

Links between Shamanism and Saladoid/Barrancoid Effigy Vessels: Case Study of Blanchisseuse and Golden Grove in Trinidad and Tobago

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Abstract

This paper explores the links between shamanism and pottery vessels from Blanchisseuse and Golden Grove archaeological sites in Trinidad and Tobago. It relied on the theory that there is continuity between the Saladoid/Barrancoid people and the Arawaks. Iconographic and formal analyses were carried out on sherds from these sites. Results from these analyses were used to discuss how pottery vessels were used as conduits into the spirit world, through their functions as storage, transfer, transformation containers.

Keywords: Saladoid/Barrancoid, shaman, pottery vessel, storage, transformation, transfer

Introduction

The element that ties Saladoid/Barrancoid adornos and pottery designs to cosmology and mythology is shamanism. Shamanism can be “defined as a religious system in which individuals act as religious intermediaries between humans and spirits” (VanPool 2009, 180). Otherwise put, the shaman was the central practitioner in the cosmographic landscape, and was the one who mediated “at the celestial nave or *axis mundi* with hidden spirit worlds on behalf of his community” (Stahl 1986, 134). The symbolism of the adornos represents the shaman’s “interpretive power, gained from unrestricted movement throughout the cosmos” (Stahl 1986, 134). All the objects used within shamanistic rituals had spiritual and cosmological significance. In this paper, I will examine the functions of shamanic paraphernalia from the Blanchisseuse and Golden Grove archaeological sites in Trinidad and Tobago.

Methodology

Formal and iconographic analyses were carried out on forty adornos from the Blanchisseuse and Golden Grove sites at the Centre of Archaeology, University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus. An equal amount of adornos was chosen from each site. The primary objective was to identify the cosmological relationship between the Saladoid/Barrancoid effigy vessels and shamanism. The research relied on the theory of cultural continuity between the Saladoid/Barrancoid and the Arawak peoples to establish the shamanic functions of the adornos.

Background

The Saladoid and Barrancoid cultures were first identified along the banks of the Orinoco river in Venezuela. The Saladoid people entered Trinidad from as early as 500 B.C. and were later followed by the Barrancoid at about A.D. 500 (Boomert 2000, 129; Boomert 2006, 66; Reid 2005; Saunders 2005, 27). Archaeological data gathered from artefact assemblage, burial and settlement patterns suggest that the Saladoid and Barrancoid people practiced a mixed economy of pottery making, hunting, fishing, foraging, and horticulture (Keegan 2000, 142; Boomert 2000, 314; Saunders 2005, xiii; Siegel 2010, 305). It is generally inferred that the Saladoid had an egalitarian or “tribal based” society (Siegel 1992), but alternatives have been postulated that range from theories about Big Man societies to theories that suggest hierarchically more complex societies (Boomert 2000; Hofman and Hoogland 2004; Petersen 1996; Reid, Hofman, Gilmore III and Armstrong 2014). These evidences along with ethnographic data from the Arawak-speaking Indians reveal cultural continuity among these groups (Heckenberger 2006, 110-111). The belief system of the Saladoid and Barrancoid peoples was based on a tropical-forest cosmology which was expressed in their village layout (Siegel 2010, 306-314; Boomert 2000, 461-465; Reid 2002, 5-8). The relationship between Saladoid religion and pottery was discussed by Boomert (2000) and Reid (2002), who identified a link between pottery effigies and shamanism. This relationship is evident in the Saladoid/Barrancoid pottery from Golden Grove and Blanchisseuse.

Discussion

Two types of vessel shapes (platters and bowls), were identified among the Blanchisseuse and Golden Grove sherds. They carried a variety of motifs. The decorative techniques included zoned incised cross hatching, incised lines, painting, simple and complex modelling. The modelled figures represent anthropomorphic, zoomorphic and anthropozoomorphic effigies. The identifiable zoomorphic effigies included reptiles, mammals and a parrot. These figures show similar imagery to the South American Saladoid tradition. They therefore represent a “continuation of the mainland [Saladoid/Barrancoid] sculptural iconography” and belief system (Boomert 2000, 463). Vessels with similar representations were still in use at the time of the first European contact and might have been deemed “physical representations of protector deities [that] represented clan ancestors” envisioned by the shaman in hallucinogenic trances (Siegel 1996, 323).

Effigy vessels were not only repositories for spirits, but containers in which potions and hallucinogens were prepared and ingested. VanPool refers to these vessels as “sacra” (sacred) (VanPool 2009, 177). They were entry points into the spirit world and represented the shamans’ need to induce the Shamanic State of Consciousness (SSC)

(VanPool 2009, 182). Shamans used SSC to travel to the spiritual worlds to gain help and “knowledge from spirits for healing, manipulating weather (e.g., rain seeking), divinations, ensuring successful hunts or raids, finding lost objects, killing enemies, or other important activities such as ensuring fertility and fecundity for the benefit of their people” (VanPool 2009, 180). The shaman achieved SSC by means of an Altered State of Consciousness (ASC). VanPool postulated that the difference between both lies at the state of consciousness – that is, during the ASC the shaman is unaware of what is happening while in the SSC he/she is conscious and able to communicate as well as control his/her actions (180).

Linking Saladoid/Barrancoid pottery adornos to shamanism means finding the connection between them and the SSC and ASC experiences. Most discussions on these effigy vessels are centred on burial (Drew 2009, 168-169; Waldron 2011, 11; Boomert 2000, 148). In addition, pottery played a very important symbolic as well as physical role in shamanistic rituals. These functions may be divided into three realms: storage, transformation and transference (Rice 1987, 208).

Shamanic Storage Vessels

As storage vessels, pottery was used to contain a variety of substances needed to conduct rituals. Platters stored dried products such as tobacco leaves, quartz crystals, vines, flowers, bones and other forms of non-liquid substances or paraphernalia. Bowls are capable of storing either solid or liquid products. Shamans might have used bowls to store or serve liquids such as brews made from hallucinogenic plants like the *datura* (*Datura stramonium*). Small bowls with restricted orifices and pairs of short tube-like extensions have been found at several sites in Trinidad and Tobago, including Blanchisseuse and Golden Grove (Boomert 2000, 479). These are referred to as nostril bowls. They might have been used by the Saladoid people for pouring tobacco or pepper juice into the nostrils as is practiced by shamans in the Guianas (480). But as mentioned earlier, pottery vessels were also used to contain spiritual entities and served as grave goods. The burial site discovered by Harris at Atagual yielded four vessels, including two open bowls, a bottle and a small bat effigy (Boomert 2003, 164). These vessels might have stored food that was used as grave offerings. In general, Saladoid burial practices included the “occasional use of ceramic bowls . . . placed under, beside or over the deceased” and a few cases of infant burials within pottery (Drew 2009, 168).

Transformation

Transformation involves changing from one state to another. This includes the use of pottery for the processing of ritual substances, purification procedures, healing rituals,

shamanic transformations and life cycle ceremonies. Because of the fragility of the Blanchisseuse and Golden Grove pottery, I can safely assert that shamanic pottery vessels were used to wash, boil and soak substances, as in South America, and not to pound or grind products (VanPool 2009, 181). Some brews that might have been prepared by Saladoid/ Barrancoid shamans were tobacco (*Nicotiana rustica*) and ayahuasca (*Banisteriopsis caapi*). In contemporary South America, these species are “considered to be the most important and powerful [plants] in the Indigenous Amazonian cosmivision” (ASC) and medical practice, and they are also processed in effigy vessels (Jauregui 2011, 743).

From a scientific perspective, adornos played another very important role in the transformation process. They and other forms of non-smoothing decorations were significant modifiers of the thermal properties of vessels used in the boiling of substances, as an uneven exterior has more surface area to absorb heat from a fire (Rice 1987, 232). Thus, adorned vessels were ideal for boiling purposes.

Effigy vessels might have also served as washing vessels during rituals. Washing transforms objects through purification. Therefore, the washing of plants prior to use started the transformation process of purification. The process of purification was not limited to the plants but was also a necessity for shamans. The most common plants used in purification rituals included: “*Aristolochia cauliflora*, *Ficus insipida*/*Ficus schultesii*, *Nicotiana rustica*, *Strychnos Sp.*, *Uncaria guianensis*, *Uncaria tomentosa*, *Hura crepitans*, *Ogcodeia tamamuri*, and *Banisteriopsis caapi* and *Chenopodium ambrosioides*” (Jauregui et. al 2011, 746). To date, there is no evidence of these flora in Trinidad and Tobago. In South American Amerindian societies, these plants were ingested by shamanic initiates so that they could “purify themselves and prepare their bodies” to meet the spirits of the “vegetables or mothers of the plants” (Jauregui et. al. 2011, 746). As mentioned earlier, there is evidence that the Saladoid/Barrancoid people of Blanchisseuse and Golden Grove also conducted these shamanistic practices and that, most likely, effigy vessels were used for the decoction of chemicals from certain plants.

Another transformative practice that requires the use of ritual vessels is healing. “Shamanic therapies involve several biological mechanisms for the transformation of the patient’s health” that are achieved by the manipulation of consciousness through the use of hallucinogens (Winkleman 2004, 210). In many Amazonian societies, ayahuasca (*Banisteriopsis caapi*) is administered in healing rituals. To make this medicine, a “fresh piece of *Banisteriopsis caapi* bark is boiled together with a fresh handful of chacruna leaves (*Psychotria viridis*) and a flor de toé (*Brugmansia suaveolens* flower) until a thick liquid decoction is produced”(Rätsch 2005). Such potions might have been prepared and served in effigy vessels.

The shaman was also the master of transformations. By transforming “into a powerful feline, snake, or raptor,” he could transcend the “mundane world and [fly]

through the cosmos,” to distant spiritual realms (Stahl 1986, 135). Iconographic portrayals of such creatures might have been associated with shamanic transformations.

Transformation was also linked to life-cycle rituals. Each phase in the life cycle initiates a transformation into different stages in individuals’ lives. But the vessels themselves go through a life cycle, beginning with the mining of clay (conception), purification of clay, modelling of clay into a vessel, decoration of the vessel, firing of the vessel, use of the vessel, destruction of the vessel (death), and finally, the crushing of the vessel to form temper (grog) for a new vessel (rebirth) (Rice 1987, 113-167 and Boomert 2000, 132).

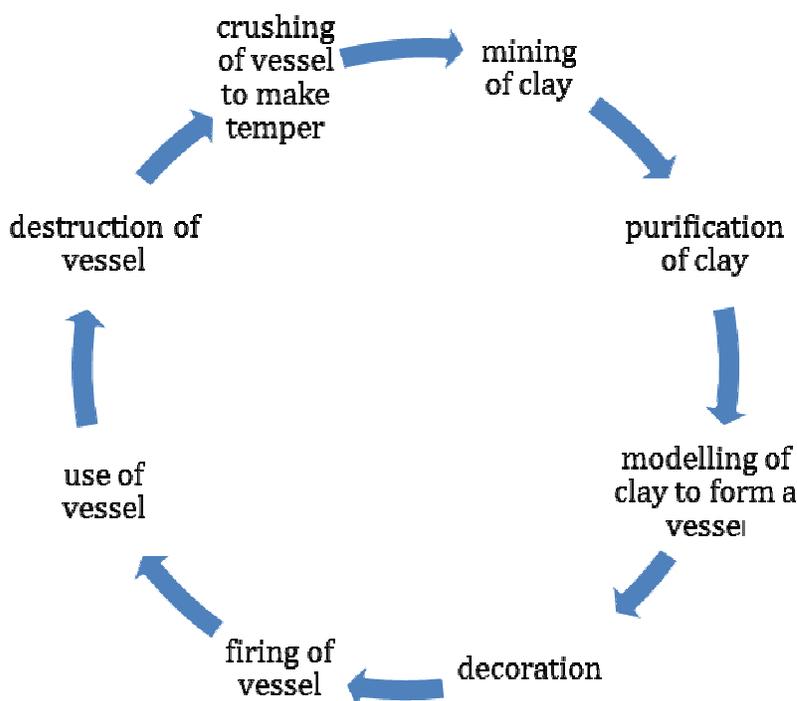


Fig. 41. Life cycle of a clay pot. See Dahlia James-Williams, “Representations of Cosmology: A Study of the Saladoid and Barrancoid Adornos of Trinidad and Tobago 500 B.C. – AD 750” (MPhil diss., University of the West Indies, 2013).

Funerary vessels aided in the transformation of human beings from flesh to spirit. This “continuous cycle of ritual creation, destruction and re-creation can be found in many tropical forest societies and is indeed an important mechanism of cultural and biological survival” in those societies (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1976, 317).

Transfer

Transference refers to transporting or moving pottery vessels and their contents. Easy transference of pottery is dependent on their weight, size and ability to be gripped. Handles or flanges are fitted to earthenware to provide “leverage, prevent slipping and protect against high temperature” (Rice 1987, 226). Two D strap handles and seven flanges were identified among the Blanchisseuse and Golden Grove sherds. Several pieces of sherds from both sites were decorated with zoned incised cross hatching (zic) and curvilinear incised lines. This was also important for transfer as “a rough surface provides a more secure grip” (Rice 1987, 232).

Transfer is linked to storage. In their storage capacity, shamanic vessels were used to transfer spiritual substances (hallucinogens, quartz crystals) as well as spiritual entities. As vessels used to transfer spiritual entities, ritual pottery facilitated the shaman’s movement throughout the spiritual world. Transfer involved the use of pottery vessels by shamans “to find and remove illnesses” (VanPool 2009, 182). With knowledge from the spirit world, shamans occasionally “initiated limited migratory movements by asking people to abandon their homes in order to avoid an approaching epidemic or the presence of evil spirits, both calamities being revealed in divinatory trance[s]” (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1976, 316).

Transfer is also an important theme in the mythology of many South American societies. Several adornos from the Blanchisseuse and Golden Grove sites reflect spiritual creatures highlighted in those myths such as frogs, reptiles, felines and birds. Frog motifs are commonly used on Saladoid/Barranoid pottery and may represent myths pertaining to the “transfer of fire to men” (Roe 1982, 156). In Waiwai mythology, the reptile (dragon) and feline (jaguar) are responsible for the transfer of cultural traits to humanity (Roe 1982, 207). The bird is another important motif that depicts the theme of transfer in South American mythology. Bird-shaped adornos are associated with the celestial realm and are common among Saladoid/Barranoid pottery (Boomert 2000, 467). One parrot adorno also was identified among the Golden Grove sherds. It might have played “an integral role in accompanying shamans in their curing capacity to the realm of the sun in the sky” (Roe 1982, 121). The importance of these creatures in Amerindian cosmology led to their depiction on shamanic effigy vessels.

Conclusion

There exist clear linkages between shamanism and the effigy vessels of the Blanchisseuse and Golden Grove sites. These links operated through the functions of storage, transformation and transference. As storage vessels, they were used as containers to hold potions, hallucinogens, quartz crystals and other substances utilised by the shaman in conducting his rituals. Transformation refers to the changing from one state to another.

The shaman was the master of transformation in his ability to change into spiritual creatures like the jaguar. In the role of transformation, effigy vessels were used to process ritual substances that aided transfigurations. They also played a role in life cycle rituals that mark the transformation from one stage in life to another for example their use as mortuary goods. Physical transfer was facilitated by the handles and flanges fitted unto vessels, as well as incisions which provided leverage.

Finally, the Saladoid/Barranoid adornos of Blanchisseuse and Golden Grove represent important images of South American Amerindian societies and their cosmologies. They reflect Amerindian belief in the spirituality of the universe. The use of effigy vessel to process, transfer and consume hallucinogens aided the shaman in his movement through the spirit world.

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