Linguistic and Material Aspects of Classic Maya Patron Deity Veneration

(Written Version)

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For AAA 2013 Panel "Signifying the Social: Language, Objects, and Materiality"

Introduction

The archaeological evaluation of meaning in past societies has suffered from a reluctance on the part of archaeologists to consider language and material culture as part of a single system of signification. Instead, researchers have consistently favored either written media or other artifact categories, narrowing our understanding of ancient social life. Most recently, a new emphasis on materiality has contrasted the physicality and durability of the material world with the intangibility and ephemerality of language, to the detriment of the latter.

In this paper, however, I will demonstrate the productivity of examining language alongside material culture in the analysis of social relationships by examining a specific case study. During the Classic period (AD 250-900), the ancient Maya world was divided into a series of semi-autonomous polities. Each of these communities possessed local patron deities which were venerated as a means of enacting internal and external political relationships (Baron 2013). Materiality was an important aspect of patron deity veneration: these gods were believed to inhabit physical effigies which were regularly handled, dressed, fed, and bathed. Temples were also constructed for them to "sleep" in and ritual food sharing was a way to celebrate them. However, if patron deity veneration were reduced to its materiality alone, without examining the numerous discourses which swirled around these practices, we would miss major aspects of its significance and efficacy.

Material Meanings in Archaeology

Recent authors (Jones 2004:330; Keane 2010:350; Maran and Stockhammer 2012:2; Olsen 2010:59) have claimed that physical objects have properties that distinguish them from language and therefore render them more effective in the world in certain ways. However, the differences between the ways in which material culture and language convey meaning are seldom described, largely because archaeologists have failed to understand the way language itself conveys meaning. As Michael Silverstein (1976:4) explains,

> The referential function of speech can be characterized as communication by propositions—predicates descriptive of states of affairs—subject to verification in some cases of objects and events, taken as representations of truth in others….It is this referential function of speech, and its characteristic sign mode, the semantic-referential sign, that has formed the basis for linguistic theory and linguistic analysis in the Western tradition.

This semantic function, Silverstein (1976:12) argues, is unique to language itself and does not apply to material culture. However, it is the semantic function which has been most commonly used as an analogy for understanding the meaning of material culture. This misapplication of semantic meaning has created many difficulties in using linguistic models to interpret the archaeological record. For example, Hodder (1987:2) uses a linguistic analogy, claiming that a pot can signify "young man." But according to Silverstein's (1976) analysis, this referential function is restricted to language alone.

However, semantic meaning is not the only meaning conveyed by language. Semantic meanings co-occur with pragmatic meanings. Pragmatism, as developed by Charles Peirce and adapted by Roman Jakobsen, involves the study of all acts that have communicative results. One important difference between semantic meaning and pragmatic meanings is that semantic meaning is essentially "context free," while pragmatic meaning is highly context-dependent

(Silverstein 1976:47). In other words, the purely semantic meaning of an utterance will not change if it is quoted directly, while the pragmatic meaning may change substantially. Another way to look at this phenomenon is to compare the different sign modes employed by semantic meaning (exclusive to language) and pragmatic meaning (also applicable to material culture). Peirce defined three different ways in which signs can be related to their referents: the iconic mode, the indexical mode, and the symbolic mode (Peirce 1998). Icons are signs that physically resemble their referents in some way. Indices are signs that co-occur either spatially or temporally with their referents. Finally, symbols are all other signs, which are related to their referents neither through physical similarity nor spatial contiguity (Silverstein 1976:27). Thus, the materiality of physical objects is relevant to their pragmatic meaning. Physical co-occurrence (indexicality) and physical similarity (iconicity) are important principles of semiosis. The incorporation of Peirce's sign modes into archaeological analysis has been attempted before, notably by Hodder (1987) and has recently been championed once again by Preucel (2010).

But another of the key insights of Silverstein and his followers is that the meaning and social effects of physical objects are themselves established discursively. Maran and Stockhammer (2012:2) argue that objects can act in the world through a non-verbal and non-symbolic dialogue which triggers human action, such as when someone smells a pot burning on the stove and removes it. However, the meaning of the smell of burning is established discursively by human beings and these prior semiotic acts are brought to bear in the moment that the pot is removed. A child, for example, who is not yet familiar with this meaning, will be unaware of the danger.

On an even more fundamental level, it is a mistake to see language as non-material, since, as Agha (2007:3) notes, "utterances and discourses are themselves material objects…—made, in

a physical sense, out of vibrating columns of air, ink on paper, pixels in electronic media—which exercise real effects upon our senses, minds, and modes of social organization." Thus, Jones' (2004:330) observation that "human intentions are translated into material form, which then effect subsequent human intentions" applies equally to language and non-linguistic material culture.

A Case Study

The Classic Maya world (AD 250-900) was divided among semi-autonomous political communities somewhat analogous to Greek or Italian City-States. Each polity was headed by a ruler (*ajaw*) and had its own set of patron gods which were believed to protect and sustain it. The veneration of these patron deities, and the many discourses that surround these religious practices, have profound implications for the power relationships between different groups and individuals of the Classic period. I will begin by discussing the material aspects of patron deity veneration, and then will describe the discourses through which the meanings of these material aspects were established.

Classic Maya patron deities were believed to inhabit physical effigies. Like human bodies, these effigies required care and maintenance. Patron deities were bathed (Stuart et al. 1999:50), dressed (Macri 1988:116–17), and given food and drink (see Houston et al. 2006:123). The ritual consumption of food by human beings was also an important aspect of their veneration. Excavations of patron deity temples at La Corona, Guatemala, have recovered evidence of feasting deposits nearby that contained massive amounts of discarded ceramic vessels, animal bones, and plant remains (Acuña 2009; Fernández 2011; Fridberg and Cagnato 2012; Patterson et al. 2012; Perla Barrera 2013). Smaller middens were recovered on the back

terraces of the temples themselves, indicating that patron deity effigies housed in the temples were "fed," probably by smearing liquids on their mouths, after which the ceramic vessels were discarded (Baron and Parris 2013). At the time of the conquest, Duran (1994:128) noted that patron deities throughout Mesoamerica were honored with elaborate feasts. In colonial and modern times, patron deities were replaced by patron saints, but patron saint fiestas continue to involve the consumption of large quantities of food. Saints are invited to partake of this food in the spirit of commensality with the community (Reina 1966:115; Wisdom 1940:376).

Patron deities inhabited spaces analogous to human dwellings. The usual term to describe patron deity temples is *wayib*, meaning "place for sleeping" (Houston and Stuart 1989). Other terms include "house" (*otoot*) (Stuart 1987:33–38), which is also applied to residential structures, and "sweat bath" (*pibnaah*), (Houston 1996; Stuart 1987:38–39) possibly connected to the idea of patron deities bathing. Patron deity temples can be definitively identified at Palenque, Chichen Itza, Tikal, Yaxchilan and La Corona (Baron 2013). Although these temples vary in size, many of them would have required large amounts of physical labor to build.

All of these physical properties and veneration practices iconically signified that deities, like human beings, required care in order to survive and fulfill their social functions. When not asleep in their *wayib*s, patron gods were physically handled. Some monuments depict rulers holding effigies aloft or deity heads emerging from ceremonial scepters. Larger effigies were set on palanquins that could be paraded around (Martin 1996; 2000). Publicly handling deity effigies allowed ritual specialists and rulers to indexically signify their special relationship to these gods, and by extension, their special status within the community.

The physical nature of patron deities allowed human beings to use iconic and indexical sign modes to signify social relationships. But an exclusive emphasis on their materiality might

lead an archaeologist to conclude, like Olsen (2003:88) that their very physicality gave them the ability to "constrain, direct and help" humans and to "constitute the very condition of possibility for…power and hierarchy" without passing through language at all. To reach this conclusion would be to ignore the profound significance of a whole set of discourses that surrounded patron deity veneration. Discourses about patron deities during the Classic period are partially preserved in hieroglyphic texts. They are also reflected in the discourses from the Postclassic period, which were preserved in indigenous-authored documents during the years immediately after the Conquest. These texts explicitly link patron deity veneration practices to the authority of the ruler and his right to claim certain privileges.

Although patron gods were believed to serve the whole community, rulers claimed a close, personal relationship with them in hieroglyphic inscriptions. They publicly proclaimed their diligence in performing veneration rituals, such a bathing and dressing the gods. The relationship between ruler and god was sometimes described as similar to the relationship between mother and child, using the phrase *ubaah ujuntahn* "his precious thing." As Houston and Stuart argue (1996:294), this probably expresses the loving care the king offered to the patron deity effigies. A passage from the Temple of the Inscriptions at Palenque claims that this love was reciprocated by the deities, stating that the ruler "satisfies the hearts of his gods" (*utimiw yohl uk'uhil*) (Houston et al. 2006:189) with his gifts of clothing and jewels.

Rulers justified their hierarchical position using these discourses. By serving the gods who served the people, rulers argued that they were necessary for the well-being of the community. A similar discourse can be found in the Colonial Era Popol Vuh, which describes the responsibilities of the Postclassic K'iche rulers toward their patron gods Tohil, Auilix, and

Hacavitz. In order to properly venerate these deities, the K'iche rulers had to undergo difficult

fasts on behalf of the people:

> Thus it was that the lords fasted during the nine score days, the thirteen score days, and the seventeen score days as well. They fasted often, crying out in their hearts on behalf of their vassals and servants, as well as on behalf of all their women and children. Thus each of the lords carried out his obligations. This was their way of showing veneration for their lordship…. For this was done for all. They did not merely exercise their lordship. They did not merely receive gifts, nor were they merely provided for or sustained; nor did they merely receive food and drink. All this was not without purpose. They did not achieve their lordship, their glory, or their sovereignty by deception or theft. They did not merely crush the canyons and the citadels of the small nations and the great nations. Great was the price that the nations gave in return. They sent jade and precious metal…They sent precious gems and glittering stones. They sent as well cotinga feathers, oriole feathers, and the feathers of red birds (Christenson 2003:290–91).

In other words, the ruler is not ruler simply because of military force. Rather, his

privileges are the result of his burden of responsibility toward the patron gods and thus toward

the community as a whole.

Classic Maya inscriptions also justified hierarchical differences by framing the

relationship between patron god and humans in similar ways to that between ruler and subject.

Texts often referred to patron gods as *ajaw*s (rulers). This practice continued into the Postclassic

period and can be seen in the inscriptions of Chichen Itza as well as in Colonial period

documents. The opposite is also true: rulers are described as "god-like" (*k'uhul*). A quote from

Duran's history of the Aztec nation, although from a different ethnic group, elaborates on this

discourse in its comparison of the emperor to the Aztec patron god:

> You [emperor Ahuitzotl] will carry the same burden as does the god Huitzilopochtli, which is to provide and maintain this world order, that is, to provide the sustenance, the food and drink for your people. Eyes from the four directions are fixed upon you. You have now been given a sword and a shield so you may risk your life for your country. You have been charged with the responsibility for the mountains, the hills, the plains, caves, cliffs, rivers and seas, pools and springs, rocks and trees. Everything has been commended to you and you must take care and see that these do not fall apart (Duran 1994:313).

All of these discourses imply a notion of reciprocity: patron deities protect the community from harm, and in return they must be sustained with food, clothes, and temples. Likewise, the ruler also protects the community by governing justly, defending, and performing ritual service to the gods. In return, he must also be sustained with tribute and labor of the people, which provide him with food, wealth, and housing.

The materiality of patron deity veneration must be understood within the context of these discourses. Bathing and feeding patron deity effigies iconically signifies the similarities between rulers and gods, a discourse which, in turn, justifies the ruler's authority. The participation of commoners in food sharing rituals honoring the patron deities indexically signified their membership in the religious and political community, and thus their obligations toward the ruler. Thus, materiality and discourse were part of a single system of signification. The fact that similar discourses circulated among the Maya and other Mesoamerican groups for millennia attests to their durability.

Conclusion

To conclude, the materiality of patron deity veneration, while important, was not sufficient to account for the meaning and importance of patron gods in Maya social life. Instead, their meaning was established through their relationship with a vast set of discourses that circulated throughout the Maya world. This case study demonstrates that we must study language and material culture together, as a seamless system of artifacts, created and manipulated by human beings and constantly re-shaping the ways people behave. Only in this way can social systems of the past be truly explicated.

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