

Maya Polychrome Vessels as Inalienable Possessions

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ABSTRACT

During the Late Classic period in the Maya Lowlands (C.E. 650–800), polychrome serving vessels were produced and circulated in restricted exchange systems. The production and circulation of these vessels has traditionally been understood in terms of prestige good economy. In this chapter, I use Annette Weiner’s concept of inalienable possessions to extend analysis of Late Classic–period polychromes beyond the tenets of prestige goods to: (1) discuss how value came to be embedded in specific polychrome vessels; (2) identify previously overlooked ceramic social valuables; and (3) discuss how these vessels were used to simultaneously promote social hierarchy and integrate communities.

Finely painted polychrome ceramics are well-known examples of Late Classic–period Maya material culture (C.E. 600–800). These vessels were relatively simple in form and consisted of four main categories: dishes, wide dishes, bowls, and vases (Houston et al. 1989:722–723). Painted scenes varied greatly according to regional and individual artistic style, chronological period, and skill of execution (see Ball 1993; Reents-Budet 1994). Maya scholars have had success in using models derived from prestige good economies (Frankenstein and Rowlands 1978; Friedman and Rowlands 1977) to understand the production, exchange, and use of polychrome pottery during the Late Classic period (Ball 1993; Foias, 2002, 2004; Foias and Bishop 2007; McAnany 1993; Potter and King 1995; Reents-Budet 1994; Reents-Budet et al. 2000). These frameworks place emphasis on the study of the highest-quality polychrome vessels as a form of social currency used by elites in an exclusive exchange system that helped rulers and nobles maintain authority and legitimacy. Although scholars have had success in applying prestige good models to ceramic datasets in the Maya area, some aspects of this application remain problematic. On its own, the model provides little direction for helping archaeologists to understand how specific ceramic vessels gained and maintained their value. Prestige good

models also encourage archaeologists to study the production, exchange, and use of the most spectacular ceramic vessels, causing them to potentially overlook less striking indigenous ceramic valuables. Lastly, the concept of prestige goods may inadvertently lead archaeologists to focus more exclusively on the role of male elites in the production and exchange of ceramic valuables at the expense of contributions from commoners, women, and children.

The concept of inalienable possessions as proposed by Annette Weiner (1985, 1992) helps ameliorate some of these problems. It offers a better explanation of how ceramic vessels gained and maintained their value through encouraging archaeologists to consider (1) the labor input and identity of the producers, (2) the identity of groups or individuals associated with a vessel’s ownership, and (3) the social contexts in which a vessel was used. Because of its combined emphasis on use context and producer–owner identity, the concept of inalienable possessions also allows researchers to identify ceramic social valuables that may have been previously overlooked due to their lack of more readily identifiable signs of prestige value. Finally, because the concept encourages scholars to investigate how multiple groups of people with different identities benefited or contributed to the creation and use of ceramic social valuables, it allows us to explore

the contributions of traditionally understudied groups, such as commoners, women, the elderly, and children.

In this chapter, I apply the concept of inalienable possessions to the study of Late Classic-period Maya polychrome ceramic vessels. I begin by defining inalienable possessions and by providing some archaeological correlates for them by using examples of polychrome pottery from the site of Holmul, Guatemala. I then discuss how the labor of individuals who participated in the production of polychrome pottery was an important part of the process of creating value in those vessels. I conclude by suggesting how integration of the concept of inalienable possessions into prestige goods models helps archaeologists better understand the creation of value, production, and use of polychrome painted ceramics during the Late Classic period in the Maya Lowlands.

Defining and Identifying Inalienable Possessions

Although Weiner (1985, 1992) does not provide one singular definition of the term “inalienable possession,” she does provide more than enough information for archaeologists to begin creating the foundation for a working model of the concept (Mills 2004; see also Kovacevich and Callaghan, this volume). An inalienable possession derives its “inalienability” from the fact that its ownership can never truly be detached from its origins (Weiner 1992:6). It can be something owned by a corporate group or individual and passed down through generations (Weiner 1985:210). Inalienable objects are imbued with qualities of successive curators (Weiner 1985:210; 1992:6–7), and their value, in turn, is attached to the identity of their past owners and subsequently to their age and the ability of those successive curators to safeguard against loss and destruction (Weiner 1985:210). In this way, inalienable objects are not only defined and made valuable by the individuals who once owned them but also by the knowledge and history embedded in them. This value can come to define those who possess the objects in the present. Weiner (1985:212) states that “an individual becomes more than she or he is because the self is enlarged and enhanced by the power of the past. In linking persons with things, the things are made into more than their own materiality, for the things themselves stand as the means through which individual mortality is transcended, ensuring some measure of the person’s or group’s immortality.” Another important aspect of inalienable possessions is their restricted circulation. Weiner (1985:210) makes a distinction between two types of inalienable objects: those that never circulate and those that can circulate in restricted contexts among specific individuals or groups. In relation to inalienable objects that

never circulate, there often exists an exchange system of like-objects or copies. The circulation of replicas or similar objects allows the current curator to hold on to his or her actual inalienable possession while still entering into exchange relationships, a situation Weiner calls “keeping-while-giving” (Weiner 1992). The circulation of these copies serves to enhance the value of the original objects and, in turn, the social standing of the possessor of the genuine article (Weiner 1985:223). One final aspect important to the definition of inalienable possessions is what Weiner called the object’s “cosmological authentication” (Weiner 1992:4–5, 99–100, 152–153). Cosmological authentication is used “to amplify how material resources and social practices link individuals with an authority that transcends present social and political action” (Weiner 1992:4–5). I believe these qualities can be evidenced in the object itself and the social context in which the object is used, as I discuss in the next section.

Scholars have previously used some of the aspects of inalienable possessions that I have outlined above to identify inalienable objects in archaeological contexts (Clark 2007; Hendon 2000; Lesure 1999; Mills 2004). In this chapter, I use their research and Weiner’s original descriptions as a point of departure to assemble a list of potential correlates for ceramic vessels in the Maya area. First, if a vessel was owned by one individual or group and then curated by subsequent persons, in order for it to be classified as inalienable we must be able to identify the vessel’s original owner or origin. Identification could take the form of a painted text, stylistic expression, technological technique, or even chemical signature (e.g., clay and slip sourcing) that can be traced back to a specific group or person. The vessel’s age, integrity (e.g., whole, incomplete, repaired), and relation to other objects in the same depositional context could indicate evidence that subsequent owners curated the vessel—that is, the vessel could represent a cared-for heirloom (e.g., a pot from a previous historical period that had been preserved for many years and later placed in a permanent context with other objects of a more recent age). Evidence that a vessel had a restricted circulation could be indicated by its rarity—possibly its classification as a singularity (Kopytoff 1986) or one-of-a-kind status that is linked to the raw materials, skill, and cultural knowledge used to produce it. Other vessels of its specific kind would not be found in mundane contexts of deposition. However, in reference to Weiner’s original ideas, copies or less-well-executed vessels similar to the original singularity could be produced (even on a large scale) and circulated widely, and this circulation would increase the value of the original vessel. Finally, related to use and contexts of exchange, a ceramic vessel can only be considered an inalienable possession if it is associated with a recognized and



Figure 8.1. Map of Maya area, showing Holmul and other sites mentioned in the text (map by author).

revered system of cosmological authentication. An inalienable vessel must be produced, exchanged, or used in relation to a known source of power that is perceived by its believers to transcend contemporary space and time, thus imbuing the vessel (and its possessors) with authority and privilege. Cosmological authentication may be evident by symbolic elements on the vessel itself, historic documentation of the vessel's use, or ethnohistoric accounts and accompanying archaeological evidence of occasions where singularity-type vessels were employed in contexts of cosmological authentication. Using the correlates described above and one specific archaeological context from the Maya site of Holmul, Guatemala, I will now discuss how and why specific polychrome vessels dating to the Late Classic period can be considered inalienable possessions.

Maya Polychrome Vessels as Inalienable Possessions

Polychrome vessels discussed in this section were found in a formal tomb constructed into the platform of Building F, Group 1, at the site of Holmul, Guatemala (Figure 8.1), during a brief interval in the Late Classic period (C.E. 780–785). Holmul is located in the northeast Petén, Guatemala, and was

first excavated by Raymond Merwin in 1911 (Merwin and Vaillant 1932). The site has been the focus of investigations led by Francisco Estrada-Belli since 2000 (Estrada-Belli 2010). The site's epicenter is composed of three main architectural platforms and includes a ritual ballcourt (Figure 8.2). Merwin's early 20th-century investigations focused on masonry structures with vaulted rooms on the platforms of Groups 1 and 2, and Ruin X. Three specific structures—Building F in Group 1, Building B in Group 2, and Ruin X—contained sealed chambers that functioned as tombs. For the purposes of this chapter, I focus on the polychrome vessels found by Merwin in Building F, Group 1 (for description and interpretation of vessels found in Building B, see Callaghan 2013; for Ruin X, see Callaghan 2008:173–175). Building F contained one tomb with eight vessels that date to different complexes of the Classic period (Figure 8.3). Five of the vessels were found immediately associated with an adult flexed skeleton of undetermined sex (Vessels 1–5; Figure 8.4), two vessels were found a few feet south of the skeleton (Pots A and B), and one vessel was found in the construction fill of the southwest wall of the tomb (Pot C; Merwin and Vaillant 1932:13–15). I argue that some of these vessels, considered together in this tomb context, represent: (1) inalienable possessions originally belonging to important individuals from other sites; (2) inalienable

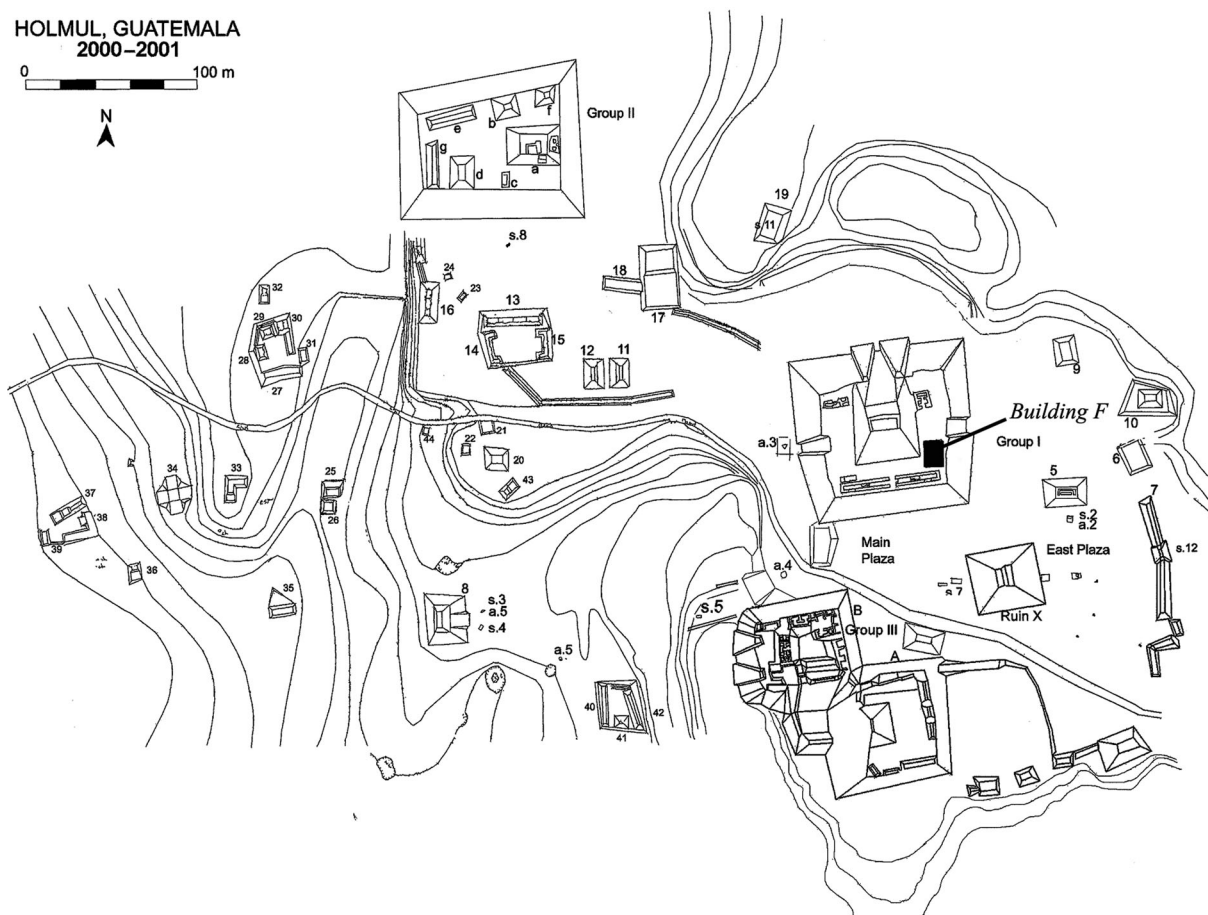


Figure 8.2. Holmul site center, showing location of Building F, Group I (map by Estrada-Belli and Holmul Archaeological Project).

heirlooms of the interred individual's lineage; and (3) personal belongings of the individual himself or herself.

Vessel 1 was the inalienable possession of a Late Classic ruler of the nearby and powerful site of Naranjo, Guatemala. It may have been given to the individual found buried in the tomb in an effort to create a social bond and simultaneously inflict social debt. Vessel 1 is a wide dish with flaring walls, direct rim, squared lip, flat base, and three cylindrical hollow supports (Figure 8.5). The vessel is painted in what Reents-Budet and colleagues have classified as the "Holmul" regional style (1994:179–187), which is defined by the application of fine-line red-and-orange designs to a cream background on wide dishes, dishes, vases, and bowls. Vessels displaying the Holmul style of painting date to the Late Classic period in the Maya Lowlands and are found at sites in the northeastern Petén and western Belize. Paste chemical composition of Holmul-style vessels also indicates that they were produced from clay mined in the northeast Petén and western Belize. Hieroglyphs appear on the interior rim of Vessel 1 and form what has come to be termed the

Primary Standard Sequence, or PSS. In the early 1970s, Michael Coe (1973:18) discovered and formulated the PSS. Coe recognized a pattern of painted hieroglyphs with a familiar syntax wrapping around the rim of many Late Classic-period vases and dishes. Later studies (Houston and Taube 1987; MacLeod and Reents-Budet 1994:109–134; Stuart 1989) revealed that this band of glyphs had regional variations but could be broken into segments related to (1) the presentation or divine creation of the vessel, (2) the inscribing of the vessel by the painter, (3) the form of the vessel, (4) the contents of the vessel, and (5) the owner–patron who commissioned the vessel.

The PSS on Vessel 1 names the original owner of the wide dish as Bat K'awil, ruler of the polity of Naranjo, Guatemala, for a short period of time around C.E. 780–785 (Tokovinine 2006:359–360). That the vessel was not found within the polity of Naranjo, but in an elite tomb at Holmul, indicates the vessel must have been gifted to the person in the tomb at some time during his or her life or even upon death. While the vessel is tagged with the name

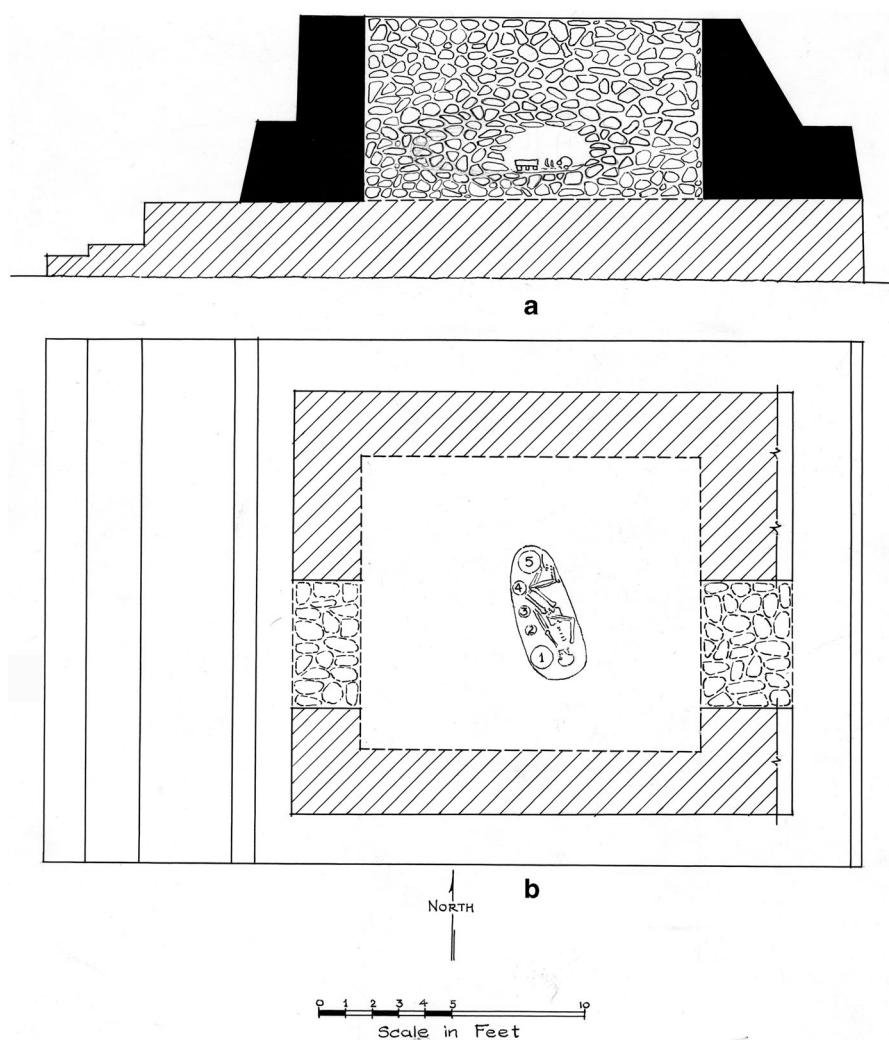


Figure 8.3. Plan and section drawing of Tomb 1, Building F, Group 1, at Holmul, Guatemala, from Merwin and Vaillant 1932:figure 7 (courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, number 11-6-20/76072.1.4 [digital file #99040065]).

Bat K'awil and labeled as his dish for cacao, its owners may have considered it more than a simple serving dish. Reents-Budet (1998:76–77) argues that through painting a PSS on a vessel, skilled artisans became metaphorically linked to acts of creation by the gods, as described in the *Popol Vuh*, the Quiché Maya text (see Tedlock 1996:68–69). In this way, certain polychrome pots like Vessel 1 may not have been considered inanimate objects but living things—brought into being and imbued with life by god-like artisans who mimicked, through painting, the act of creation. Vessel 1 was further infused with life-essence by the inscription of the name of the Naranjo Holy Lord who commissioned it and originally used it. For all these reasons, Vessel 1 can be considered a singularity or one-of-a-kind dish that was so

valuable to its subsequent owner, the individual in tomb 1, it needed to be taken out of circulation upon his or her death.

In relation to the concept and archaeological correlate of cosmological authentication, the main design on the interior base of the vessel depicts the “Holmul Dancer” theme (Reents 1985; Reents-Budet 1991). The theme consists of a dancing figure wearing a headdress and cosmographic back-rack, which represents the axis mundi and the Maya universe separated into three parts—the underworld, the middle world or earth, and the sky (Reents-Budet 1991:218). This dancing figure is common in Late Classic-period Maya art and is thought to be representative of the Maize God dancing at the time of his resurrection from the underworld (Reents-Budet 1991:217). It was common during the Late Classic



Figure 8.4. Photograph of Vessels 1 through 5 associated with skeleton in Tomb 1, Building F, Group 1, at Holmul, Guatemala, from Merwin and Vaillant 1932:plate 2b (courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, number 2004.24.4330 [digital file #131300024]).

period for kings and queens to identify with the regenerative and creative qualities of this deity (see Freidel et al. 1993:276–286), as it was after the Maize God's resurrection that humans could be made out of maize and receive sustenance (see Tedlock 1996:141–146). In Vessel 1's scene, a dwarf accompanies the central dancing figure. The dwarf is a known yet incompletely understood character associated with mythical scenes and courtly life in Late Classic-period Maya art (Houston 1992; Miller 1985). It is possible that the

inclusion of the dwarf serves as a link between the mythical realm of the Maize God and earthly realm of the royal court. Either way, the presence of these two figures together on Vessel 1 relates to larger accepted pan-Maya ideas of cosmological authentication. It is likely that after the vessel was gifted, it may have been used on ritual or feasting occasions that included god impersonation, dancing, and feasting similar to what was depicted on the vessel itself. Through the vessel's inclusion in the tomb, and use during life, the interred individual became linked with a transcendent system of cosmological authentication that constituted and conferred social power and prestige.

Vessel 3 also contains a PSS and painted scene in the same Holmul style of Vessel 1 and is the second most readily identifiable inalienable possession in the tomb. Vessel 3 is a cylinder vase with vertical sides, direct rim, rounded lip, and flat base (Figure 8.6). The cream-slipped exterior boasts painted red-and-orange designs. A red-and-orange band encircles the base. As on Vessel 1, the main design shows a "Holmul Dancer" theme. The rim contains a horizontal band of hieroglyphs, with one vertical column of glyphs extending down into the main design frame. In contrast to Vessel 1, Tokovinine (2006:360–361) believes the glyphs are written in an idiosyncratic style compared to earlier and contemporary cream-slipped polychromes of Holmul style. Furthermore, unlike the wide bowl commissioned by a king of Naranjo and possibly made in a production unit in that area, an unknown patron at a currently unknown site commissioned Vessel 3. Tokovinine (2006:360–361) does not identify the name of the original owner but does state that the PSS mentions an unknown toponym or place-name,

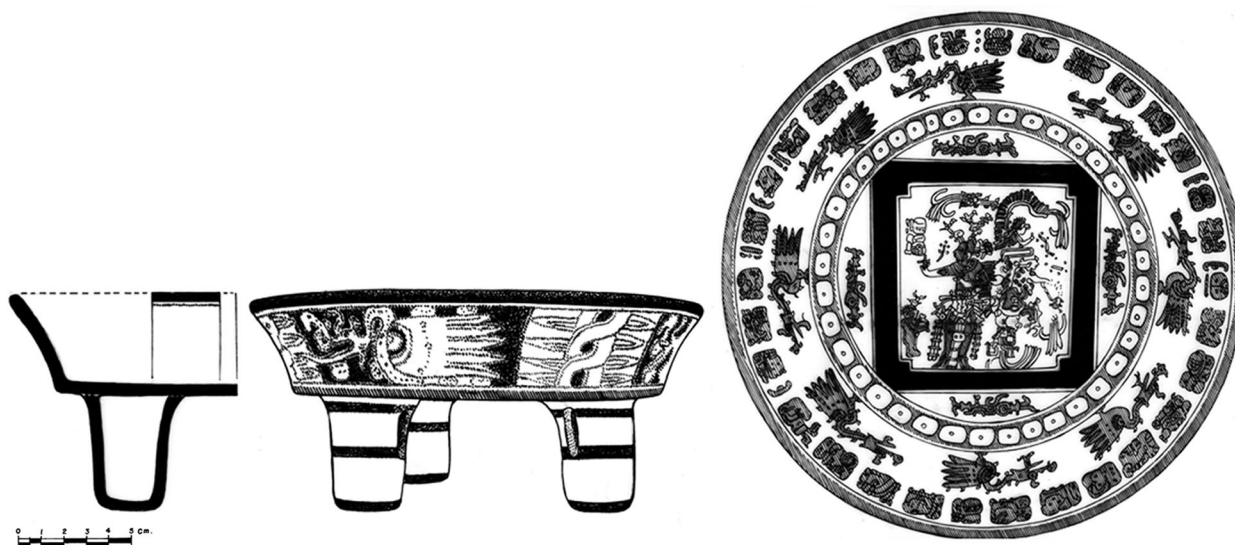


Figure 8.5. Vessel 1 profile and interior base (drawing by Fernando Alvarez).

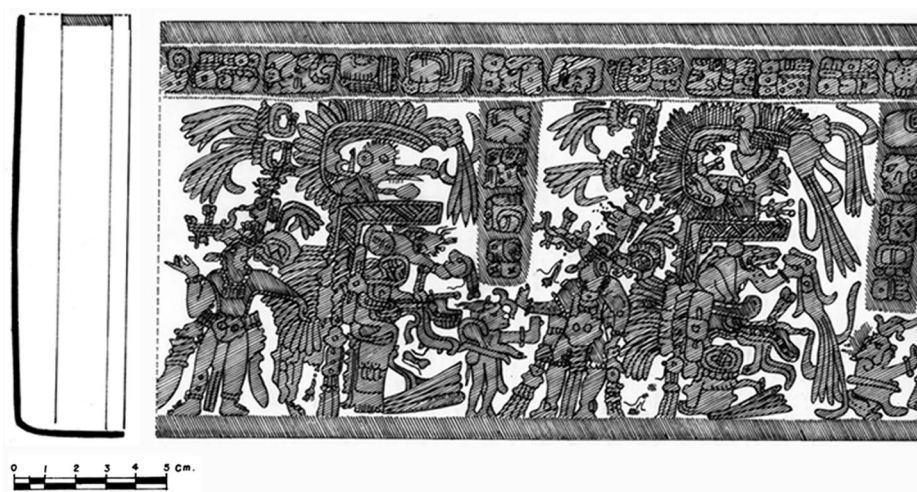


Figure 8.6. Vessel 3 (drawing by Fernando Alvarez).

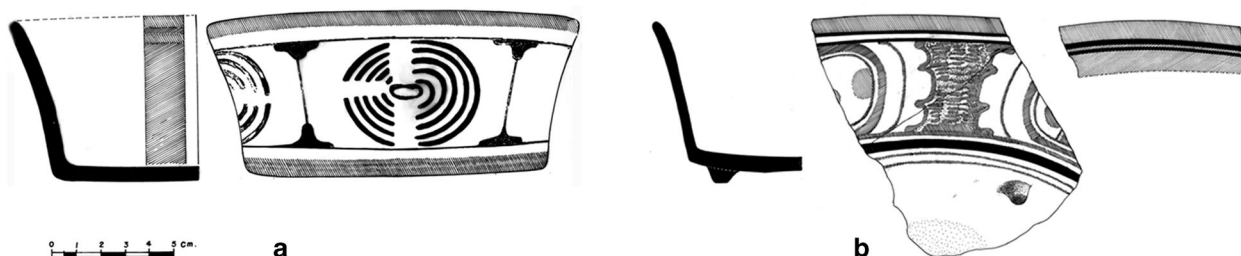


Figure 8.7. a) Vessel 4. b) Similar sherd (drawings by Fernando Alvarez).

yuk'ite. He concludes that the vessel represents independent innovation or development in an artistic style of the Holmul polychrome tradition. Vessel 3's presence in the Holmul tomb may represent the act of gifting from yet another lord in the northeast Petén area to the individual buried in the tomb. Like Vessel 1, Vessel 3 is tagged with its place of production outside of Holmul, it is a singularity, it has been removed from circulation, it has been curated with other vessels in a structured ritual context, and it displays symbolic elements of a recognized system of cosmological authentication—the Maize God dancing upon his resurrection. Also like Vessel 1, Vessel 3 may have not only enhanced the entombed individual's prestige but also contributed to the formation of his or her identity. The iconography on both vessels connects the interred individual to the regenerative and creative powers of the Maize God. Similarly, the glyphic inscriptions connect the individual to powerful rulers of foreign kingdoms. These personal and mythical connections would have been recalled when the individual from Holmul used this vessel during rituals, thus reconstituting his or her identity and prestige.

Vessels 4 and 5 are not nearly as unique as Vessels 1 and 3, and may represent examples of less-well executed

polychromes that mimicked the style of Vessels 1 and 3, and were also much less restricted in circulation. Therefore, Vessels 4 and 5 are not identifiable as inalienable possessions. Both vessels are slipped cream with main designs in red-and-orange and black paint of the Holmul regional polychrome style. Vessel 4 is a bowl with outcurving sides, direct rim, rounded lip, and flat base (Figure 8.7a). The interior is slipped orange with two horizontal red bands at the rim. The exterior is slipped cream with horizontal red bands encircling the lip and base. The main exterior design depicts a repeating broken concentric circle made by black lines radiating out from the circle's center. The circles are framed by rectangles in black paint. Sherds with similar form and painted decoration are common in the Holmul area during the Late Classic period (Figure 8.7b; Callaghan 2008:437–437).

Vessel 5 is a wide dish with flaring walls, direct rim, rounded lip, flat base, and three hollow cylindrical supports (Figure 8.8). The interior is highly eroded, but the remnants of a figure painted in red are visible on the base. The iconographic program is similar to what Reents (1985:120–121, 206–208) classifies as a “seated lord” or “throne scene” in which a Maya lord with headdress is portrayed sitting on

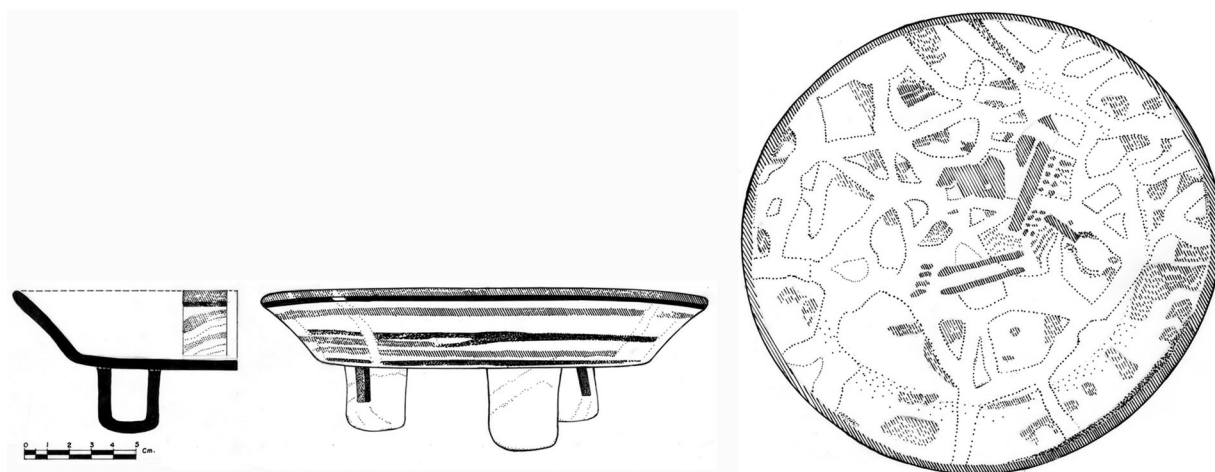


Figure 8.8. Vessel 5 profile and interior base (drawing by Fernando Alvarez).

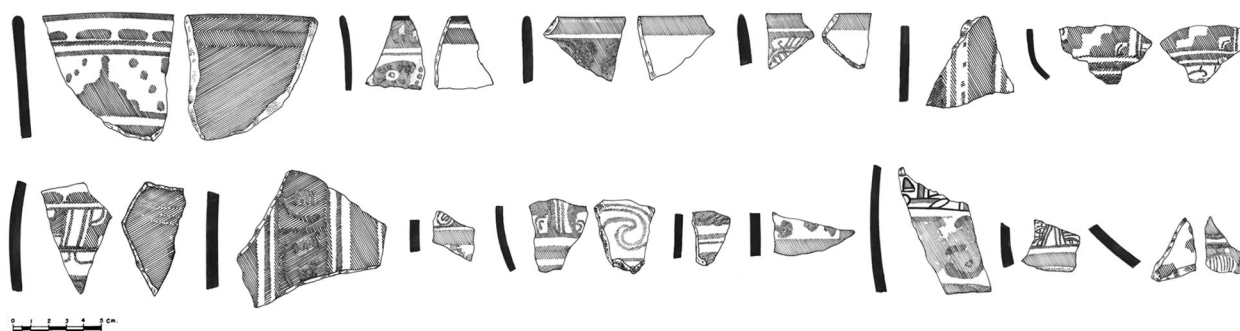


Figure 8.9. Holmul-style polychrome sherds found in South Group 1, Holmul, Guatemala (drawing by Fernando Alvarez).

a throne and leaning forward. Despite the eroded state of the dish's interior, it still does not appear that hieroglyphs were painted anywhere on the vessel. In less-eroded areas on the interior rim and base, where we would expect to see a glyphic inscription, there are simple geometric designs of red circles and triangles. The exterior walls of the wide dish are slipped cream with crudely executed alternating bands of red and black paint. While both Vessels 4 and 5 appear in the same context as Vessels 1 and 3, it is more difficult to make a strong argument that they were inalienable possessions of either the buried individual or someone else; they lack any readily identifiable tags of ownership and seem to be examples of less restricted ceramic types.

However, the possibility exists that these two vessels were the original belongings of the individual in the tomb and still factored into the function and value of the inalienable Vessels 1 and 3. Vessels 4 and 5 could be considered local "copies" of the highly valued singularities painted and brought into being by artisans of royal courts. To date, there is no known artisan or group of artisans attached to the Holmul royal court anytime during the Late Classic period.

It is possible that the individual in Tomb 1 did not have access or was denied access to an artisan skilled enough to paint in well-executed Holmul style using a PSS. Therefore, outside of gifts from lords at sites that did have artisans attached to the royal courts, these red-and-orange on cream polychrome vessels were the only ones the individual in the tomb could acquire locally.

Copies or less well-executed vessels like Vessels 4 and 5 may have been made for lesser elites and even commoners. Support for a production system of lesser-quality Holmul-style polychromes comes from the site of Holmul as well as from the provincial capital of Buenavista del Cayo, Belize. In 2003, outside the epicenter of Holmul in South Group 1, architectural fill contexts containing a large amount of Holmul-style polychrome sherds were discovered (Ebersole 2003) (Figure 8.9). These sherds do not display any examples of legible hieroglyphs. Although they display red-and-orange on cream fine-line painting, the quality of line and thematic content does not equal that of Vessels 1 and 3 in Tomb 1. At Buenavista del Cayo, archaeologists uncovered a large sherd deposit of lesser-quality Holmul-style ceramics

located adjacent to a palace structure (Ball 1993; Ball and Taschek 1992; Reents-Budet et al. 2000). Similar to sherds from South Group at Holmul, they lack the PSS on the vessel rims; however, some do display pseudoglyphs (i.e., unreadable representations of real hieroglyphics) wrapping around vessel rims. The fine-line painting on the Buenavista sherds also lacks the detail and skill of execution of the Holmul-style polychromes painted by artisans attached to royal courts. This suggests to Reents-Budet and colleagues (1994:184) that the artisans painting these ceramics did not have the ability to read or paint glyphs, or they were specifically creating these vessels for a less-discerning group of consumers. Similar to Tomb 1 at Holmul, a polychrome cylinder painted in Holmul style was found in the tomb of a provincial lord at Buenavista del Cayo (Ball and Taschek 1992). This cylinder displays the Holmul dancer theme and a PSS naming the original owner of the vessel as a lord of Naranjo, K'ak Tiliw Chan Chaak, who reigned from approximately C.E. 693 to 728 (Houston et al. 1992). Not only is this another example of the gifting of an inalienable ceramic valuable between elites, but it also supports an argument that the tradition of Naranjo royalty gifting inalienable polychrome vessels to lesser lords in the north-east Maya Lowlands dates back to the end of the seventh century C.E.

These Holmul-style polychromes of differing quality from Holmul, Buenavista, and Naranjo are an excellent example of what Lesure (1999:26) has termed “gradations of value” in an artifact class, which he notes is a component in the creation of an inalienable possession. A “gradation of value” means that certain objects within an artifact class can have more value than others of that same artifact class. In the case of Holmul-style ceramics, those vessels displaying the PSS and finely executed painting may have been more valuable to Late Classic-period elites than those that did not. Therefore, such prized vessels had a greater potential to become inalienable possessions of members of this social class. The restricted production and exchange of the most well-executed vessels alongside the simultaneous production and exchange of lesser-quality vessels of similar style may have served to increase the value of the more restricted polychromes, and in turn, the social standing of their possessors (see Clark and Colman, this volume, for a similar argument regarding Middle Formative jade and serpentine axes).

Vessel 2 is not painted in the same Holmul-style tradition as Vessels 1, 3, 4, and 5; however, it is similar in form and decorative treatment to another famous vessel associated with the site of Naranjo and a predecessor of the king who commissioned Vessel 1. Vessel 2 is a cylindrical vase currently located at the American Museum of Natural History in New York (Figure 8.10). Merwin (Merwin and



Figure 8.10. Vessel 2 (photo by Francisco Estrada-Belli).

Vaillant 1932:15) describes it as a “long cylindrical vase,” and Vaillant describes it as a “tall cylindrical jar, yellow lacquer interior, white plaster on exterior with designs in black” (Merwin and Vaillant 1932:72). While highly eroded, Vessel 2 resembles what has come to be called the “Vase of the Seven Gods” (K2796; see also Reents-Budet 1994:64, 319). A PSS appears on the exterior rim of this famous vessel, and a vertical text descends down from the rim. On the vase is a scene in which six lords of the underworld sit facing a seventh god known as God L. The style of the glyphs and painting on the vessel exterior lead Reents-Budet (1994:319; 1998:75) to conclude the painting was done by a famous artist of the Naranjo royal court, Ah Maxam, who lived during the reign of King K'ak Tiliw Chan Chaak (C.E. 693–728). Although Vessel 2 of the Holmul tomb is eroded, the tall form and remaining black background paint with cream slip and stucco is similar to that of the Vase of the Seven Gods. I suggest Vessel 2 may have belonged to this same tradition of painting. If this were the case, then the presence of the vessel in the Holmul tomb would not only qualify it as a potential gift from a powerful individual at another site (possibly Naranjo) but perhaps even as an heirloom, because these kinds of vases were known to have been produced slightly earlier in the Late Classic period than the

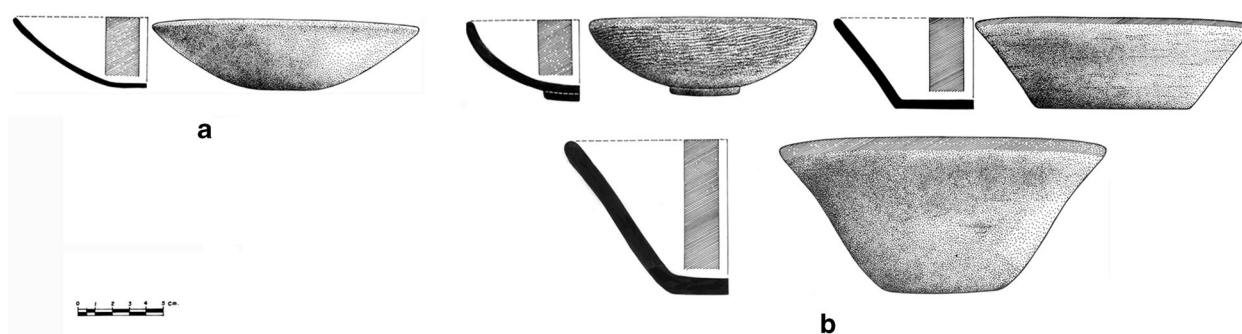


Figure 8.11. a) Pot B. b) Nitan Composite vessels (drawings by Fernando Alvarez).

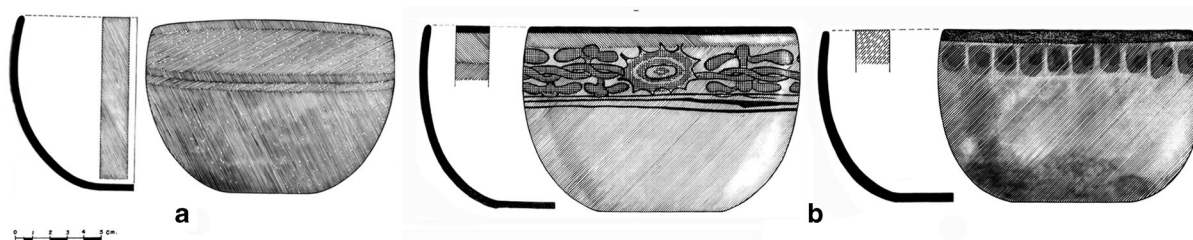


Figure 8.12. a) Pot A. b) Saxche polychrome bowls (drawings by Fernando Alvarez).

later, and relatively firmly dated, Vessel 1 from the Holmul tomb (C.E. 780–785).

Like Vessel 2, Pots A, B, and C from Tomb 1 also may have been heirlooms, but they were produced locally and date from as early as C.E. 500 to 750. I will first describe the pots separately and later explain their value in terms of inalienable possessions. Pot B (Figure 8.11a) may be the earliest heirloom. It is a bowl with flaring sides, direct rim, slightly pinched lip, and flat base. The vessel is slipped orange on the interior and unslipped on the exterior. Rough smoothing or raking marks are visible on the exterior. The flaring form, orange-slipped interior, and rough exterior texture make the vessel resemble a later Early Classic-period (C.E. 500–600) type of pottery classified as Nitan Composite and common to the site of Holmul and surrounding sites (Figure 8.11b). It is found in Early Classic household refuse, construction fill, and burials (Callaghan 2008:378–379).

Pot A (Figure 8.12a) is a bowl with high rounded sides (barrel-like in shape), direct rim, rounded lip, and flat base. The interior is slipped orange with two bands of red paint encircling the rim and lip. The exterior is covered in a cream underslip, above which is applied an orange slip, above which is again applied red paint. The paint is absent on the upper register of the vessel near the rim, giving the appearance of two horizontal orange bands of different thickness. The vessel form and decoration are not characteristic of the later Late Classic period to which the tomb deposit is dated. The barrel form of Pot A resembles polychrome vessels of the Saxche type produced earlier in the Late Classic period from

approximately C.E. 600 to 700 (Callaghan 2008:432–433) (Figure 8.12b).

Pot C (Figure 8.13) is a wide dish with outcurving sides, direct rim, and rounded lip. It has three support scars on its exterior base. The exterior is eroded, but red vertical bars on a cream background are visible. The interior is also eroded, but it is possible to see that the interior was slipped orange. Red painted vertical lines appear on the sides. Between the lines red dots are arranged in columns of three. The interior base is too eroded to see any design. The outcurved wall form of this vessel is also a mode associated with a slightly previous date to the deposition of the tomb in the Late Classic period, or approximately C.E. 700 to 750. That the three supports on Pot C were broken but that the vessel was still included in the tomb suggest it may have been a valuable locally made possession of a member of one generation earlier than the entombed individual. It was curated despite its broken state, or it may have been broken as a form of ritual decommissioning.

Although Pots A, B, and C do not contain glyphic inscriptions and were not singularities, form and decorative stylistic treatments identify them as being produced in the Holmul area during the Early through Late Classic periods. This finding suggests that they were interred with the individual as family heirlooms that were not circulated outside of the lineage. The concept of inalienable possessions is particularly helpful in understanding the significance of the inclusion of Pots A, B, and C in Tomb 1. While, in terms of surface decoration, Pots A, B, and C are considerably

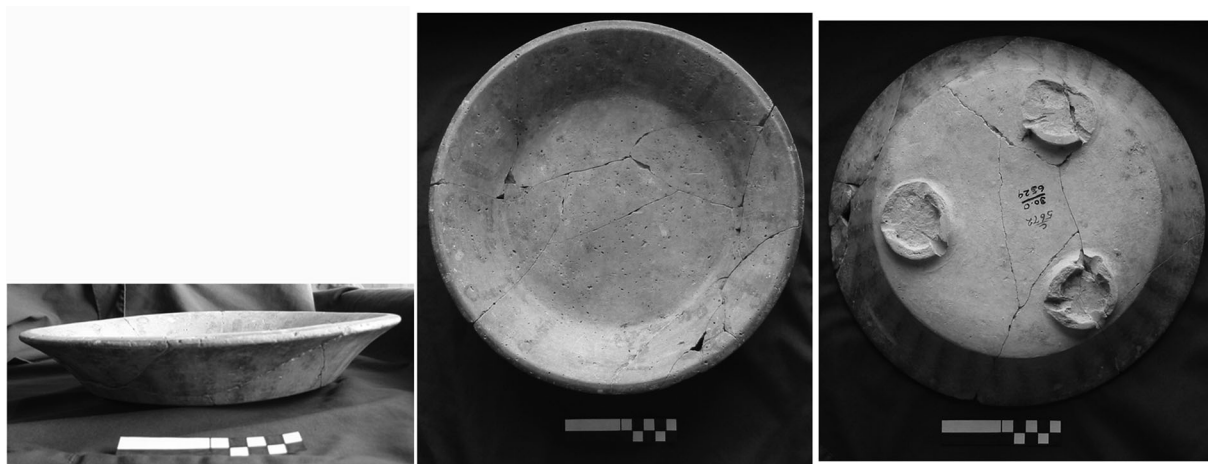


Figure 8.13. Pot C (photo by Francisco Estrada-Belli).

less sophisticated than other vessels in the tomb, they were still extremely valuable to the interred individual and the group responsible for his or her burial. Pots A, B, and C may have gained value through use in previous ceremonies of cosmological authentication, careful curation, and eventual removal from circulation. Their final deposition in a prominent structure in the epicenter of Holmul demonstrates that though these pots were buried, they may not have been forgotten (see Hendon 2000). The elevated platform where the vessels were buried was more than likely the site of subsequent rituals of cosmological authentication related to the lineage of the individual in Tomb 1. In this way, Pots A, B, and C (along with all the other tomb contents) contributed to the creation of a physical location where ceremonies that anchored people to a sacred place were performed. However, if not for the application of the concept of inalienable possessions to this deposit, the value and significance of Pots A, B, and C may have remained overlooked.

In summary, the vessels associated with the skeleton in Tomb 1 in the platform of Building F, Group 1, at Holmul may be considered a collection of individual inalienable possessions, inalienable family heirlooms, and personal belongings. Vessel 1 is tagged with textual markers identifying it as the original possession of a lord from Naranjo. The text on Vessel 3 indicates it was produced at a site other than Holmul and possibly owned by another individual before being gifted to the occupant in Tomb 1. Vessels 4 and 5 were common, possibly locally made, and contemporaneous to Vessels 1 and 3. Vessels 4 and 5 may have been the original possessions of the tomb occupant and were removed from circulation upon that individual's death. Although Vessel 2 is highly eroded, its style suggests it was an heirloom produced during a slightly earlier time in the Late Classic period and at another site in the northeastern Petén. The form and

decorative style of Pots A, B, and C suggest that they too are heirlooms, but produced locally. As I discussed above, the value of these vessels can stem from their association with prominent individuals or groups, use and association with important rituals of cosmological authentication, as well as age and their curator's abilities to guard against their destruction. These vessels were imbued with inalienable properties through gifting, bequeathing, and removal from circulation. The place where these vessels were curated was a sacred location where a group's identity became anchored and served as what Weiner termed a "hub around which social identities are displayed, fabricated, exaggerated, modified, or diminished" (Weiner 1992:99–100).

So far, I have used the concept of inalienable possessions to argue that some polychrome vessels gained value through age, group curation, and links to a recognized system of cosmological authentication. I will now use the concept to demonstrate how value can be instilled in these polychrome vessels through the labor and identities of the people involved in the five-stage process of ceramic production.

Production and the Inalienability of Labor

The argument that the labor of some producers contributed to the value of Late Classic-period polychrome vessels is well supported. In a series of remarkable studies that used a combination of PSS decipherment, painting style, and chemical paste composition, Reents-Budet (1998; Reents-Budet 1994) has identified individual artists responsible for the painting of specific Late Classic-period polychrome vessels. Her most notable example was discussed above and includes three vessels painted by the royal artist Ah Maxam of the Naranjo polity. She has also identified the painting style and chemical signature of pots painted by a

royal artist at the Late Classic-period site of Motul de San Jose, Guatemala (Reents-Budet et al. 1994:172–179). Similarly, Simon Martin (1997:850) argues individual artist's styles can be identified on Codex-style polychrome vessels from the north-central Petén. Taken together, Reents-Budet (1998:72–76) uses these data to argue that vessels painted by talented artisans whose style was easily recognizable could serve as an “additive of prestige,” which further imbued their products with social value. I agree and believe the concept of inalienable possessions can further support this assertion.

Recalling Reents-Budet's (1998:76–77) suggestion that artists were replicating the divine act of creation through painting, it is possible that during this process they imbued the vessel with an aspect of their own inalienable life-essence that accompanied the vessel through subsequent gift exchanges. In this way, the identity of a celebrated artist became an inalienable aspect of the polychrome vessel he painted. This position is strengthened in the rare cases where an artist's signature actually appears on the vessel itself (Reents-Budet 1994:48–50; Stuart 1989:156–157). With the inclusion of the artist's signature on the vessel, along with the name of the original owner or commissioner, the vessel physically and permanently embodied the identity of these two individuals. As long as the vessel was curated and the inscription remained intact, subsequent owners would have been able to associate their identities with the artist and original owner of these vessels, and they could successfully link themselves to powerful individuals whose authority transcended the present time and place.

In these extraordinary studies, the focus has primarily been on two stages of the ceramic production process: painting (decoration) and chemical composition (paste preparation) on the interregional scale. However, the ceramic production process actually consists of five general stages—paste preparation, forming, finishing, firing, and decoration—and I suggest that each of these stages allows for the participation of multiple producers and therefore the ability of these producers to imbue the vessel with their own inalienable essence in the form of labor. Previous analysis of polychrome vessels supports the assertion that the production process was segmented and allowed for the inclusion of multiple producers. In her review of polychrome ceramic production, Rice (2009) concludes that evidence previously used to infer single locality “workshop” locations at such sites as Tikal (Becker 1973, 2003), Buenavista del Cayo (Reents-Budet et al. 2000), and Aguateca (Inomata 2001) actually indicate the presence of only one stage of ceramic production—painting. Based on lack of evidence for other stages of production, Rice (2009:139–141) proposes that paste preparation, forming, and even firing may have taken place at other locations by entirely different producers. Fur-

thermore, analysis of polychrome vessels at some Maya sites reveals the possibility that different individuals with varying levels of skill may have been responsible for painting different areas of the same vessel. Coggins (1975:513–548) notes that different individuals may have painted panels and glyphic elements on a set of ten polychrome cylinder vessels from Burial 116 at Tikal. In her study of Copdaor polychromes, Beaudry (1984) proposes at least two painters were responsible for painting scenes on bowl forms, with one less-skilled artisan painting the more standardized interior design and one more-skilled painter responsible for the more complex exterior design. In an analysis of Codex-style polychromes from the north-central Petén region of Guatemala, Hansen and colleagues (1991) suggest multiple producers were involved in the production process. Reents-Budet and colleagues (1994:219) also argue that Codex-style vessels may have been formed by one craftsman and painted by another. They too suggest a segmented model of production, proposing apprentice potters formed the vessels and master craftspeople painted them (Reents-Budet and Bishop 2012:292–295; Reents-Budet et al. 1994:218–222).

Ethnographic studies of pottery suggest multiple producers of different genders, ages, and skill often produced pottery. In a study of 25 pottery-making communities in Guatemala, Reina and Hill (1978:200–201) recognize women as overseeing every stage of the production process in all but three communities. In these three communities, both men and women are engaged in pottery making during different stages of the production process. In Santa Maria Chiquimula, the male head of the household is considered the “potter” and is in charge of primary-forming phases; however, women and even children are involved in the secondary-forming stages, such as adding on vessel appendages, as well as firing (Reina and Hill 1978:70). In San Cristobal Totonicapan, women manufacture the majority of pottery forms, but men are in charge of making two specific forms, namely *tinajeras* and large *apastes* (Reina and Hill 1978:77). Finally, in Rabinal, men, women, and children contribute more or less equally to every stage of the production process. In her work with pottery-making families in Puebla, Mexico, Druc (2000:79) meticulously records the different identities of producers within the forming stage of the production process. Women begin by pre-forming the clay into “tortillas,” or disks, and men place these pre-forms on molds and subsequently create vessel rims and handles, after which women smooth the handles and decorate the rims. Children then take the vessels to dry in the sun outside. Finally, Philip Arnold (1991:32) notes a similar pattern in which multiple producers are involved in different stages of ceramic production in potting communities of Las Tuxtlas, Mexico.

If we apply these data to the highly prized polychromes found in Holmul Tomb 1 (and other, similar contexts), then we see the resulting ceramic vessels may not only be the product of singular male painters but of all the hands it took to create the works. In the case of a highly valued polychrome, when that final product was used and potentially curated by elites at a feast or within a burial or cache, it was not only the identity of the elite(s) and painter(s) that was acknowledged but those of all who were involved in the vessel's production, from paste preparation through firing. As other chapters in this volume demonstrate (see Inomata, Kovacevich, and Lohse), although a producer may eventually become physically alienated from the product he or she created, that producer inevitably retains the knowledge of its production and use, and that object still retains the labor invested in it. Therefore, while not present in body at the event where the vessel was used, all the laborers who helped create the vessel may have been present in mind or spirit. While this idea is presented as a suggestion here, it could be supported in the future by the identification of intrasite-specific technological processes aside from painting style, such as paste recipes at the macroscopic and mineralogical level (see Barber et al., this volume), as well as form modes and techniques.

If we extend the notion of the inalienability of labor further, then these polychromes not only contained the inalienable essence of the elite who originally owned them and the producers who made them, but also their forms and images may have stood for regional-specific ideologies that could be read and understood by multiple sectors of site populations, thereby making these vessels powerful symbols of regional identity. Similar to Inomata (this volume), what I argue is there may exist multiple subjective levels or nested layers of inalienability in the most valuable types of polychrome vessels. The first level of inalienability is related to that of the elite who commissioned and originally owned the vessel as well as to any subsequent elite custodians. The second level represents *all* the artisans who had a hand in creating the vessel, from paste preparation to post-fire decoration (although some artisans may have received more credit than others). Finally, the third level of inalienability may have encompassed the larger communities whose myths and folklore were reflected in the images and styles of the polychrome pottery—for example, the northeast Petén regional-specific Holmul style and its accompanying dancer theme. Therefore, when these vessels were used in important private and public sacred events, they integrated multiple groups of people through shared labor and common ideology, but they also segregated these same people through restricted access to use.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I make the argument that some polychrome vessels produced and used during the Late Classic period in the Maya Lowlands were inalienable possessions in which original ownership was never completely transferred, circulation was restricted, and value was created through identity of the original owner, labor investment of producers, and rituals of cosmological authentication. Vessels from Tomb 1 in Building F, Group 1, at Holmul, Guatemala, were used to test the proposition that ceramic containers could be identified as inalienable possessions in archaeological datasets and demonstrate how their value was enhanced through production and use. Taken together, the vessels in Tomb 1 represent a collection of heirlooms, gifts from individuals at other sites, and personal belongings that were owned by such powerful individuals that the vessels were too valuable to remain in circulation. Crafters within the community produced some of these vessels locally, while other vessels were from exotic locations and were the original property of foreign kings. Some vessels had been passed down for generations, while others may have been made expressly for the individual interred in Tomb 1. Some vessels were copies of the singular works of master craftspeople, which gave them value but also enhanced the value of the singularities. The fact that all the vessels were interred together with an important individual speaks to the idea that they had various roles to play in the life and afterlife of the deceased, reiterating his or her local and exotic lineage and non-lineage ties simultaneously. Each vessel represents an aspect of the individual's identity but also the larger communities of which he or she was a part.

Because crafting and labor figures so prominently into how value is created in an inalienable possession (see also Mills 2004), I believe that the study of the production process cannot only focus on the final stages of production (i.e., painting). The entire production sequence must be taken into consideration. Using studies of polychrome vessels from other Late Classic sites and ethnographic data from contemporary and historic Maya and Mesoamerican potting communities, I attempted to show how varied numbers of producers could be involved in the production of polychrome vessels, and how layers of inalienability could be built into these vessels through the segmented production process. Subsequent use and gifting by specific individuals was not the only process that could imbue these vessels with personal identities and contribute to their life histories. Though elites maintained access to the highest-quality polychromes, it is important to remember that multiple producers of different ages, genders, and classes may have helped produce these

vessels (cf. Reents-Budet and Bishop 2012:292–296 for an alternative interpretation). Therefore, even when these vessels were involved in elite rituals, they served as reminders of the identity of the entire community. The result was a sophisticated social control mechanism: one that helped to integrate communities centered on site-specific polities of the Late Classic period through the production process but simultaneously separated them through restricted access to use.

These data and interpretations add a nuanced understanding to the production and use of polychrome serving vessels in the Late Classic Maya Lowlands that may compensate for shortcomings of prestige good models. Via the concept of inalienable possessions, we discover previously unidentified indigenous social valuables, like heirlooms. Similarly, the concept encourages us to look for multiple individuals of different ages, genders, and classes who may have had a hand in creating social valuables. Finally, by applying the concept of inalienable possessions to Late Classic Maya polychromes, we are afforded a better grasp of how these vessels gained value, why they maintained their value, and how their owners and curators used them to maintain social hierarchy and to integrate peoples of diverse identities.

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