The Ritual on the Ratlinlixul Vase
Pots and Politics in Highland Guatemala

Elin Danien

One of the ironies of archaeology is that as it has matured and changed from what was called “antiquarianism” to a more scientific discipline, its practitioners have tended to ignore early museum collections gathered on an indiscriminate basis and to concentrate their efforts instead on new excavations designed to test hypotheses and methodologies. Certainly, modern field projects designed to answer carefully structured research questions can supply precise and accurate data. However, older museum collections obtained under less than ideal circumstances can yield new and important information when subjected to careful analysis using all the facilities available today.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the area of Maya studies, where recent advances in field archaeology, epigraphy, ethnology, and ethnography have all been extraordinarily productive and rewarding. These advances enable those of us working with previously excavated artifacts to bring new insights to the examination of pottery and sculpture in museum galleries and storerooms (Fig. 1). My own research into a collection of highland Guatemala Maya pottery at the University of Pennsylvania Museum is only possible because I can draw upon the discoveries and interpretations of dozens of other contemporary scholars; they in turn are indebted to those earlier investigators—“adventurers” and “explorers”—whose names may no longer resonate in academic halls.

The Maya, whose ancient civilization flourished more than a thousand years ago, are still to be found in what is now southern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and part of El Salvador (Fig. 2). They created a unique artistic tradition, manifested in carved jade, stelae, architectural sculpture, stucco reliefs, mural paintings, figurines, and ceramic vase painting. Here I look at vases decorated in one particular style of that tradition to show how the study of early collections can give rise to new interpretations with important implications for an understanding of Maya history.

THE COLORFUL VASES OF CHAMÁ

The ceramic cylinders made by the Maya during the Late Classic (AD 600–800) form a special category highly appreciated by archaeologists, artists, and connoisseurs alike (Fig. 3). They are recognized as among the finest expressions of Maya artistic genius. These polychrome masterpieces have been excavated from the tombs and palaces of the elite in the great Maya cities of the central Petén in lowland Guatemala. They have been photographed and widely published, and most have been subjected to iconographic, epigraphic, and artistic analysis.

There is a particular and distinctive corpus of such vessels, made during the same period, that is equally admired but rather more enigmatic. These vases are known as “Chamá polychromes,” for the site where they were first found in the southern Guatemalan highlands. The potters painted their distinctive motifs on a cylinder form, using a palette of red and black on a yellow to yellow-orange background. A chevron border of black and white usually frames the top and bottom of the scene. The preferred decorative template was either a repetition on each half of the vessel of a static scene or individual, or a continuous scene that wrapped around the vessel. Chamá polychromes were made for only a brief period of time: Dorie Reents Buet (1994) estimates no more than two or three generations of potters working in an extremely circumscribed area of Guatemala, far from the lowland centers of Classic Maya culture, were responsible for all this pottery. There is a sudden emergence, a brief flowering, and an equally
sudden cessation of this class of polychromes. Other than placing them some time within the Late Classic, we cannot be more precise in our dating at this time. The site of Precolombian Chamá is today a coffee plantation northwest of Cobán, in the Alta Verapaz, where the Chixoy River is joined by a small tributary, the Tzabil River. This fertile valley in Guatemala’s hilly middle country is only 880 feet above sea level. Both geographically and temporally it lies between the great Classic lowland cities of the Petén and the highlands where the Postclassic Maya Quiché culture later flourished (AD 1250-1524).

Chamá was first excavated in the 1900s by the German trader and amateur archaeologist Erwin Dieseldorff. He sent some of the finds to a Berlin museum, and later left the bulk of his private collection to the anthropology museum in Guatemala City. In 1917, Robert Burkitt, commissioned by George Byron Gordon, director of the University of Pennsylvania Museum, re-excavated the site and sent all his finds back to Philadelphia. These are the only two early excavations known to have taken place at Chamá.

Today, there are hundreds of Chamá-style vessels in private collections. Unfortunately, many of them are the result of unscientific, unreported, and undocumented removal, which means that those cylinders bring with them little or no contextual information. The high prices and ever-increasing appetite of the private art market have led to large-scale looting of both known and unknown sites. An additional difficulty arises because the eroded Classic painting on many of the privately held vessels has been subjected to modern (and sometimes
MEANING OF THE SCENE ON THE RATINLIXUL VASE

The Ratinlixul Vase (Fig. 4a) has attracted much attention from those seeking to understand the scene portrayed. Kornelia Kurbjuhn (1983) noted its similarity to a vase in the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, and to a vase in a private collection in California. Justin Kerr (n.d.) compared the Ratinlixul Vase to yet another vessel in a different private collection. Each of these authorities compared the Ratinlixul Vase to others, but this article marks the first public observation that there are four vases showing almost identical scenes. According to Recents Budet (1994), replication is extremely rare in Maya polychrome vessels, yet here we have multiple vessels clearly illustrating the same event. Because of this replication and the unusual nature of the procession shown, I believe that the scene may hold a clue to the brief fecundity and rapid demise of the Chamarí polychrome style.

None of the other three vessels carries any provenience data. As with any research that uses undocumented material, there is always the danger that the interpretations may be found to have been based on a scene inaccurately restored, incorrectly recontextualized, or—the complete nightmare—that the pots may be nothing but well-executed forgeries. Nonetheless, with that caveat in place, the vase purchased by the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, is known as the Nebaj Vase (Fig. 4b), named for the highland site from which it is said to have been excavated. The two in private collections have no information as to provenience and are identified only stylistically as coming from the Chamarí region. As a means of identification I'll refer to them as P1 and P2 (Fig. 4c, d).

Both Kurbjuhn and Kerr suggest that the scene shows a dead king being escorted to the Underworld. Before turning to the reasons I put forth a different interpretation, it may be worthwhile to examine the elements on the vessels and discuss the reasons for their importance.

The scene on all four vessels is that of a man being carried in a litter, or palanquin, by two bearers. Beneath his litter is a dog. On three of the vessels, the man in the litter is followed by an attendant carrying his jaguar skin-covered mantel, symbol of rulership; on Vase P1, the man is not present, and the dog is accompanied by a dwarf. The dwarf on Vase P1, the dog on Vase P2,
and the dog on the Nebaj Vase all have lines emanating from their mouths that may represent either breath or speech, as commonly portrayed in Mesoamerican art. On all the vessels, at least one person carries a trumpet; on the Ratirical Vase, long trumpets are carried by three attendants. The conch shell trumpet, another instrument recognized as part of the traditional Maya orchestra, is carried by figures on the Nebaj Vase and on Vase P2. On Vase P1, the artist has captured the musician with the conch at his lips, at the very moment of sounding a long note.

Initially, the figure in the litter on the Ratirical Vase was identified as a merchant because the fan he holds was believed to be an identifying symbol of long-distance traders. However, a number of figurines and scenes on vessels from other areas of the Maya realm show what seem to be rulers and other elites, both with and without fans, being carried in litters or palanquins. These have led to a new understanding that fans indicate high status in general, rather than a particular profession. One of the Compendium-period chronicles records that in the highlands, Maya Tzutuhil chiefs were carried into battle in palanquins. (On one unfortunate occasion, this marked the leader as a much too visible target; he was wounded and died before the end of the day.) Clearly, then, this was the usual mode of transportation for elite members of Maya society.

We can assume that the figure in the litter is at least a person of high degree. Further evidence for his elite status is provided by his headdress. On the Ratirical Vase, he wears what Michael Coe (1976) calls the "spangled headdress," and Karen Bassie (1996) identifies as the headdress of a diviner or shaman, a role filled by Maya rulers during the Classic period. The flare coming from the headdress on the Ratirical Vase and Vase P2 represents the burning torch belonging to one of the most important gods in the Maya pantheon, God K. This god is frequently shown as the Mankind Scepter, part of the ruler’s regalia, in the art of the Classic Era (Fig. 5), and has been identified with dynastic descent and lightning. Elements of headdress and costume, even masks, are frequently used as devices to indicate that the wearer has assumed the role of, and is to be regarded as, a supernatural for as long as he wears that transformational symbol. In the art of the Classic period, rulers are costumed to represent the god of the specific ritual being celebrated. Among traditional Maya today, such costumes and masks are donned for ritual performances.

I suggest that the litter-borne figure is a ruler or a governor of a small polity, and is clad in the attributes of Maya supernaturals for ritual purposes. This relates the scene to other known sculptures and paintings from the Classic period where such deity attributes are assumed by rulers.

Prior interpretations of the scene as portraying a dead figure are based on a mistaken misunderstanding of the use of the God K flare. On the famous carved sarcophagus lid from Palenque, the king Pacal is shown descending to the Underworld with the God K flare clearly emanating from his forehead, indicating that he is dead and has been disfigured (Fig. 6). This identification of the God K flare as symbolizing the death of the wearer has been extrapolated and applied far too broadly as the only possible use of the flare, overlooking its many ceremonial uses as part of Maya ritual life.

The litter-borne figure on the vessels discussed here has the God K flare emerging not from his head, as might appear at first glance, but from his headdress. This placement indicates that the flare is an identifying element in the costume of a living human rather than part of a transfigured king.

The ruler is accompanied by musicians who may be low-level diviners or daykeepers—shamans who still figure prominently in the spiritual life of today’s highland Maya. The musicians in the Bonampak murals, nicknamed “the boys in the Bonampak band” by Mary Miller (1988), are clearly engaged in a ritual performance, one that calls for more than simply a musical contribution (Fig. 7). These scenes, painted during the 8th century AD on the walls of a Late Classic building in the Maya city of Bonampak, reinforce what we know from other Pre-
columbian, Conquest-period, colonial, and modern sources. Music is an intrinsic part of Maya ritual, and musicians in rituals often are low-level aspirants to religious office.

On another vessel, Kerr 1453 (Fig. 8), trumpets and a conch shell come in from the left to provide the musical accompaniment to the ritual before us. On that vessel, the role of dwarf as diviner is evident. He presents a mirror, one of the tools of diviners, to a ruler or dominant figure. Steve Houston (1992), one of today's foremost epigraphers, has identified a glyph for dwarf, and comments on the dwarf's role as supernatural rather than stunted figure, as diviner rather than freak.

The depiction of the dog beneath the litter on each of these vases strongly suggests that it plays an important role in the activity about to occur. The Rattlesnake dog has a black spot, usually symbolizing death. That was the argument used to suggest that the dog is there because he is accompanying the seated figure to the underworld; indeed, that is frequently his role. However, it is also valid to interpret the black spot as serving the same purpose as the supernatural adornments on the seated figure: to indicate that in this scene, the dog is meant to be more than animal, more than natural.

When portrayed with human or superhuman attributes, dogs may be seen as animal co-essences, or way, the animal alter ego belonging to diviners or daykeepers. Such attributes can be identified in the collar and bells worn by the dog on the Nebaj Vase and on Vase P1. The speech scrolls in front of the dogs on the Nebaj Vase and Vase P2 provide additional evidence that these are not to be interpreted merely as dogs. On Vase P1, the dwarf, rather than the dog, has scrolls emanating from his mouth. This visual metaphor reinforces the concept of divination as one of the primary subjects of the scene. Whether the scrolls are symbolic of breath—that ephemeral manifestation of the soul, the essence of the individual—or of speech—used to call up the supernatural in poetic and compelling phrases—they emphasize the ritual nature of the scene, and the metaphorical character of the animals.

This supernatural aspect of animal depictions can be seen as well on Kerr 389 (Fig. 9), where the two figures shown are clearly not just a dog and a monkey. Their costumes identify them as diviner and scribe. That the monkey, scribe of the gods, is also a diviner is suggested by the fact, recorded by Bishop Landa (Thompson, 1941), that the Maya used their writing not for mundane communication, but for divination or history.

The scene as shown on the Nebaj Vase most closely relates to the Coch (cargo, or burden) ritual, still engaged in by traditional highland Maya. Anthropologist Mary Pohl witnessed the survival and continuity of Coch rituals involving the transfer of power, or the burden, within Maya tradition. She suggests (1981) that the drama may have been linked to ancient accession ceremonies, in which the burden of power was transferred to the new ruler. Animal sacrifice and musicians are part of the Coch ritual, and animal heads and decorated poles are carried in procession during this celebration. The Nebaj Vase has animal heads prominently carried as headdresses, and attendants with decorated poles.

CONTACT AND MOVEMENT IN THE LATE CLASSIC

If the scene on each of the four vases portrays a stage in the ritual that confirms the transfer of power to the ruler carried in the litter, why would such a regular occurrence be cause for extraordinary artistic commemoration? Who is the figure in this scene, where does he come from, and why is the event so important as to require four separate representations of the same scene? To answer these questions, we must look at the broader picture of interregional contacts in the Late Classic.

Archaeological excavations, ethnohistoric chronicles, and ethnographic research confirm that trade routes between the Maya highlands and the lowlands began in the Preclassic (by as early as 900 BC), and continued until disrupted by the Conquest in the 16th century AD. Historical linguistics provides evidence for grammatical similarities and lexical borrowings that signify constant contact between highlands and lowlands. Ilxi, one of the most conservative highland Maya languages, uses the split ergative verbal system common in the lowland languages, but not ordinarily found in the highlands. According to linguist John Robertson (1992:120), structural linguistic changes of this nature require intense and prolonged contact. Other evidence for contact includes carved jades, mud-made figurines, and effigy vessels found in the highlands which show kinship with and influence from lowland cities.

Sherds of highland Chimú pottery have been found at a number of lowland sites, including Piedras Negras and other sites along the Usumacinta River, and whole vessels have been recovered at Altar de Sacrificios. Excavations at this last site have produced one of the most famous of all Maya ceramics: the Altar de Sacrificios vase (Fig. 10). It origi-
The Altar vase provides evidence not only for trade but for diverse kinds of interaction. There were other, perhaps more urgent, reasons for the movement of groups of people during the Late Classic, when the Maya world was disrupted by political unrest, escalating military excursions, and increasingly costly hostilities, particularly in the southwest Petén. Identification of emblem glyphs, coupled with the recent ability to read and interpret many of the inscriptions, confirms that one of the solutions to difficulties at home was out-migration. A cadet branch of a ruling family would either found a new city or marry into the ruling family of an existing city, leaving behind the problems and muddy politics of the ancestral home. One example of this process of elite colonization occurred at Dos Pilas. Members of Tikal’s ruling family founded Dos Pilas and continued to use an emblem glyph that made reference to their anciently powerful ancestral city.

MOVING UP THE ROAD

The fact that elite colonization was an accepted practice in the Late Classic provides part of my hypothesis, but it would have been inconclusive without the information provided by glyphic texts on many Late Classic ceramics. The recent ability to more fully understand inscriptions reveals that scribes and artists name themselves, and proclaim their status as members of Maya ruling families. This information, combined with the knowledge of elite colonization, leads one to my explanation of the emergence of Chama polychromes. If such artists were part of a cadet branch of a Petén ruling family that moved up the Chicxul River and took over the authority of Chama, they may have taught the local artists to emulate the lowland Petén polychrome ceramic painting. While beautiful, the painting of Chama pots is crude when compared to some of the virtuoso vessels in the so-called Holmul Dancer or Codex styles of the lowlands. The symbolism is slightly skewed; supernaturals portrayed on Chama pots are usually not those of the lowlands, and the human form is more caricature than portrait, as if there had been a melding of two different schools of thought and art.

If the practices recorded in post-Conquest ethnohistoric and ethnographic sources reflect more ancient traditions, the Chama potter’s may have been part-time specialists who practiced their art from their homes in small communities, rather than in concentrated production centers. Neutron activation analysis of the Museum collection tends to confirm this, by indicating that the vessels have no single clay source. Regional surveys by Smith (1955) almost fifty years ago, and by the French Archaeological Mission in the 1970s (Iehon 1979–1981) show the equivalent of small towns scattered along the Chicxul River and in the valleys. In modern terms, the Chama potters might be considered hicks, living in one-deer towns, far from the bright lights of downtown Tikal. This brings us back to the scene on the four vases. I suggest that it documents an important transfer of the burden of rulership from a local leader to a more
powerful and impressive lineage as a lowland elite group takes over. This is why the scene is commemorated on four different vessels, why the way or animal essence is shown, and why the ruler emphasizes his supernatural connections with a headdress that proclaims his relationship to God K—the god of dynasty and lightning, the diviner god—and his supernatural companions.

The lowland intruders were the sophisticates from the "big city," whose art style and ceremonies were emulated for as long as they were perceived as powerful. With the collapse of the great cities of the central Petén, the charisma such people exuded would have waned. Their access to and control of wealth would have been diminished. Their contacts with lowland relatives may indeed have become counterproductive. Perhaps they decided to leave their safer havens in the highlands to return to help their families in the lowlands. The scenarios can be spun endlessly. What is known is that the Chumá polychrome style suddenly bloomed and as suddenly ended within a brief span that coincided with a time of great political unrest. The scenario I have sketched here is speculative and requires much more research, including a field season or two along the Chixoy River. But it does present a reasonable answer to one of the small mysteries within the larger puzzle of Maya civilization.

Puzzling out such mysteries also emphasizes the value of focusing more attention on a currently dormant research area. Many more answers are waiting to be ferreted out; forgotten objects, acquired early on, wait to be examined in the cases and storerooms of all museums, not just the University of Pennsylvania Museum.