Research Article

On not seeing like a state: rethinking ancient Honduras (The Gordon Childe Lecture for 2023)

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Abstract

This article exemplifies the way that moving from perspectives on inequality to questions of the exercise of freedom can change archaeological interpretation. Using a case study from Honduras, where conventional models suggest that social evolution stagnated at the level of chiefdoms, the article draws on recent advances in theories of anarchic social organisation to rethink the data relating to occupation during the equivalent of the Maya Classic and Terminal Classic periods (*c*. 500–1000 AD). Settlement pattern data from northern Honduras have previously been interpreted as exemplifying heterarchy, understood as the expression of multiple overlapping hierarchies, in distinct aspects of social life. Most settlements conform to the needs of farming, with small towns that are roughly evenly spaced providing opportunities for rural populations to participate in seasonal ceremonies, ball games and possibly markets. Considering the structuring role of freedom to move, to refuse commands and to create new forms of social life enables understanding underlying dynamics that the heterarchy model was missing. It allows for an account of the growth and decline of settlements as outcomes of strategies by leading families and refusal of these by the broader population. Central to these strategies are the roles of visual media, specifically art

works, through which social values were created among this politically anarchic population.

Keywords: inequality, hierarchy, heterarchy, anarchy, art, ceremony, gender, Honduras, archaeology

Introduction

During the equivalent of the Maya Classic and Terminal Classic periods (*c*. 500–1000 AD), most of Honduras was organised in networks of villages and small towns. Nowhere in this territory is there evidence of the kind of sovereign command by a political leader at the top of a hierarchy that is projected by neighbouring Maya people at the time in their carved monuments and inscriptions. This contrast has historically served as the basis for interpreting Honduran societies as less socially or politically complex than their Classic Maya neighbours. In the language of social evolutionary frameworks, these were chiefdoms at best, or perhaps even tribes. While this framing may not seem to be explicit today, it remains in the background of all work in the region, as much as it did when Payson Sheets (1992) characterised it as the 'pervasive pejorative' in area archaeology.

Through research contesting this view, settlement pattern data from northern Honduras have previously been interpreted as exemplifying heterarchy, understood as the expression of multiple overlapping hierarchies, in distinct aspects of social life. Most settlements are located to accommodate farming. Larger towns that are roughly evenly spaced provided opportunities for rural populations to participate in seasonal ceremonies, ball games and possibly markets.

These archaeological patterns have been interpreted as evidence of people maintaining less hierarchy than neighbouring Maya societies, resisting the development of inequality. Yet these characterisations still fall into the trap of assuming that continued development of inequality – continuing concentration of hierarchies – would normally be expected. The analyses end up reinforcing the pejorative. Instead, in this article, following David Graeber and David Wengrow (2022, 130–2, 426–7, 503), I argue that what characterised this area was greater freedom

than in neighbouring Maya societies. Considering the structuring role of freedom to move, to refuse commands and to create new forms of social life enables to understand underlying dynamics that the heterarchy model was missing. It allows for an account of the growth and decline of settlements as outcomes of strategies by leading families (exercises of their freedoms) and refusal of these by the broader population (drawing on Audra Simpson's [2007] concept of Indigenous refusal, to emphasise that this is not simply 'resistance'). Central to these strategies in this region are visual media through which social values were created and recreated in this politically anarchic population.

Persistent Ulúa social worlds

Between 500 and 1000 AD, fired clay and carved marble objects were created in the lower Ulúa river valley (Figure 1) in what archaeologists
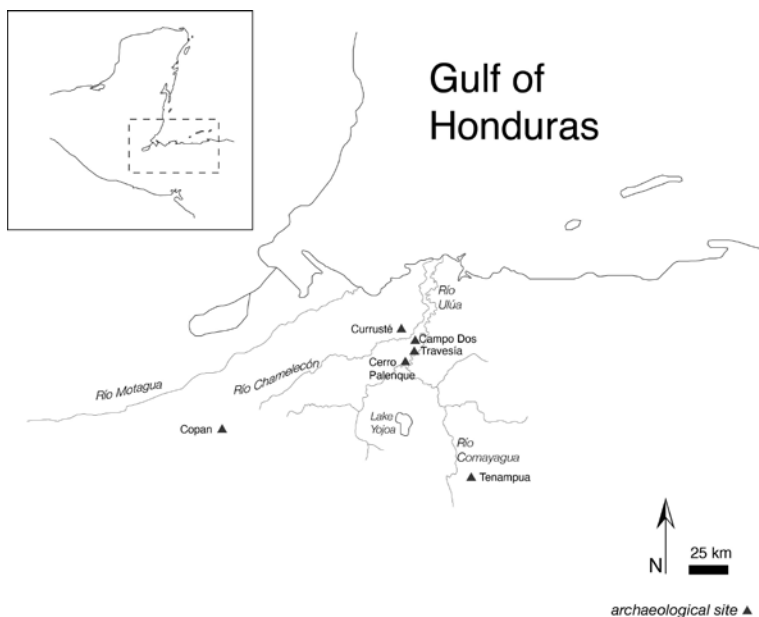
Figure 1   Locations of sites mentioned in the article

today call Ulúa style (Hendon et al. 2014, 14–22; Joyce 2017, 25–7; Luke 2002, 57–69). Ulúa-style figurines and painted pots were produced in multiple workshops dispersed throughout the region (Joyce et al. 2014, 415–17; Lopiparo and Joyce 2022, 84–7). Ulúa marble vases were produced in smaller numbers, most likely in workshops in a single town (Luke and Tykot 2007, 317–8). In all three media, Ulúa style emphasised adherence to conventional patterns of images, resulting in the production of multiple objects with the same images.

Jeanne Lopiparo (2003, 228–9) has argued that moulds, which ensured the reproduction of desired imagery in Ulúa figurines, were not employed to produce multiple copies. Multiple figurines that maintain the same details were produced from different moulds. Lopiparo suggests that moulds produced by more skilled members of a community of practice ensured less skilled hands could produce images legible to the community. I reach related conclusions about Ulúa polychrome painted pottery (Joyce 2017, 19–28). Often compared to the unique images of named persons that characterise polychrome pottery in the neighbouring Maya lowlands, Ulúa polychrome vessels (Figure 2) have a distinctive character. Skilled artisans striving to produce a series of almost identical vessels created images so similar that sherds of different vessels can appear interchangeable.

Ulúa marble vases, while produced in much smaller numbers, share with the more popular media an emphasis on highly standardised forms and designs (Luke 2002, 57–69). Throughout their two centuries of manufacture, carvers of Ulúa marble vases inscribed the surface of

Figure 2 Ulúa polychrome vessel (Source: photograph by Justin Kerr. 1999. *The Maya Vase Book* 4, no. 567: K4628)

these stone vessels with a field of volutes from which emerges a frontal anthropomorphic face, framed above and below by one or two distinct geometric bands. The earliest examples copy forms of contemporary Ulúa polychrome vases. Pairs of lugs attached to the body initially echo modelled bird heads on ceramics. Later marble vessels substitute three-dimensional figures of felines for bird heads.

Stone sculpture is otherwise uncommon in the Ulúa region. Rare sculptures serve to distinguish certain buildings, embellishing roofs and doorways (Joyce 1988, 272). They are not a medium for inscribing names and deeds of individual people as in neighbouring Maya city-states.

Differences from practices in the Maya lowlands like these contribute to seeing the Ulúa region as failing to achieve state formation. That formulation presumes states are inevitable or even desirable developments. Instead, we might ask whether the human subjects depicted in the visual culture of the Ulúa region are best interpreted as would-be counterparts to Maya rulers, who were simply less effective; as heads of chiefdoms stuck on the way to becoming states – or something else entirely. Answering this question starts with reconsidering settlement data from perspectives informed by theories of heterarchy and anarchic social organisation.

Settlement patterns in the lower Ulúa valley

Surveys carried out in the lower Ulúa valley between 1979 and 1983 located remains of over 500 prehispanic settlements in a 2,400 km² survey area, the majority contemporary with the Maya Late Classic period (Henderson 1988, 8–11, 15). Studies of 1:20,000 stereo air photos showed that visible sites, which surface collections and excavations suggest were occupied between 500 and 1000 AD, are distributed nearly continuously along past river courses (Sheptak 1982, 92). Most sites are composed of clusters of earthen platforms that excavations show once supported largely perishable structures – residences of groups of farmers (Lopiparo 2003, 130–66). Around these structures, excavators recovered discarded remains of stone tools used in food preparation and ceramic vessels, the majority unslipped or red-on-buff jars, large basins or shallow cooking vessels. Vessels in forms appropriate

for food serving in both hamlets and towns were polychrome painted (Beaudry-Corbett et al. 1993, 106–30). Evidence of household-based craft production was present in many settlements. Mould-made production of figurines was especially frequent (Lopiparo 2006, 139–43, 158–60). Several different technologies for firing ceramics have been documented in small villages and larger towns (Joyce et al. 2014, 415–17; Lopiparo and Joyce 2022, 84–7). Chipped stone tool production was not uncommon. Production of more perishable products, including bark cloth and spun thread, was less frequent, but specialist tools for this purpose were found in multiple sites (Joyce 1991, 99, 106; Hendon 2010, 134, 139–45). Marble working was the least common craft, with evidence noted at one site, Travesía (Luke and Tykot 2007, 317–8).

Travesía is an example of a town, one of a series identified as nodes for hinterlands of roughly equal size (Stone 1941, 58–86; Hendon et al. 2014, 77–80). Towns had some larger stone structures and special purpose architecture, such as ballcourts. At Travesía, buildings in the most imposing residential compound were plastered with thick white stucco and provided with stone roof merlons carved with unique imagery. Residents of places like this sought to assert an elevated status at different points in their history. The visual culture consumed by residents of even these towns tells a different story: there is no evidence these families were successful in asserting lasting dominance.

Ulúa visual culture

Even in larger towns in the lower Ulúa valley, visual culture presents images of interdependence and de-emphasises identifying specific human actors, as was done in the neighbouring Maya region using writing. Instead, Ulúa polychrome pottery depicts collaborative action by groups of people and anthropomorphised animals that may be figures from foundational narratives. The painted polychrome ceramics produced at Travesía, used by its most prominent family for everyday meals, present an anthropomorphised monkey as the focal actor, not a human personage (Joyce 2017, 47–60, 125–34). Anthropomorphic figurines at this site present images of pairs of humans, their body features uniform, joined into single subjects (Hendon et al. 2014, 99–135).

The most elaborate Ulúa-style figurines known do represent subjects wearing distinctive pendants, with body painting, filed teeth and other traits associated with higher statuses (Hendon et al. 2014, 24–5). These circulated between family groups and were not part of a technology for asserting political sovereignty. Bodily features and patterns of dress denote sex or gender, with male and female subjects both shown as prominent. Distinctive headdresses associate figurines with specific settlements or social groups living in specific towns or hamlets. While most figurines are singular subjects, some were constructed as pairs, presented as unified subjects of action. Individual figurines were sometimes assembled and deposited in groups as well. A small group of larger three-dimensional ceramic figures were produced, positioned on top of lids of incense burning vessels. These anthropomorphic figures hold incense bags and other ritual implements, or carry bundles of bones (Lopiparo and Joyce 2022, 72–5).

Polychrome painted ceramics also represent figures wearing distinctive headdresses, belt ornaments or items of clothing. Yet even such differentiated anthropomorphic figures are commonly shown participating in shared action. Many of these actions are the same as those represented in figurines and the larger figures: anthropomorphic figures wearing costumes hold musical instruments, present bowls or carry jars on their head. The common topic is people participating in ceremony, playing music, dancing, burning incense, presenting food and drink.

Interpreting visual culture in settlement contexts

Viewed through the evolutionary lens that has been normative for understanding political organisation, the roughly equal-sized hinterlands of Ulúa towns look like territories under command. Yet the boundaries we can draw equidistant from the attractions of nearest neighbour towns do not delimit differences in style of objects, nor interruptions in the continuous distributions of houses of farmers along waterways. We are confronted with two maps of the same territory. One assumes the presence of a pre-state cluster of chiefdoms. The other envisions farmers living in homesteads located according to the logics of water and soil, of histories of dwelling and of relations to place. Some families, especially

those that were long-lived, developed distinctive forms of engagement with others in their vicinity, serving as hosts of ball games, dances and other events, to which people could come but in which they were under no evident compulsion to participate. Rather than failed states, the region is a testament to flexible social relations that proved sustainable for very long periods of time.

Sustainable social relations: heterarchy, seasonality and the freedom to move

When we shift frames in this way, from the political to the social, the Ulúa region makes sense as an example of what Carole Crumley (1987, 155–69) called heterarchy. In our first exploration of this alternative, Julia Hendon and I showed that in one 95 km² region along the Rio Cuyumapa, a tributary of the Ulúa river, social relations were visible only when we attended to the pragmatics facing farmers (Joyce and Hendon 2000, 147–53). Settlement distribution here followed water courses and access to land appropriate for farming. A seasonal rhythm allowed for the dispersed population to assemble in a few distinctive places that hosted ball games. We documented an unexpected high frequency of ballcourts in two different configurations. Those with shorter playing alleys were accompanied by one other monumental building. These ballcourts were oriented slightly east of north. Others, with longer alleys oriented along a northwest to southeast axis, formed parts of larger plazas with multiple monumental structures.

Rather than see sites with ballcourts as forming two levels of a single political hierarchy, we identified them as nodes in patterns of seasonal circulation (Joyce et al. 2009, 64–70). Ballcourts with longer alleys, oriented towards the winter sunrise horizon, were in more central locations along main rivers. Ballcourts with shorter alleys and less monumental construction were located in places more removed from the main rivers. Their alleys faced the horizon of summer sunrise. For people living in these valleys, public performances and participation in them varied by season. During the summer, when care for plants in the fields would have counselled restrictions on travel, farming

families might still participate in solstice ceremonies at nearby ball-courts located away from the major rivers. In winter, after the harvest, some people might take advantage of the break in seasonal agricultural tasks to travel longer distances to larger, more centrally located ball-courts. Here, they would encounter people from even further away, whose visits are testified to by individual ceramic vessels of exotic origin (Joyce et al. 2009, 69).

The apparent dominance of places with ballcourts was implicitly temporary, seasonal, not continuous. They were potential gathering places that anyone could use freedom of movement to visit, where the freedom to create different forms of social life was exercised throughout the year, but no one was compelled to attend. In counterpoint to these places of seasonal ceremony, houses were distributed continuously along river courses, according to practicalities of agriculture. This, we argued, was an example of the core idea of heterarchy. Heterarchy, alternatively described as multiple hierarchies in the same space, makes it possible to imagine a landscape fragmented under different regimes of control. Yet that conception retained the notion that hierarchy is inevitable. Returning to our initial observation that the settlement distribution along the Cuyumapa river seemed unstructured, we can move beyond these initial efforts to engage with contemporary theories of anarchic social life.

Archaeologists working in a number of areas have begun to engage with anarchy theory. One recent summary of this emerging work states that 'the theory of anarchism primarily concerns the organization of society in a way that fosters egalitarian or equitable forms of association and cooperation and resists all forms of domination' (Angelbeck et al. 2018, 1). For example, Bill Angelbeck and Colin Grier (2012) present Coast Salish history as marked by a lack of formalised government, without centralised authority. Yet this existed alongside social complexity, that is, diversity in social positions and a rich body of technologies used to enhance daily life and periodic events. Angelbeck and Grier (2012, 547) assert that an anarchist theory of history 'emphasizes an ongoing and active resistance to concentrations of power', and they provide an analysis that seeks evidence of this kind of resistance. The late history of Travesía offers an opportunity to explore the kind of contestation of assertion of hegemony that Angelbeck and Grier discuss

for the Pacific Northwest, while considering how to take another step away from the matrix of cultural evolutionary theory and its focus on inequality towards an understanding of the exercise and preservation of freedom.

Travesía and the freedom to refuse to follow orders

Travesía's town centre includes a ballcourt built in an open plan, potentially inviting circulation, adjacent to a raised, enclosed residential compound (Hendon et al. 2014, 99–135; Stone 1941, 58–86). This is the kind of spatial locus archaeologists in Central America are used to identifying as the residence of a political authority, a chief. Christina Luke has convincingly argued that the family living in this closed compound patronised carving of vases made of locally available marble (Luke and Tykot 2007, 317–18). She shows that these intricate works were sent as singular gifts to families in the Maya lowlands of Guatemala and Belize, as well as to distant southern partners living as far away as what today is Costa Rica (Luke 2010, 45–50). They ended up as possessions of people that archaeologists regard today as rulers of city-states and others who are seen as leaders of chiefdoms.

Some Ulúa marble vases were distributed to people in other settlements within the Ulúa valley. Yet the majority of neighbouring places did not participate in exchanges of these stone objects. Few of the towns identified in the region have evidence of these objects. Instead, a vibrant localised production of ceramic effigies of Ulúa marble vessels developed using the mould technology that was already central to the visual culture of the region (Hendon et al. 2014, 67–9, 109–11; Joyce 2017, 217–18). Studies of chemical composition of fine paste vessels that include ceramic effigies of marble vases indicate they were produced in multiple workshops (Lopiparo 2007, 78–9). Rather than responding to Travesía's monopoly on white stone vases by entering into relations of dependency to acquire these rarities, the majority of Travesía's neighbours refused. They made their own 'marble' vases from clay, some examples complete with a thick white slip that covered their clay core. Abundant anthropomorphic figurines, also products of the ubiquitous, decentralised mould technology, represent women holding

vases of this kind in shared ritual practices (Lopiparo 2006, 140–3). In these novel ceramic works, Ulúa crafters eliminated the most distinctive visual element of the stone vases, frontal anthropomorphic faces, the feature that centred individual human subjectivity.

These gestures are traces of the exercise of freedoms that Travesía found no way to revoke; refusals of an assertion of hierarchy. Travesía's leading family pursued its freedom to (attempt to) create new forms of social relations. but they were incapable of successfully imposing demands on people who exercised their freedom to refuse to follow orders. Ulúa people in general avoided falling into more enduring hierarchical structures. In the words of James Scott (2009, 26–32), they practised the art of not being governed. Part of the way they did that was by crafting and using items marked by visual images, media for worldmaking that refused centralisation and control. This leads me to ask: what happens if we take Scott's art of not being governed literally, interpreting art to index visual culture? What is the art of the ungoverned – the visual culture that celebrates and makes normal social relations with a minimum of inequality or, to maintain my focus on not seeing like a state, with a maximum of freedom?

Not seeing like a state: the art of being ungoverned

We can turn to an evocative Ulúa polychrome pot to explore this question (Figure 2). In roll-out view, a scene is repeated twice. A single profile figure appears at the left, seated on a raised platform under an ornamented roof. This figure's body is compressed and details are not entirely clear. In front of the stepped platform on which he sits his hand is extended, holding a staff ending in a circular element, ornamented above and below with feathers or possibly cut paper, material also suggested by the fringe along the roof. The seated figure's face is directed towards a pair of standing figures occupying twice as much space, shown facing each other. These standing figures are dressed in zoomorphic costumes, with feline pelage marking on the face, and wear a belt with a pendant at the back. In one hand they hold a rattle, in the other a long reed – possibly another musical instrument or item of dance regalia.

In addition to occupying less space in the painting, the seated figure has fewer markers of distinction. The seated and standing figures all have jewellery at their ankles and wrists, but the standing figures add visible ear spools and an ornamented headband, while the seated figure's hair is covered by a simple wrapped turban. In contrast to the long, elaborately ornamented kilts and loincloths displayed by the standing figures, the seated figure displays only a simpler short hipcloth.

Are the visual relations presented those of hierarchy – or of other forms of difference and connection? Based on widely shared practices of prehispanic Central America, being seated on a platform or bench singles out a social position different from that of other people (Mendelsohn 2022, 222–5). This is reinforced on the Ulúa polychrome vessel by the placement of a carved image of a mat, a sign of such distinction, above the seated figure. Yet it is only in the minds of the viewers who see all difference in terms of hierarchy, all distinction as putatively permanent, that this must imply an enduring power to command.

When we re-emplace the visual image in its material form by considering how it appears as the vessel is viewed, turned around from one scene to another, we can see the minimisation of the seated figure in favour of the standing figures. They take up much more space. They also are associated with carved images. One stands below a single quatrefoil from which emerge scrolls. In the second instance, this emblem of emergence from a central place is doubled, with a twisted motif joining the two quatrefoils, giving each standing dancer their own centred place.

The standing figures that occupy most of the space on Ulúa polychromes like this are dancers and ritualists (Joyce 2017, 288–93). More detailed and infinitely more legible visual signs make up their appearance than the images of seated figures shown watching their performances. The seated figures often appear subordinated to the ornamented structures in which they crouch or on which they sit. None of the humans in any of these scenes has a unique historic identity denoted by written texts. The abstract signs that frame them indicate their spatial settings, seated (on the mat) or centrally located (in the middle of the quatrefoil).

Recognising the visual relations here is one step to seeing these art works as objects through which collaborative action is given value. Ulúa polychrome pots like this, with multi-figure narrative compositions, are actually both late and rare. The earliest human figures on Ulúa poly-chromes were singular or were repeated in series. These figures engage with nonhuman objects, masks or other items of regalia. On many vessels, the centred images are nonhumans, including headdresses, masks or even mats, ritual regalia placed in the position of agential subjects. Modern observers, collectors and museum curators privilege late Ulúa polychromes with multiple human figures engaged in narra-tive action, yet even in the latest period of production when these kinds of compositions become more common, human subjects are presented in series, or alternate, and are interchangeable with nonhuman subjects. From the first depiction of anthropomorphic figures before 600 AD to the end of the Ulúa painted pottery tradition in the early ninth century, humans, when represented, are participants in ritual, with little focus on individual identity, and more on the regalia that made them ritu-ally efficacious: masks, backracks, staffs and headdresses (Joyce 2017, 33–4, 298–307).

Pragmatically (in their use), materially (in their making) and discursively (in what they represent) these vessels inscribe belonging, being part of a series, as a valued positionality. They do this through the medium of skilled painting, used not to produce unique images of individualised actors, but to make pots that repeatedly reiterate shared participation in ritual processions, dances and offerings. The collective agency of groups enabled the actions shown, in which vessels, figural instruments and other regalia were active. Painted vessels, turned from one view to another, present each participant as of equal visual impor-tance. It makes no sense to try to impose a logic of individualism, or hier-archy, on visuality so insistent on relationality and the combination of participants in intra-action. Does the pair of figures carrying an incense burning vessel and incense bag (Figure 3) lead a procession or end it? Are the musicians playing rattles and flutes setting the pace or accompa-nying the gestures of the incense burners? The pragmatic effects incense burners, rattles, flutes and even the vessels depicting them have are a product of actions by interdependent persons. Once the embodiment of agentiality, as defined by Karen Barad (2003, 815–8), and in the series

Figure 3   Rollout of image on Ulúa polychrome vase from La Ceiba Site 2, Lake Yojoa (Source: Frontispiece in William D. Strong, Alfred V. Kidder II and Anthony J. Drexel Paul, Jr. 1938. 'Preliminary report on the Smithsonian Institution – Harvard University archaeological expedition to Northwestern Honduras, 1936'. *Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections* 97, no. 1: 1–129)

identified as the effect of Ulúa visual culture, it becomes visible everywhere – even in the larger towns viewed by archaeologists as promising, if ultimately failed, attempts to create hierarchical chiefdoms.

Being ungoverned: the freedom to create new forms of social relations

At Travesía, figurines of paired humans provide the only abundant form of anthropomorphic imagery (Hendon et al. 2014, 99–135). Their individuality obscured, lacking even the differences in garments that in other cases allow assignment of female and male genders, these conjoined doubles are displayed as co-actors who seem to merge. They routinely share a visual detail: a single circle standing for the ear spool of either of the two. Only their headdresses sometimes distinguish them. Lopiparo (2003, 200–6) has shown these headdresses are emblematic of social groups residing in specific settlements, denoting collectives, not individuals.

An emphasis on co-action is not limited to extreme images of jointness like those of the figurines from Travesía. We can consider the pairing of separate figurines buried together at Cerro Palenque as another way to visually and pragmatically emphasise collaboration (Hendon et al. 2014, 137–58). This pair embodies the interdependency of masked dancers and women providing drink for the events through which social life was transacted. These are the kind of activities whose

traces remained around the buried bodies of these figurines, in the form of broken and discarded brewing vessels and pottery figural instruments (Joyce 1991, 48–9, 95–6, 114–5). This assemblage of figurines juxtaposes two anthropomorphic beings as materially independent yet pragmatically, discursively interdependent subjects belonging to distinct categories of actors.

These categories of actors appear in different proportions in different media. Figurines depict both masked dancers and women presenting pots in similar numbers. Women are more rarely depicted on polychrome pots, where ritual dancers wearing costume elements like loincloths, considered distinctive male garments, are the common repeated human subjects. Yet the prior actions of women on which rituals depended are indexed by the presence of vessels that female figures carry to the site of ceremony. This is a gesture represented by many figurines and in rare cases on polychrome painted vessels. The prior actions of these ritual participants are also implied by the pragmatic activity of using the pots themselves as drinking vessels.

Ulúa polychrome vessels thus index a temporal sequence, recalling the multiple temporalities instantiated by different ballcourts in the Yoro region. Ulúa visuality offers a temporality on a more intimate scale: the duration of the preparation for and performance of a ritual, a matter of days rather than seasons. We see the moment between one step and another. Meanwhile, the pots themselves imply the time from one episode in a ceremony to the next, from drinking to dancing. The passage of time implied by the absence of women from the moment of dance performance is longer than the duration of the processions and dances shown. All these temporalities invoke the participation of co-actors necessary for events to be effective.

In the more anarchic social world of the makers of Ulúa-style art works, the freedom to create new forms of social relations was available to each actor. There is no reason to expect every person understood relations in the same fashion. We can return to the difference between seated and standing figures in scenes of participation in ritual on Ulúa polychrome vessels, to reconsider the ways effects can be staged by the cylinder form itself. Turning a pot can alternately frame as focal a seated figure or a standing pair burning incense (Figure 4). Social relations become matters of perspective. For the person who was sometimes
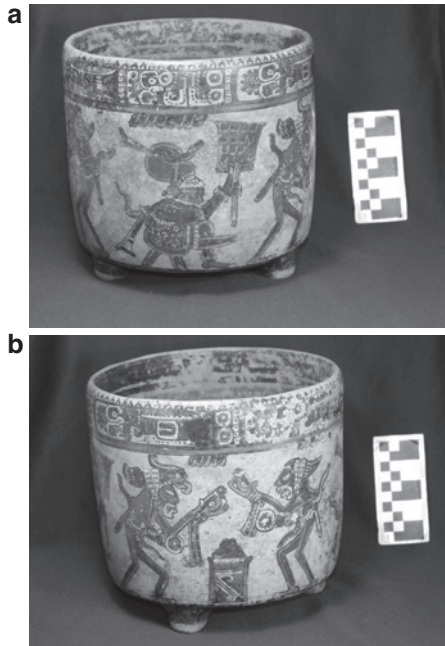
Figure 4 Ulúa polychrome, Tenampua group: (a) figure seated on carved stone bench; (b) pair of figures burning incense (Source: photograph by Russell N. Sheptak/Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of the American Indian catalogue number 24/4275)

seated on a carved stone bench, a rarity obtained through low volume exchange over long distance, an Ulúa polychrome pot showing someone seated on such a bench may have denoted a relationship of difference asserted as one of domination. Yet such effects were subject to counter by others using the freedom to refuse to follow orders.

We could view the relations in scenes showing seated and standing figures on Ulúa polychromes as those of dependency of the standing ritualists on the seated figure under whose gaze they operate. That would be seeing like a state. Or we could attend to the engagement between the standing figures in these scenes and the degree to which the seated figure becomes part of their setting, a furnishing of the scene. We could follow the visual lead of the artists, giving our attention to the ritual actions in which the standing figures with their incense bags

and musical instruments specialise, and the art of not being governed that their practice entails, their freedom to create novel forms of social relations.

Discussion

The arguments I and my colleagues have previously made for viewing the people of the Ulúa region as successful at limiting the development of inequality, and our argument that different principles of organisation were operating at the same time to produce a heterarchical landscape, remain sound. However, these characterisations, while countering the claims of stagnation and failure that underlie the cultural evolutionary assumptions employed in the region, do not provide a complete framework for examination. Turning to an analysis of contestation over basic freedoms materially improves our interpretation of the empirical data. It helps us to see the creation of visual culture that occupied so much of the productive efforts of Ulúa people as an active aspect of the way in which they asserted different understandings of social possibilities, made them real and made them impossible to deny.

We see no evidence of successful claims of enduring power to command others in the lower Ulúa valley. Visual culture represents groups of people, acting together in rituals, creating social credit for them jointly. Ulúa artisans do not borrow Maya writing, of which they were aware, to mark individual identities of community leaders. In the cases where we see a family trying to consolidate more authority, as at Travesía, independent artisans produce their own equivalents of novel objects for use in ritual, and no greater population is drawn into the town. Even at Cerro Palenque, where a larger population assembled in the valley after 850 AD, people retained their freedom to refuse to stay in a town where the leading family failed to deliver the goods. Sovereignty was never successfully consolidated in the lower Ulúa valley.

Instead, Ulúa people continued to exercise their freedom to create new forms of social life. We can see the actions of the leading family of Travesía, aligning its household and ballcourt not just to the traditional sacred mountain but also to solstices as this kind of

exercise of freedom. We might speculate that part of the argument made for the new town at Cerro Palenque was a return to traditional values, reinforcing the importance of the sacred mountain by actually building a city on a hill.

During Cerro Palenque's growth, new forms of visual culture were produced through the exercise of freedom in workshops where people formed communities of practice with long histories of mastering clay processing and firing, ultimately experimenting with levigation of clay to produce new, thin-walled, monochrome pottery. Marble crafters changed from using white marble to green, aligning their products with novel aesthetics. A play of possibilities that crafters enjoyed resulted in an astonishing variety of visually embellished things which were co-actors in novel forms of social life.

The cultivation of these freedoms maintained what in some ways may be the most fundamental freedom of them all: the freedom to move, to leave one place and go to another. This was the freedom that drew people from farming hamlets into towns like Travesía to partic-ipate in the celebrations around seasonal moments, watch ballgames and witness ritual performances. It was the freedom that allowed people to move away from places in the valley where life was disrupted by changes in river courses to others where new crops might be culti-vated. And this is also the freedom exercised by people who gave up on Cerro Palenque when it proved to be unrewarding to stay, establishing new places to live along the river. These exercises of freedom are all archaeologically perceptible; they need only our reorientation from older models and questions to become visible.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

Consent for publication statement

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Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this article. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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