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Author(s): Linda A. Brown

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FROM DISCARD TO DIVINATION: DEMARCATING THE SACRED THROUGH THE COLLECTION AND CURATION OF DISCARDED OBJECTS

Linda A. Brown

*The artifact assemblage recovered in a sealed undisturbed context inside a ceremonial building (Structure 12) in the ancient village of Joya de Cerén (A.D. 600), a Classic Period site located on the Southeast Maya Periphery, has been particularly enigmatic and difficult to interpret. This assemblage consists of small portable worn objects, some of which show physical and chemical damage consistent with having been previously discarded prior to being carefully curated in a ceremonial building, suggesting that they were collected in antiquity. A review of the ethnographic literature reveals that contemporary Maya ritual practitioners routinely collect small portable objects, many of which are Pre-Columbian in origin, as personal *sacra*. This practice of "ritual collecting" serves multiple purposes including: 1) the acquisition of divining tools, 2) personal verification of divine election, and 3) evidence to one's community of supernatural sanction for a change in social status. Through engaging in this practice, social actors create and manipulate power in local ritual systems that exist outside of the control of contemporary institutionalized religions. It is suggested that collecting may represent an alternative avenue to supernatural power for past, as well as present-day, rural ritual practitioners.*

La zona de Joya de Cerén, ubicada en el valle de Zapotitán en El Salvador, fue una villa agrícola floreciente durante el período clásico en la Periferia Maya del Sudeste (Sheets 1992). Alrededor del año 600 A.C., se abrió un paso volcánico debajo del cercano Río Sucio y sepultó a la villa debajo de cinco metros de ceniza. La erupción inesperada precipitó el abandono inmediato de la comunidad, dejando grupos virtualmente completos de artefactos en su contexto de uso, almacenamiento o desecho. Por lo tanto, Cerén proporciona un caso ideal para el examen de procesos de formación cultural que podrían tener un impacto en los archivos arqueológicos. La evidencia de Cerén sugiere que los practicantes precolombinos de rituales en la villa que trabajaban en un edificio ceremonial (Estructura 12) coleccionaban y curaban objetos encontrados en contextos de desecho. Una revisión de la literatura etnográfica revela que coleccionar era una práctica común entre los practicantes rituales contemporáneos en las tierras altas y bajas de los Mayas. Desde una perspectiva émica, los artículos coleccionados y cuidadosamente curados en grupos personales, en altares y en santuarios comunitarios o de linaje, pueden verse como herramientas importantes con las cuales los practicantes rituales acceden a lo supernatural. En este trabajo, sugiero que la tendencia a <<coleccionar ritualmente>> es parte de una actividad clave para los practicantes rituales de la villa ya que al principio sirve para identificar a individuos que participan en la iniciación y posteriormente se usa como evidencia continua de la sanción supernatural de un estado sagrado. Por sobre todo, el coleccionar se usa como una avenida hacia el poder religioso dentro de los sistemas rituales locales y existe fuera del control de las religiones contemporáneas institucionalizadas. El coleccionar también podría representar un camino alternativo hacia el poder para los practicantes rituales tanto del pasado como de nuestros días.

My objective in this paper is to explore the relationship between collecting discarded objects and the demarcation of the sacred domain among present and past village ritual practitioners. While conducting ethnoarchaeological research in Santiago Atitlán, Guatemala, I noted that contemporary Maya ritual practitioners collected

small discarded objects, many of which are Pre-Columbian, for use as divining tools and personal *sacra*. Discussions with ethnographers and a review of the ethnographic literature confirmed that collecting is widespread among ritual practitioners in the Maya Highlands and Lowlands as well as being documented in other parts of the Americas. From an

Linda A. Brown ■ Department of Anthropology, Campus Box 233, University of Colorado, Boulder 80309-0233

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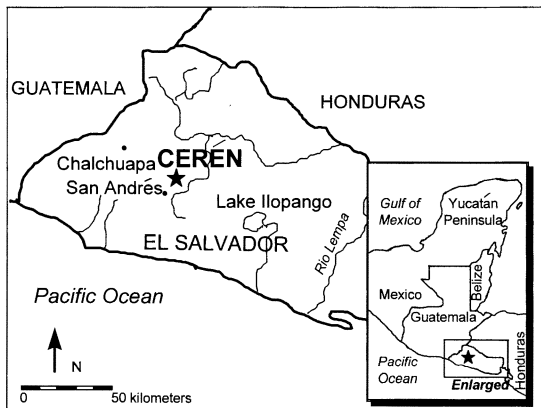


Figure 1. Map of Western El Salvador.

emic perspective, collected items carefully curated in personal bundles, on altars, and at lineage or community shrines are viewed as important tools with which ritual practitioners access the supernatural. In this paper I argue that collecting is a key activity for village ritual practitioners as it initially serves to identify individuals undergoing divine election and subsequently confirms ongoing supernatural sanction for a sacred status. Importantly, collecting is used as an avenue to religious power within local rit-

ual systems and exists outside the control of contemporary institutionalized religions. I will refer to this practice as “ritual collecting” to distinguish it from commercial collecting driven by the needs of the mostly foreign art market in developed countries.

The widespread practice of ritual collecting by contemporary Maya ritual practitioners sheds light on a problematic artifact assemblage curated in a ceremonial building at the site of Cerén, El Salvador. The Cerén site, located in the Zapotitán Valley of El Salvador (Figure 1), was a flourishing Classic Period agricultural community located on the Southeast Maya Periphery, and all artifacts and architecture recovered to date indicate that the ancient community did not have elite residents (Sheets 1992). At around A.D. 600, a volcanic vent opened up beneath the nearby Rio Sucio and buried the community under five meters of ash. The suddenness of the eruption precipitated the rapid abandonment of the community, leaving virtually complete artifact assemblages in their context of use, storage, or discard in addition to preserving fragile earthen architecture (Figure 2). Thus, Cerén provides an ideal case for the examination of cultural site-formation processes that may impact the archaeological record.

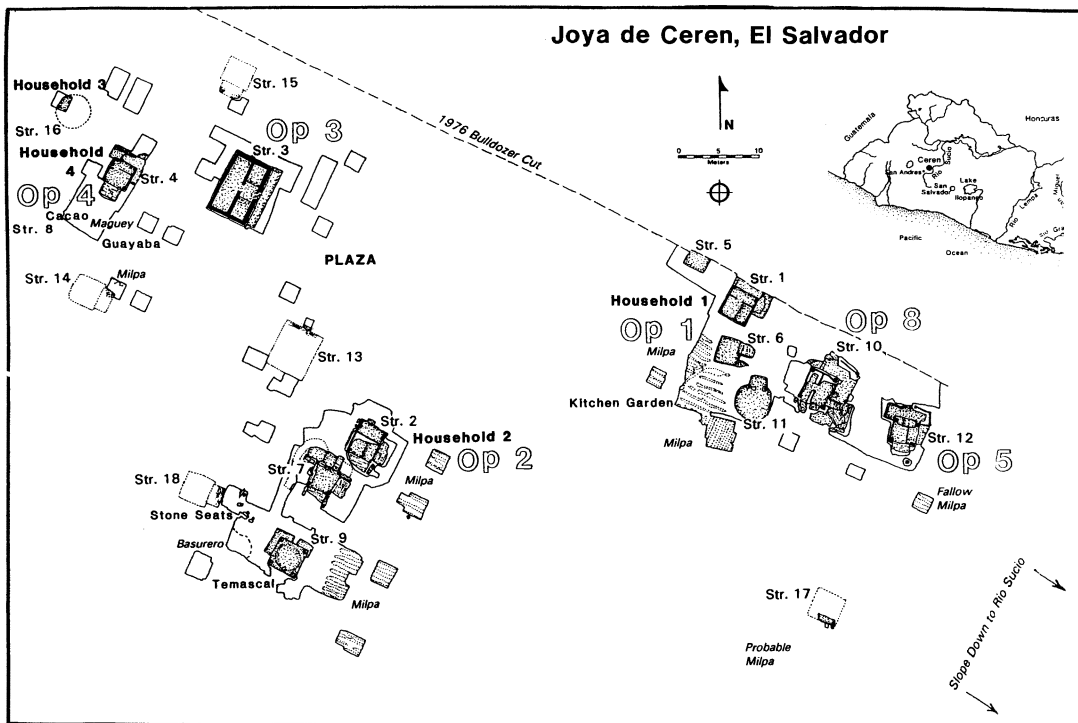


Figure 2. Map of the Joya de Cerén Site, El Salvador. Illustration courtesy of Payson Sheets.

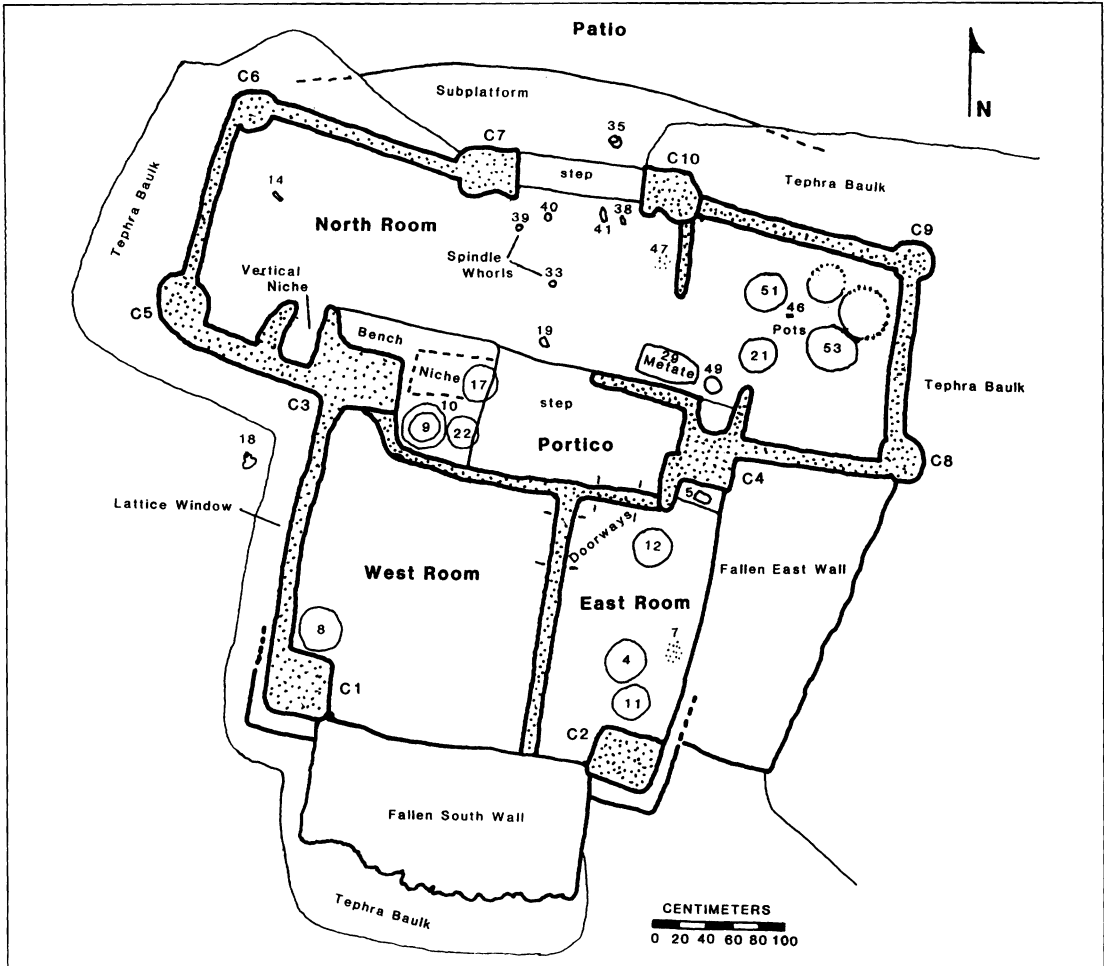


Figure 3. Planimetric Map of Structure 12, Joya de Cerén, El Salvador. Illustration courtesy of Payson Sheets.

At Cerén, evidence suggests that Pre-Columbian village ritual practitioners who worked in a ceremonial building, Structure 12, collected and curated objects found in discard contexts.

Prior to beginning, a few terms should be defined. In using the term "*sacra*" I refer to those objects used in ritual contexts that are believed, by ritual practitioners, to be closely related to the supernatural realm. I use "ritual" to refer to those social actions that "strategically distinguish themselves in relation to other actions . . . [ritual] is a way of acting that is designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, more quotidian, activities" (Bell 1992:74).

"Systemic context" refers to those objects that are participating within a behavioral-use system, while "archaeological context" refers to those objects that have been removed from an active-use context (such

as those in dumps) and are interacting solely with the natural, or archaeological, environment (Schiffer 1987:3-4). Of course, once an object enters an archaeological context it does not necessarily stay there. "Reclamation processes" refer to those cultural site-formation processes (such as collecting, pothunting, and archaeology) that transfer objects from archaeological contexts back into systemic contexts while "collecting" refers to "the disturbance, removal, and transport of surface materials" (Schiffer 1987:99).

Small Portable Artifacts Curated in Structure 12 at Cerén

Structure 12 is the most enigmatic building excavated at Cerén to date (Figure 3). It has been interpreted as serving a ceremonial function within the ancient community and likely was the locus of ritual activ-

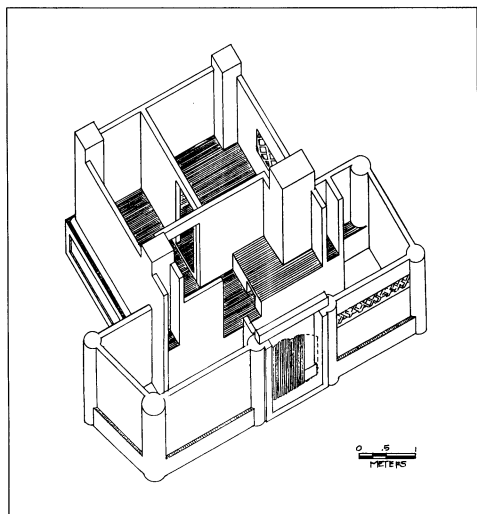


Figure 4. Isomorphic Drawing of Structure 12, Joya de Cerén, El Salvador. Illustration prepared by Karen Kievet.

ity related to divination (Sheets 1992; Sheets and Sheets 1990; Sheets and Simmons 1993). The architecture is unusual in a number of ways, including its two lattice windows, increasingly higher floor levels as one proceeds into the building, and the presence of four vertical niches (Figure 4). Additionally, the artifact assemblage is notable in that it does not appear to conform to any known functional assemblages¹ found in any domestic or special use contexts at the site. The small portable objects in Structure 12 consist of heavily used, broken, or battered items, some well beyond the point of being able to serve any utilitarian function at all. Notably, some items show signs of physical and chemical transformations associated with objects in discard contexts, suggesting that they had been picked up from an archaeological context then subsequently curated in what is interpreted as a ceremonial context (Sheets 1992, 1993; Sheets and Sheets 1990; Sheets and Simmons 1993).

My focus here is the small portable inorganic artifact assemblage ($n = 13$) that was carefully stored inside of the building (Table 1). Small portable objects were stored in two general contexts within the building: in an elevated context on wall, column, or lintel tops, or inside a horizontal niche in a small bench located immediately south of the north room. Objects curated in elevated contexts included obsidian tools, a greenstone disk, a miniature frog effigy "paint pot," spindle whorls, a polychrome sherd, and

a collection of unmodified mineral crystals, in addition to cut fragments of *Spondylus* sp. shell and two painted gourds. Items stored in the niche included a female figurine, a ceramic animal head, half of a ceramic double ring, six beans, three fragments of a *Spondylus* sp. shell, and a left antler from a white-tailed deer stag (*Odocoileus virginianus*).

All three inorganic objects in the niche were in a secondary-use context and at least one, if not all, was collected from an archaeological context. For example, analysis of the female figurine and the animal head showed that both pieces originally adjoined to ceramic vessels (Beaudry-Corbett 1998). The figurine is broken in several areas and all broken edges are quite rounded (Sheets and Sheets 1990). Similarly, rounding was noted on the broken edges of the animal head and its surface showed considerable abrasion and appeared generally eroded (Sheets and Sheets 1990). Experimental studies have shown that post-depositional trampling will produce a "generalized abrasion and erosion of the surface" in ceramic objects, while the rounding of edges is produced by both trampling and repeated handling (Schiffer 1995:276). Thus, the rounding noted on all broken edges of these objects suggest that either they were extensively handled after the original break and/or they were in a discard context and trampled at some point in their life-history, while the abraded eroded surface on the animal head would suggest that it was discarded prior to its curation in Structure 12.

The final fired clay piece curated in the bench niche not only shows signs of post-depositional damage but also dates from an earlier chronological period. This item consists of one half of a double ring, broken where the two rings previously would have joined at right angles (Beaudry-Corbett 1998). Again, rounding on broken edges and considerable abrasion and scratching on the outer surface (Sheets and Sheets 1990:147) suggest that previously the ring was in a discard context. Moreover, as Sheets (Sheets and Sheets 1990) noted, double rings were common during the Preclassic Period; thus both artifact form as well as physical damage indicate that this item was found in an archaeological context and intentionally brought into Structure 12.

In addition to the horizontal niche, objects were stored in other elevated contexts in Structure 12. A single polychrome sherd, carefully placed on top of a *mano* in a vertical niche, did not match any others recovered and seems to have been brought into the

Table 1. List of all Small Portable Inorganic Artifacts Stored in Structure 12, Cerén (data compiled from Beaudry-Corbett 1998; Sheets 1990, 1993; Sheets and Sheets 1990; Sheets and Simmons 1993).

FS #	Artifact Type	Damage Observed	Inferred Cause of Damage	Comments
5-6	Polychrome Sherd From Cylinder Vessel	Not reported	Not reported	Isolate sherd picked up and brought into building
5-14	Obsidian Prismatic Blade Fragment	Heavy edge damage	Heavy use	Not suitable for cutting, no remaining use-life
5-18	Miniature Frog Effigy "Paint" Pot	None	None	Traces of red pigment on interior
5-24	Fired Clay Female Figurine	Rounding of all old breaks, striations	Post-depositional trampling, extensive handling	Collected from discard context? Laterally cycled? Heirloom?
5-26	Fired Clay Ring	Rounding on old breaks, abrasions, striations, scratching	Post-depositional trampling, extensive handling	Collected from discard context, dates from Pre-Classic period
5-28	Fired Clay Animal Head	Rounding on all old breaks, abrasion, striations	Post-depositional trampling, extensive handling	Collected from discard context? Laterally cycled? Heirloom?
5-33	Fired Clay Spindle Whorl	Not reported	Not reported	Not suitable for cutting, no remaining use-life
5-38	Obsidian Prismatic Blade Fragment	Heavy edge damage	Heavy use	Collected after subjected to water transport? Light grinding of edges?
5-39	Fired Clay Spindle Whorl	Not reported	Not reported	Not suitable for cutting, no remaining use-life
5-40	Greenstone Disk	Rounded edges, roughly shaped	Artifact carried in water, Grinding	Collected after subjected to water transport? Light grinding of edges?
5-41	Obsidian Macroblade	Heavy edge damage	Heavy use	Not suitable for cutting, no remaining use-life
5-46	Obsidian Prismatic Blade Fragment	Heavy edge damage, patination	Post-depositional physical (trampling) and chemical (patination) transformations	Collected from discard context
5-47	Unmodified Crystals (Augite and Biotite)	None	None	Available locally, collected from environment

building as an individual piece (Sheets 1992:107). Small to tiny unmodified mineral crystals (augite and biotite), stored on a small dividing wall in the north room, are typical of volcanic regions (Sheets and Simmons 1993), suggesting that they were probably collected from the local environment. A small roughly shaped greenstone disk on the door lintel had rounded edges from deliberate shaping or being tumbled in water at some point prior to curation (Sheets and Simmons 1993). Meanwhile, one heavily worn obsidian prismatic blade fragment exhibited both physical (edge damage consistent with trampling) and chemical (patination) alterations associated with discard contexts. Sheets (1993:158) states that “[the blade] looks like a piece of discarded obsidian that was picked up from a *milpa* or garden, brought into the building, and left in an elevated context in the north room.” The remaining obsidian tool fragments showed such heavy edge damage that Sheets wondered why those from Structure 12 had more “worn edges than the blades from any other structure at the site . . . the important and largely unanswered question is why most of the obsidian in Str. 12 is so edge damaged that it is unusable” (Sheets 1993:154).

So what behaviors might account for the unusual small artifact assemblage seen in Structure 12 at Cerén? Previously, it was suggested that these items, seemingly individually placed within a ritual context, were heirlooms that may have been left as payments or offerings for services provided by a ritual practitioner (Sheets 1992:104). While it is conceivable that some of the well-worn items lacking evidence of post-depositional alterations may have been heirlooms, this does not explain the presence of the stored objects with damage, suggesting that they were transferred from discard to systemic context prior to curation.

One possible interpretation involves children. Ethnoarchaeological studies have shown that children will routinely transfer objects from discard to use contexts in the course of play (e.g., Deal 1985; Hayden and Cannon 1983; Wilk and Schiffer 1979). Yet the objects found in Structure 12—a building with restricted access—were stored in elevated or otherwise difficult-to-reach places that presumably would have been well out of reach of children.

The widespread practices of contemporary Maya village ritual practitioners would suggest the hypothesis that the objects with signs of previous discard in Structure 12 were ritually collected for use as *sacra* and divination tools. Below I review ethno-

graphic reports of ritual collecting among contemporary Maya ritual practitioners. Then I discuss the material correlates of this behavior and propose material expectations if Pre-Hispanic ritual practitioners engaged in this behavior. Finally, I propose that for present and past village ritual practitioners, ritual collecting is an alternative strategy to supernatural power, one that exists outside of the control of institutionalized religious systems and ideologies.

Ritual Collecting among Contemporary Maya Ritual Practitioners

Maya ritual practitioners in many different communities collect objects from archaeological contexts and re-enter them into systemic use contexts as personal *sacra* (Table 2). Typically these “found” objects are not seen as random happenstance encounters; rather, ritual practitioners view these objects as having been deliberately placed in their paths as gifts from the various supernatural deities. As will become obvious, both informants and ethnographers alike link the finding of objects with a concomitant supernatural sanction for a transformation in social status for incipient religious practitioners. Subsequently, collecting can provide continued verification of an individual’s profession as a ritual practitioner throughout the duration of his/her career.

Some Maya ritual practitioners undergo a type of ritual recruitment known as divine election. Divine election can be viewed as a form of achieved status that is largely based on a process of self ascription and identification by the social actors themselves, a point to which I shall later return. However, from the emic perspective of the incipient ritual specialist just the opposite is true. Individuals believe that they are chosen directly by spirits, ancestors, earth deities, or other supernatural entities to embark on a path as ritual practitioners, a call that, if ignored, will bring about certain illness if not death. For example, in describing the recruitment process among the Ixil Maya in northwestern Guatemala, Lincoln (1942:121) noted that “before becoming a calendar priest a man has to have an urgent dream or series of dreams, which determine his fate, and which can not be ignored under pain of death.” Frequently, dreams were accompanied by a persistent illness that was only cured after the acceptance of one’s fate as calendar priest (Lincoln 1942).

Once individuals accept their call, they may be taught directly by supernatural communication in

Table 2. A Review of Ethnographic Literature Reporting Maya Ritual Collecting. The Presence of Divine Election is Compared to the Presence of Using Previously Discarded Objects as *Sacra*.

	Divine Election	Ritual Collecting
Ixil Maya		
(Colby and Colby 1981)	+	+
Mam Maya		
Todos Santos (Oakes 1951)	+	+
Santiago Chimaltenagno (Wagley 1949)	+	+
Tzotzil Maya		
Zinacantan (Fabrega and Silver 1973; Vogt 1969, 1976)	+	-
Quiché Maya		
Chichicastenango (Bunzel 1952)	+	+
Momostenango (Cook 1981; Tedlock 1982)	+	+
Chuchexic (Cosminsky 1972)	+	+
Yucatec Maya		
Chan Kom (Redfield and Villas Rojas 1934)	+	+
Dzitas (Redfield and Redfield 1940) ^a	+	-
Piste (Kunow 1997)	+	+
unspecified village (Gutiérrez-Estévez 1993)	+	+
Lacandon Maya	-	+
(Dale Davis 1978)		
Chorti Maya		
Quetzaltepeque (Wisdom 1940)	+	+
Cakchiquel Maya		
San Lucas Toliman (Woods 1968)	+	+
Tz'utujil Maya		
San Pedro (Paul and Paul 1975)	+	+
Santiago Atitlán (Douglas 1969; Robert Carlsen, personal communication 1998)	+	+

+ Published ethnographic literature reports the presence of the behavior.

- Published ethnographic literature did not report the presence of the behavior.

^a The use of a *sastun* (divining stone) was reported yet the objects were not described. In the other reviewed publications on Yucatec Maya *sastuns* include both naturally occurring quartz and discarded objects and this is likely the case for Dzitas.

dreams, apprentice with elders, pay for formal teachings, or combine any number of these avenues. During this time, new initiates first begin to accumulate personal *sacra*, the objects that will be used as tools for communication with the supernatural and as divining equipment. While new initiates might receive some of their *sacra* as gifts from teachers, the ethnographic literature reported that found objects frequently were viewed as important ritual equipment as they are "evidence" of divine sanction.

The practice of ritual collecting is well documented among the Yucatec Maya (e.g., Gutiérrez Estévez 1993; Kunow 1997; Redfield and Villa Rojas 1934). In the northern lowland village of Chan Kom, Redfield and Villa Rojas (1934) noted that ritual practitioners, called *h-men* ("one who knows"), collected certain kinds of objects for house dedicatory rituals, ceremonies to protect the village, and personal *sacra* used for divination. Two methods of divination were practiced in the village; divination by counting kernels of corn and crystal gazing. In crystal gazing, *h-men* used a divining tool, called a *zaztun* ("stone of light" or "clear stone"), that was either a crystal, a clear rock, or a broken glass-bottle stopper. "Every h-men has one or more of these [*zaztun*], which he usually keeps in a leather bag. They are very sacred objects, which he does not permit to be casually handled. It is sometime said by the *h-men* that he finds such objects on the paths leading into the pueblo, where the *balams* have placed them for him, but the ordinary laymen is skeptical" (Redfield and Villa Rojas 1934:170).

Diviners in Dzitas, Yucatán, also use *zaztun*, presumably similar found objects, although no mention was made as to what these objects were or how they were acquired (Redfield and Redfield 1940). However, another report explicitly noted the practice among Yucatec Maya ritual practitioners (Gutiérrez Estévez 1993). "They prefer to find these objects [*zaztuns*], which function as a sign of their personal destiny and chosen-ness, near archaeological ruins or mounds. Looking into the *zaztun*, the *h-men* 'sees' the affliction suffered by the client, finds out about their origin and cause, announces the possibilities for cure" (Gutiérrez Estévez 1993:269). A different informant conveyed the following story demonstrating how the *zaztun* also functioned as a tool for receiving information and knowledge through dreaming:

The first night after finding the *zaztun* I dreamt that two old men sat down by my hammock. They came with herbs in their hands; each one brought a certain herb and they began to show me medicine. "Papa Loh, this is medicine for such and such affliction. This medicine cures such and such illness and this is how much is needed." The other old man spoke up. He said: "This cures such and such ailment, this is how much you use, but take good care of us! Don't let us die, don't let us waste away" [Gutiérrez Estévez 1993:271].

Apparently, ritual reciprocity with ancestor teachers was a crucial component in gaining access to supernatural knowledge.

Kunow (1997) studied with Yucatec curers in the town of Pisté in Quintana Roo, Mexico. In Pisté, curers also used divining stone (*sastun*) "crystals," including naturally occurring quartz pebbles as well as cultural materials such as obsidian artifacts (Kunow 1997:51), acquired as gifts from the supernatural.

They [Pisté curers] unanimously state that the *sastuns* are "the gift" of the *balams*, and provide the means of communicating with them and tapping into their powers. . . . The *balams* show the dreamer where in the woods or fields he or she must go to look for their crystals. The *sastuns* signify that the owner has been approved of, or selected in some sense by these beings. Places away from town, especially uncultivated forest, are the domain of the *balams*. They guide people to discover their crystals in their environment. Don Cosimo found one of his crystals embedded in the fork of a tree. Others have found *sastuns* lying in their path on the ground [Kunow 1997:51].

Several divination techniques are used by Chorti Maya of Guatemala including gazing at crystals or glass. "Every diviner carries in his shoulder bag a few small pieces of broken glass, usually colored, as well as pieces of quartz, and he pretends to see future happenings with them" (Wisdom 1940:345). While Wisdom did not mention how the broken glass or crystals came to be in the diviner's bag, he did mention the practice of picking up other kinds of small portable items of supernatural significance, such as stone celts, and chipped stone (Wisdom 1940:382).

Among the Lacandón Maya of Chiapas, Mexico, lineage heads collect fragments of Pre-Columbian buildings (*tunchi? nah*: "stone from the house," i.e., of a god's temple) from archaeological sites (Dale Davis 1978). These stones are the most important objects when making new ceremonial incense burners called god pots.

When the initial god pot is made, a new stone must be acquired, but when the god pot is replaced, the same stone is transferred from the old pot to the new one. These stones must be taken from the sacred residence or temple of the god to whom the god pot is dedicated. In ceremonial speech these stones are called "god's house" (*nah k'uh*). When Lacandons visit

archaeological sites, they frequently take a small rock from the structure that they believe was once the god's house, and that stone can be used to start a new god pot for that god. Obtaining such stones usually involves walking long distances, so the stones are highly valued. Lacandons compare the significance of the stone to a radio; by means of these transmitters placed into the god pots, a man's supplications, messages, and offerings reach the gods in heaven [Dale Davis 1978:73–74].

Many different types of ritual practitioners in the Guatemalan Highlands are reported to engage in ritual collecting including; midwives (Cosminsky 1972; Douglas 1969; Paul and Paul 1975; Woods 1968), diviners (Bunzel 1952; Douglas 1969; Schultze Jena 1954; Tedlock 1982), bonesetters (Douglas 1969), bite specialists (Douglas 1969), and bundle priests (Robert Carlsen, personal communication 1998).

In Chichicastenango, Quiché ritual practitioners (*chuchqajau*) have sacred bundles, called *la vara* or *chakpatan* ("work custom"), that are used to perform divinations and otherwise mediate between humans and the ancestors (Bunzel 1952). While the initial *vara* is given to a novice at the time of initiation, items are added to the set as the *chuchqajau* finds special objects. "It [the bundle] consists of one-hundred red seeds of the maguey, with one or more small antique carved stones, (*iq'*) of the type commonly found by the hundreds in the highland ruins, or a quartz crystal, wrapped together in a small red cloth. If at any time a man finds such a stone, he adds it to his bundle" (Bunzel 1952:287). While seeds and corn kernels are the objects that are physically manipulated during the divination, collected objects—obsidian, figurine fragments, and rock crystals—are displayed yet not handled during divination (Schultze Jena 1954).

Quiché Maya ritual practitioners in Momostenango likewise are recruited through divine election following a series of dreams and illnesses prior to initiation (Tedlock 1982). Cook (1981:156) noted that curers, called *aj turunel* ("one who opens a bag or unwraps a bundle"), had *sacra* that included found objects such as large rock crystals and "little *incensarios* or other pre-Hispanic artifacts." Barbara Tedlock (1982) reported that Quiché mother-fathers, "priest-shamans" who perform community and lineage rituals, curated lineage ritual paraphernalia in their homes. These objects, carefully curated in a

wooden box, consisted of “potsherds, stone figurines, axe heads, old or foreign coins, and stone concretions in the shape of animals, vegetables, and fruits” (Tedlock 1982:81). Meanwhile Cosminsky (1972:179) reported that Quiché midwives in Chuchexic were recruited to their profession through dreams and finding small objects that revealed the new midwife’s fate.

In the Cakchiquel Maya village of San Lucas Toliman, Woods (1968) reported that:

Each curer maintains a special table in his residence which holds the various accoutrements of his station. These include such things as miniature idols and pictures of saints, a crucifix or two, mirrors, containers for *aguardiente*, incense, candles, horseshoes, magnets, cigars, coins, *rayos* (oblong pieces of obsidian commonly believed to be pieces of lightning bolts), and any number of small rocks (*piedracitas*) of various shapes and sizes. The latter, always found by the possessor in the *monte* (fields or hills) or elsewhere in his travels, are pre-eminently important since they signify the curer’s *suerte* [luck or fate] as a shaman and are believed to be sent by God or other important figures in the supernatural pantheon. They are commonly used as witnesses of the shaman’s power [Woods 1968:129].

Likewise, in the Tz’utujil Maya village of San Pedro la Laguna midwives (*iyoms*) undergo recruitment through divine election (Paul and Paul 1975). Paul and Paul (1975) reported that a future midwife, unaware of her destiny, would experience loss or a severe illness followed by a powerful communication in a dream. One midwife, named Rosa, told of her recruitment that began when the spirits of dead midwives visited her in a dream. Shortly afterward she had the following experience:

One day Rosa encountered a strange object in her path—a conch shell. She was afraid to touch it. That night spirits of the dead midwives came to her again, rebuking her for rejecting the magic shell and directing her to go back and pick it up. The shell was her “power” (Sp., *virtud*), the spirits said. They told her to wrap it in a kerchief and keep it locked in a safe place. Another day she similarly “found” a penknife with a fish and child carved on its handle. This time she knew to pick it up. She had the shaman divine the meaning of the curious objects. He confirmed what she had been told in her dreams, that the shell was her *virtud*, and the knife the special tool of her calling used to cut the umbilical cord [Paul and Paul 1975:711].

Rosa used the shell in the diagnosis and treatment of barren women. If, by scraping her magic conch against a grinding stone, the accompanying sound was “like a baby’s cry,” then it was considered a very a good sign for future conception (Paul and Paul 1975:71). Sometimes the conch fragments were mixed with water and given to infertile women to drink as a cure.

In the Tz’utujil Maya village of Santiago Atitlán, ritual practitioners believe that curing knowledge comes to those destined to be healers through revelations in dreams. Douglas (1967:137—138) noted that if a person were truly destined to be a healer, then he or she would start finding special objects that acted as media through which dream knowledge and curative powers would flow (Figure 5). These found objects, called *cuenteitos* in colloquial Spanish and *k’ijbal* in Tz’utujil, were viewed as “direct lines of communication to the spirit world” (Douglas 1969:138).

If a person is truly destined to become a prayer-maker [curer/diviner], he will begin to “find” special objects which are to be his *k’ijbal* (divining implements). Atitecos use the Spanish word *pepenar* (to pick up) to describe this event, but the meaning goes beyond that of a causal encounter with an object and takes on the implication that the object was strategically placed just for the finder. One “knows” that this rock, broken fragment of idol, shell, marble, or any wide variety of objects is important, it stands out in such a way that the intended finder recognizes its special quality. The incipient prayer-maker begins to find objects in this manner and he collects and guards them. If they are indeed his *cuenteitos* (*k’ijbal*), he will begin to dream more frequently of prayers, spirits, remedies, and other *secretos* [Douglas 1969: 137–138].

Colby and Colby (1981) mentioned that the Ixil diviners used “flint cores” as divination tools and, although the authors did not mention how these objects were acquired, presumably diviners collected these themselves from local archaeological sites.

Ritual Collecting Outside of the Maya Area

A review of the ethnographic literature demonstrates that ritual collecting is not restricted to the Maya area. In Mesoamerica, the Huichol Indians of Mexico collected projectile points, stone figurines, and ceramic vessels that were later re-deposited as ritual offerings (Weigand 1970). Once, after a particularly bad



Figure 5. K'ijbal displayed on the altar of a Santiago Atitlán ritual practitioner. Collected objects include numerous Pre-Columbian obsidian tools and debitage, Pre-Columbian ceramic figurine fragments, a large fragment of carved basalt, a Colonial painted wooden doll, numerous historic and modern metal fragments, and palo de pita seeds. Photograph courtesy of Robert Carlsen, 1995.

measles outbreak in the town of San Sebastian Teponahuastlan, a village-wide curing session was held. During the ceremony a collected fluted Paleo-Indian point was deposited as part of a ritual offering in cave located 40 kilometers away from the settlement. When asked why this item was included, the singer/curer stated that objects that old (from before the time of the Huichols) had more power and thus were pleasing to the deities (Weigand 1970).

In the American Southwest, Stanislawski (1978) reported that the Hopi place Pre-contact ceramic sherds on shrines and use them in divining the future. Meanwhile, the Zuni collect Western Apache projectile points and turquoise to be used as fetishes (Schiffer 1987).

South American curers in Chiclayo, Peru also collect pre-Hispanic ceramics and lithic artifacts for use as power objects (Glass-Coffin 1998). Among the Quichua Indians of Ecuador (Whitten 1976), polished stones are thought to contain ancient souls and thus are actively collected by ritual practitioners. As Whitten noted, "any excavation in the ground is an exciting business, because old polished stone hatch-

ets, shaman's stones, stone mortars and pestles for grinding capsicum, and the rocks and hard clays used by the ancient Ruma ancestors are bound to turn up. The finder is quite lucky, for such 'hard evidence' of antiquity links him with ancestral, territorial, souls" (Whitten 1976:42).

Ritual Collecting as an Alternative Avenue to Power for Village Ritual Practitioners

Becoming a Maya ritual practitioner through the process of divine election primarily involves a process of self ascription. Individuals undergo a series of personal experiential events that eventually are resolved through self identification with a new social status, that of a ritual specialist. But any process of ascription necessarily involves the creation and maintenance of a boundary (Barth 1969). Collecting is a critical boundary-marking strategy used by the contemporary Maya to define who does, and who does not, have access to the supernatural. Associated with this activity is a necessary cognitive shift in which individual social agents reclassify "useless" trash as an object of value according to cultur-



Figure 6. An example of conservatory practice as numerous collected objects of a deceased Quiché ritual practitioner are curated on an altar in a tourist shop. Photograph courtesy of Harriet F. Beaubien, 1999.

ally constituted categories related to power and the divine.

Maya ritual practitioners often claim that their fate is intimately tied to their found objects as is evident in the following passage:

The sacred objects that come into the possession of midwives have miraculous powers . . . [the objects] can vanish and reappear of their own accord, and their fate is linked with that of their possessors. A woman who was about to become a midwife discovered that her children had found her hidden object and smashed it to bits in the courtyard. The woman hastily assembled the pieces and wrapped them once more in the original silk handkerchief, but the damage could not be undone. A severe chill overtook her, and she died within two weeks [Paul and Paul 1975:712].

Similarly, although from a different vantage point, I would argue that the fate of individual and artifact is indeed entwined. This relationship is essentially dialectical, for as an individual finds and marks a discarded object as *sacra*, at the same time the found object marks the individual as a ritual practitioner.

The observation that contemporary Maya ritual

practitioners, from both Highland and Lowland communities, engage in ritual collecting demonstrates a widespread behavioral pattern in which contemporary ritual practitioners actively demarcate a sacred domain within local religious systems. Importantly, ritual collecting provides contemporary village ritual practitioners an avenue to power that exists outside of the control of contemporary institutionalized religions.

In considering what circumstances might influence this widespread practice, economic and ideological factors provide potential insight. For the most part, rural Maya ritual practitioners belong to economically marginalized peasant populations. Therefore, if incipient ritual practitioners are to demarcate ritual space within their local communities, it means finding and using mechanisms that would not necessitate the acquisition of expensive items. Collecting small unique objects can be done by virtually anyone, regardless of how economically disadvantaged she or he might be.

Moreover, scholars have argued that ancestor veneration has formed a central social nexus (e.g., Carlsen 1997; Carlsen and Prechtel 1991; McAnany

Table 3. Objects Ritually Collected as Divination Tools by Contemporary Maya as Reported by Ethnographers or Recorded by the Author.

Pre-Columbian Artifacts	Unmodified Objects	Historic and Recent Period Artifacts
Spindle Whorls	Quartz Crystals	Glass Perfume Bottle Stoppers
Figurine Fragments	Concretions	Glass Medicine Bottle Stoppers
Whistles	Various Stone Pebbles	Unidentified Glass Bottle Stoppers
Mammiform Vessel Legs	Marine Shells	Marbles
Ceramic Sherds		Miscellaneous Glass Fragments
Obsidian Prismatic Blades		Dice
Obsidian Macro-Blades		Wooden Dolls
Lancelet Blades		Lead Figurines
Stemmed Knives		Fired Clay Figurines
Projectile Points		"Frozen Charlotte" Historic German Doll
Scraper Fragments		Plastic "Dumbo" Elephant
Obsidian Polyhedral Cores		Metal Latch
Flakes and Shatter		Small Metal 10 Toy Cowboy Hat
Polished Stone Celts		Old or Foreign Coins
		Knives
		Riding Spur
		Metal Bell
		Metal Link Chain
		Miscellaneous Metal Objects

1995) for present and past Maya peoples. As noted above, contemporary Maya ritual practitioners often view their collected objects as closely linked with ancestral spirits and, thus, are perceived as containing intrinsic ritual power.

Widespread collecting among contemporary Maya ritual practitioners suggests that for incipient part-time ritual practitioners in rural agricultural societies, basic economic restrictions, in combination with an overarching ideological emphasis on ancestral forces and deities, may promote the transfer of objects from archaeological contexts back into use contexts through ritual collecting.

Archaeological Implications of Ritual Collecting

Contemporary ritual collecting has obvious archaeological implications, as it impacts both "donor" archaeological sites and future archaeological assemblages. For those objects re-entering systemic contexts, ritual collecting results in the clustering and association of objects that do not appear to form any functional assemblage (see Figures 5 and 6). Unlike scavengers, collectors will remove fragmentary artifacts lacking any remaining use-life (Schiffer 1987:116). Analyses focused on elucidating the life history of these objects would reveal that many items were heavily used, incomplete fragments, some of which would be recognizable as dating from an earlier culture-historical place and time. On those mate-

rials particularly sensitive to post-depositional changes, there should be signs of physical, chemical, and environmental alterations consistent with objects in previous discard contexts.

From the perspective of the "donor" archaeological site, sites that undergo recurrent long-term ritual collecting are expected to be depleted of small portable surface artifact assemblages. As with collectors in the American West (Plog 1981), Maya ritual practitioners "go for the goodies"; formally made chipped stone tools, figurine fragments, whistles, spindle whorls, celts, and polyhedral obsidian cores are likely to be removed from surface assemblages (Table 3). Artifact size is an important criterion influencing ritual collecting as contemporary Maya ritual practitioners, typically on foot, tend to pick up small easily portable inorganic items. The proximity of Maya sites to footpaths leading to *milpas*, or countryside shrines, should be considered when assessing potential impact of ritual collecting on surface assemblages, as proximity to roads has been for sites in the American Southwest (Schiffer and Gumerman 1977). And, finally, those archaeological sites that contain actively used community shrines, as is a common occurrence in the Guatemalan Highlands, may have particularly biased surface assemblages.

Upon returning to a systemic context, collected objects, now reclassified as *sacra*, are subjected to culturally regulated processes that control the life

histories of ritual things, thereby dictating how and where these items might re-enter an archaeological context in the future (Walker 1995a, 1995b). Currently, no research exists on the identification of those conditions that dictate when and where these collected objects might re-enter an archaeological record. However, I have noticed that at least some Quiché and Tz'utujil Maya families engage in conservatory practices where the *sacra* of deceased ritual practitioners were transferred along kinship lines (Figure 6). At least one ethnographer reported that after the death of ritual practitioners, their *sacra* were redeposited on top of a nearby archaeological mound, thereby creating new deposits (Oakes 1951:51).

Ritual Collecting at the Cerén Site

Returning to the artifact assemblage carefully stored in Structure 12 at Cerén, what activities might have led to the curation of small portable items, many of which were virtually useless? The collecting practices of contemporary Maya village ritual practitioners would suggest a hypothesis: the apparent hodgepodge of items stored in Structure 12 may have been ritually collected in antiquity for use as *sacra* and divination tools.

Interestingly, at least one ethnographic report would suggest that the collected partial Preclassic double ring curated in a niche could have been used a divination tool. "A ring is sometimes used for divination. It is placed in a vessel containing *baltse* [fermented ceremonial beverage], tobacco, and nine leaves of a tree called in Spanish *hoja de viento*. In the movements of the ring among the leaves, the future is foretold" (Tozzer 1907:164).

If the interpretation of ritual collecting at Cerén is correct, then it raises some interesting issues. Analogy with contemporary village ritual practitioners would suggest that, for the inhabitants of Cerén, these collected objects functioned as signifiers of supernatural sanction playing a particularly important role in linking newly emerging village ritual practitioners with the supernatural realm. If so, then might the life-history of objects be used to infer a self-ascribed, or achieved, ritual status?

We cannot rule out the possibility that the unusual pattern seen in the artifact assemblage in Structure 12 could reflect the idiosyncratic behavior of one particular individual. However, the presence of a widespread behavioral pattern of ritual collecting among

contemporary Maya ritual practitioners, which results in an artifact assemblage similar to that seen in Structure 12 at Cerén, certainly raises the possibility that in the past village ritual practitioners may have engaged in a similar practice.

Conclusion

We know much more about how Classic Period Maya elite rulers demarcated realms of the sacred, thereby making claims of power and privilege, than we do about commoners. Concerning the elite, scholars have argued that Maya rulers participated in restricted inter-elite ceremonial exchange networks (Hirth 1992) that controlled certain status-enhancing goods such as quetzal feathers, jade, jaguar skins, and finely painted polychrome vessels. These items became "critical in identification of the divine elite class, enhancement of their prestige, and definition of their relations" (Demarest 1992:143). Others have suggested that elite rulers may have represented themselves in a shamanistic role during ritual performances, with elaborate stone temples serving as the ritual stage for the legitimization and creation of power (Demarest 1992; Freidel 1981, 1986, 1992; Freidel and Schele 1988a, 1988b; Freidel et al. 1993; Schele 1985; Schele and Freidel 1990; Schele and Miller 1986).

But if Pre-Columbian rural village ritual practitioners did not have access to jaguar skins and the use of carved-stone temple facades, then what materials might they have used to demarcate the sacred domain? While economic and sociopolitical constraints limited commoners' access to the kinds of materials used to delineate human-supernatural relations by the elite, nevertheless the evidence from Cerén, a community without elite residents, suggests that individuals negotiated these restrictions. If, as Durkheim (1995 [1912]:303–329) argued, all people need to mark some portion of society as sacred, then one of the avenues available to the agriculturists at Cerén may have involved collecting and assigning new meaning to objects that otherwise might be viewed as useless "trash." Importantly, this avenue may have allowed commoners a means to control and manipulate some ritual power at a local community level beyond the control of Maya elite-state religion. If this interpretation is correct, then ritual collecting represents an alternative avenue to power for past, as well as present-day, rural ritual practitioners.

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Notes

1. The ceramic vessel assemblage from Structure 12 may be a notable exception as at least one jar functioned for utilitarian use as indicated by the presence of preserved corn kernels stored inside. Similarly, the two painted gourds were likely used for serving food or drink.

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