 freshwater and marine shell ornaments and beads were recovered including thousands of whole shell beads and dozens of highly modified ornaments.

Social status appears to have been the major determinant for access to marine shell ornaments at Pacbitun, rather than biological sex. Both whole shell specimens, and those that were cut and ground, appeared only in elite burials but of both sexes. Neither artifact class appeared in any of the low-ranking interments. This lack of differential access to shells between the sexes seems to hold true for most aquatic species at Pacbitun. The only exceptions are seen in the presence of *Oliva reticularis*, *Dentalium* sp., and *Dinocardium robustum* in female burials only, and eight Pacific *Oliva porphyria* tinklers recovered from male internments. The other remains of Pacific Ocean univalves represented in the Classic period Pacbitun shell assemblage were *Jenneria pustulata* tinklers from the double burial of a male and female. Though these tinklers may have been associated with the female individual, their frequent appearance in male costumes in
Maya art (e.g., Tikal Stela 22), suggests that they were associated with the other individual.

While the evidence for sex-based differences in access to exotic shell species among Pacbitun’s elite inhabitants may be limited, a relationship between an individual’s biological sex and shell ornament types seems to have existed. However, this relationship counters Joyce’s (1992:5) finding that males in Maya art are associated with nature and thus adorn themselves with minimally modified ornaments. For example, a complex shell mosaic object was recovered from a male burial, as were several ceremonially killed Spondylus sp. shell artifacts.

Our evidence suggests that wearing marine shell ornaments was indicative of high or elite status at Pacbitun in the Classic period. However, excavations in an undated mound in the Periphery zone recovered large quantities of marine shell detritus. This finding suggests that lower-status individuals may have been involved with manufacturing marine shell ornaments, even if they were not permitted to wear their products.

Late Classic to Early Terminal Classic Periods (AD 650-900) at Actun Lak Cave

Shell objects were just one of the types of ornamentation used to distinguish social identities during the Classic period. Our investigations over the past two field season in Actun Lak cave, located approximately 1.5km to the southeast of Pacbitun, has uncovered examples of other types of Maya body decoration used in the Late to Terminal Classic periods (AD 650 to 900). These decorations include ear spools, and beads made from greenstone, limestone, and soda straw cave formations. The presence of these objects suggests that the cave was a locus of royal rain ritual, and that the items themselves were part of the Pacbitun royalty’s costume. A description of the cave and our other findings in and around it is necessary to understand why we attribute these ornaments to the site’s royalty.

Demarest (1992) argues that one of the primary roles of ancient Maya kings was ritual communication with various sacred forces and deities on their polity’s behalf. These performances involved much pageantry and showmanship that included the ostentatious displays of wealth, conspicuous consumption, and the use of elaborate goods. Therefore, we expect the material remains of royal rituals to have the same characteristics in the Pacbitun region.

Actun Lak is a heavily modified space, and the artifacts recovered from within it suggest that it was used for polity-level rituals throughout the Classic period (Figure 4). The cave’s physical structure is relatively simple. It is 43m long, has three main chambers, and is located halfway up a steeply sloped hillside. The slope below the cave and its immediate entrance area was extensively modified with steps, low terraces, and a platform. These modifications continue for at least 30m downhill, and head towards another large cave into which a seasonally active stream drains. Actun Lak’s entrance was modified by an earthen and rubble platform measuring 5m north-south by 3.5m east-west. Our excavations revealed that the Maya dug into the native soil and bedrock for nearly 2m, after which they refilled the hole with a mix of dry core fill and...
broken ceramic sherds in order to build the level platform. A modified slate cache was uncovered in the approximate center of the platform, below which a prismatic obsidian blade fragment was recovered.

The cave’s name translates to “Pottery Cave,” the meaning of which becomes immediately apparent upon entering. Sherds are ubiquitous from the front of the cave to its rear. The entrance passage is steeply sloped and ends at a 70cm tall, dry laid, uncut stone terrace adjacent to modified drop, below which begins Chamber 1. Excavations in the terrace revealed that it is actually over 2m deep with an artificial slate floor buried 1m below the surface. This terrace creates the only flat area in the otherwise steeply sloped entrance passage, and its depth and slate floor demonstrates a heavy investment into modifying the Entrance Area that would have necessitated building up the entire 10m long passage, in addition to the modifications immediately outside of the cave.

The terrace’s positioning suggests that physical access to the cave was restricted because such constructions are often located in large, open, interior chambers in other caves (e.g., Ferguson 2000) presumably to act as stages upon which rituals were performed in front of an audience. The Actun Lak terrace is positioned in such a way that individuals standing on it are easily visible from the platform area outside while a large formation jutting out of the cave wall blocks its visibility much beyond the drop into Chamber 1. This positioning suggests that the terrace was built as a stage for performances to be seen from the cave’s exterior, but also that entering was restricted only to ritual performers. If this restriction were not the case, then we would expect that the terrace would have been constructed along the opposing passage wall, which would have made it highly visible to anyone standing below in Chamber 1 and beyond.

Chamber 1 is the largest in the cave, and its floor is populated with several stalagmitic formations, which were all broken in the past. One of the stalagmites near the cave’s approximate center has a naturally cemented-over boulder area that extends from it for nearly 2m towards the entrance. Excavations adjacent to this paved area encountered a density of pottery unseen in other portions of the cave. In fact, the pottery took up more volume than even soil. Several burned residue clumps and sherds around which the material had melted were recovered, suggesting that some resin, likely copal, was among the offerings given in this area.

We argue that Chamber 1 was likely used to perform rituals to the rain god, Chaak. The connection between caves, rain, and rulership has been well documented throughout the Maya area. For example, Andrews (1961) recorded numerous Tlaloc censers surrounding the large column at the rear of Balankanche cave in Yucatan, Mexico. Ishihara (2008) recovered musical instruments, miniature vessels, and human offerings in the Main Chasm of Aguateca, Guatemala, which she argues were offerings to the rain god. In La Pailita cave in the Peten, Guatemala, the ancient Maya carved and plastered a formation at the cave’s entrance to appear in the guise of the rain deity seated on a throne (Graham 1997). This transformation of a cave formation into the rain god, as well as the other noted connections between the two, suggests the tantalizing possibility that the ancient Pacbitunecos considered the columns in Actun Lak as manifestations of that same deity, and thus the cave to be one of his homes.

Chamber 2 is much smaller than Chamber 1 in both width and height, and is divided roughly in half by a natural, raised ridge. Fire-blackened walls dotted with occasional sections of spall mark the transition into the smaller room. A dense charcoal lens surrounding a table top altar constructed from cave-formations sits on the upper portion of the chamber. The base of the altar is constructed from a series of round, broken columns on top of which is a laid-flat, roughly rectangular block likely removed from a nearby formation. Excavation units placed adjacent to the altar proved to be the most shallow in the cave reaching bedrock at around 15cm, though they revealed evidence of the extensive burning that charred the walls. The first level lacked any significant soil matrix. Instead the matrix was mainly charcoal mixed with ceramics, possible copal residue, and the body ornaments made of jade, limestone, and
soda straw cave formations mentioned earlier (Figure 5).

The case for royal utilization of Actun Lak is further suggested when considering the quantity and symbolic significance of greenstone that was recovered near the altar. Over 100 biconically-drilled, round bead fragments of varying sizes, pieces of two ear spools measuring 2mm thick, and a tubular bead, all made from the same material were collected. Taube (2005) argues that jade, or greenstone, is synonymous with Maya kingship. Rulers appear on carved stelae ornamented with items such as belt celts, necklaces, ear spools, and crown-like head ornaments made out of it. Taken as a whole, the artifact assemblage recovered from Actun Lak, the conspicuously consumed pottery, greenstone, copal incense, and intensive burning, in addition to the modifications that restricted access, point to royal activities that centered around petitioning for rain on the behalf of the polity.

Speleothem ornaments have gone largely unidentified in the archaeological record up to this point. We suggest that this relatively unknown use as an ornament may be due to the fragile nature of the cave formations from which they were created. Only a small handful of the hundreds of formations that we recovered during our excavations were definitively beads. The majority of the recovered formations were highly fragmented and had sharp, jagged edges. We identified the few modified samples as beads based on the presence of smooth, angular cuts on their ends. Their association the large quantities of jade and limestone beads, which are understood in this case to be royal body ornaments, suggests that they also decorated Pacbitun’s royal bodies.

Conclusion
In this paper, we have discussed the role that body ornaments and their production played in forming identity at the ancient Maya site of Pacbitun. The Middle Preclassic period was a time where identity was based on the shell bead production primarily. We have argued that Pacbitun was one of several egalitarian villages that may have been collectively considered the shell bead production area for the Southern Maya Lowlands at this early time. As social inequality begin to appear sometime in the Late Preclassic to Early Classic periods, the collective community identity based primarily on shell bead production gives way to body ornamentation as a form of status differentiation. Beads become more elaborate, are made from prestige materials, such as Spondylus shell, and differential access to those types of materials appears in the archaeological record. Nonetheless, shell was only one of several media from which elite body ornaments were made in the Late Classic period. Our excavations in Actun Lak cave have uncovered ornaments likely from a royal costume that were crafted from jade, limestone, and soda straw cave formations. Other objects similar to these latter jewelry pieces have to this point gone largely unrecognized by archaeologists, making them the king’s new clothes, or at least new to us.

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