

Classic Maya Figurines as Materials of Socialization: Evidence from Ceibal, Guatemala

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Abstract

We examine Late and Terminal Classic (c. AD 600-950) Maya ceramic figurine whistles from Ceibal, Guatemala, as materials of socialization. The figurines are mold-made and represent repeating characters, including humans, animals, and supernaturals. Based on mortuary and other contextual evidence, we argue that they were used for household performances among adults and children. Figurines were everyday objects, used in ritualized and nonritualized activities. They were played and played with by children. The cast of characters represented in the figurine whistles was determined by adults and tells us about dominant ideologies, including gender and beauty norms. As agents of socialization, children could have reimagined or subverted narratives around these objects. However, the materiality of the figurines limited play and shaped social structures that persisted for centuries.

Keywords: childhood, everyday life, figurines, gender, households, Maya, Mesoamerica, music, ritual, toys

Introduction

“So many idols did they have that their gods did not suffice them, there being no animal or reptile of which they did not make images, and these in the form of their gods and goddesses.”
– Diego de Landa, *Relación de las Cosas de Yucatan* (1566), translated by William Gates

“She’s everything. He’s just Ken.” – Tagline for Greta Gerwig’s film *Barbie* (2023)

In this article, we examine the Late and Terminal Classic (c. AD 600-950) Maya ceramic figurines from Ceibal, Guatemala as everyday mediators of socialization. Most of these figurines, throughout the Maya lowlands, are musical instruments – specifically, whistles. The whistles are mold-made and represent repeating characters, including humans, animals, and supernaturals. Based on excavations of rapidly abandoned houses at the site of Aguateca, near Ceibal, Triadan has previously argued that figurine whistles were made by women and used for household performances involving children (Triadan 2007). Mortuary data from Ceibal and other sites support this interpretation, especially the association with children. We argue that Classic Maya figurines, like many classes of artifacts, were used in ritualized and nonritualized activities. They were played and played with by adults and children. The cast of characters represented in the figurine whistles was determined by adults and tells us something about dominant values, including gender norms, at Late and Terminal Classic Ceibal. However, as with

toys in our society, children could have reimagined or subverted narratives around these portable, manipulable objects.

Figurines as Materials of Socialization

We approach the analysis of figurines through household archaeology. Anthropologists have long recognized the importance of households as arenas of socialization and cultural reproduction (Netting et al. 1984). Bourdieu calls the house the “principle locus for the objectification of generative schemes” (Bourdieu 1977:89), indicating that the structure of society is reproduced and altered through acts at the household level (Hodder and Cessford 2004). Most archaeological research on gender and childhood has occurred in the subfield of household archaeology.

In ancient Mesoamerican societies, adult men were generally dominant in the public sphere, although elite women participated in public rituals. Conversely, women oversaw activities in the home, including weaving, cooking, and child-rearing. This ideal of gender complementarity can be seen in ethnographies from the Maya area, as well as in ancient Maya works of art (Joyce 1996; McCafferty and McCafferty 1988). This does not mean that gender was a static binary in the ancient Mesoamerican world. Evidence for complementarity varies across time, space, cultural group, and status level (Brumfiel 2012). Individuals must have reproduced, negotiated, and challenged the dominant ideology. In addition, ancient Maya men inhabited domestic spaces, ancient Maya women entered public spaces, and the dichotomy of domestic vs. public is overly simplistic. For example, a royal palace crosscuts both categories, as a residence and place for political administration and public ceremony (Inomata et al. 2002; Inomata and Houston 2001; Jackson 2013; Lamoureux-St-Hilaire et al. 2019). Nonetheless, many valuable insights about women and children have come from the investigation of domestic spaces, artifacts, and activities (e.g. Brumfiel 2006; De Lucia 2010; Joyce 1993; Robin 2002). Here, we build on that tradition to show how women and children reproduced and reshaped their society using a class of objects found mainly in household contexts and particularly associated with children at our field site.

Although children make up a large part of all societies, archaeological studies focused on children did not become popular until the 1990s and early 2000s (Ardren and Hutson 2006; Baxter 2008, 2022; Joyce 2000a; Kamp 2001a; Lillehammer 1989; Sofaer Derevenski 1994, 2000). In Mesoamerica and elsewhere, many scholars focus on the processes through which children are made into adult members of society. However, children are not only objects of socialization, but also social agents who shape daily life and effect social change (Baxter 2005; De Lucia 2010; Hutson 2006). Their actions also affect the formation of the archaeological record (Baxter 2006; Hammond and Hammond 1981).

All archaeologists rely on material remains to understand social processes, including socialization. Some go farther, focusing on how the interactions between people and things create and change society – or even reality. Scholars of materiality and related topics encourage us to consider the social roles and potential agency of objects in the past more deeply (DeMarrais et al. 1996, 2004; Fogelin and Schiffer 2015; Gell 1998; Latour 2005; Meskell 2005; Miller 2005; Tilley 2020 [2004]; Walker 2008; Zedeño 2008). Archaeologists have used the lens of materiality to examine how people interact with landscapes and monuments, small items of everyday life, and things in between. In an analysis of Moche ceramic figurines, Erell Hubert



employs Latour's definition of objects as "mediators" of agency – emphasizing that figurines not only transfer human agency (contra Gell 1998) but also transform that agency (Hubert 2016; Latour 2005:39). We find this perspective useful in understanding Classic Maya figurines.

We are also influenced by studies of daily life. In the chapter "The Materiality of Culture," Elizabeth DeMarrais moves from her earlier work on the materialization of state ideology, centered on elites and monuments, to a discussion of the broader materialization of culture: "...the transformation of ideas, values, stories, myths, and the like into a material, physical reality" (DeMarrais 2004:11). DeMarrais' approach is based on the dialectic between agents and structure, but she emphasizes that the materiality of the world constrains human agency and makes social structures more durable. She draws on the work of Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1977, 1990) to argue that the local knowledge and practices that make up a culture are learned through everyday experiences of the material world. Likewise, several archaeologists of Mesoamerica have focused on the role of everyday practices and materials in the construction, reproduction, and transformation of society (De Lucia 2014; Hendon 2010; Hendon et al. 2014; Hutson 2010; Lopiparo 2006; Overholtzer and Robin 2015; Robin 2013, 2020).

A major part of everyday life is the socialization, or enculturation, of young children, who often learn by playing with quotidian objects in a household context. All young humans, not to mention our mammalian relatives, learn through play. Games may be structured to pass on skills and values the adults of a society deem important, but they also allow for creative innovation by children (Kamp 2001a:18–20; Sutton-Smith 1976).

Archaeologists have considered a variety of objects in studies of children's socialization. One category is toys (Baxter 2022:61–82). However, in many societies in the past, the category of toy may not have existed (Dozier 2016). Even in modern contexts, children often play with objects that are not made for that purpose. Toy-ness should be seen as a stage in the life history of an object, rather than a clear category (Crawford 2009). In this article, we make comparisons to modern toys to clarify some points, but we do not see Maya figurines as formal toys. In addition to toys, miniature objects and artifacts that seem to be made by children are analyzed in terms of socialization, play, and the dissemination knowledge (Baxter 2008; Crown 2001; De Lucia 2010; Fladd and Barker 2019; Kamp 2001b). Historian Carla Pascoe Leahy asks us to consider items used in parenting, by both adults and children, as relational objects that are best understood in terms of the social relationships that they mediate (Baxter 2022:68; Pascoe Leahy 2021). Classic Maya figurine whistles may fit into this category.

Some readers may object that the figurines we discuss are ritual objects, not toys. However, we should not assume that rituals are separate from domestic life (Bradley 2005). Everyday items, such as undecorated pottery jars, are used in rituals as part of their life history (Brady and Peterson 2008; Walker 1998). The Mesoamerican ballgame, an important part of ancient Maya mythology and public spectacle, shows that ritual and play are not mutually exclusive (Freidel and Rich 2017; Scarborough and Wilcox 1991). Among the Ancestral Puebloans of the Southwest U.S., katsina figurines used in ceremonies were also played with by children (Adams 1991; Kamp 2001a:20; Ladd 2000). Figurine whistles were used in household ritual performances, but they were also accessible to children in their everyday lives.

Figurines are a particularly interesting class of artifacts when considering the potential agency of objects, because they are shaped like humans and other beings capable of action. They may reify ideal body types and shape identities within a society (Bailey 2005; Halperin et al. 2009; Hubert 2016; Joyce 2000b:28–38, 2003; Lesure 1997, 2005; Lopiparo 2006; Scarre 2007). Because the Classic Maya figurines are musical instruments, they also emit breath and sound, giving an illusion of life (Looper 2018). Here, we do not argue that the Classic Maya considered figurines animate, ensouled, or persons. Instead, we see potential agency in figurines as mediators of social processes among adults and children.

Classic Maya Figurines in Context

Scholars associate Mesoamerican ceramic figurines with women and children because these artifacts are frequently found in domestic contexts (Brumfiel 1996; De Lucia 2010; Joyce 2000b; Marcus 1998; Triadan 2007). Maya figurines are no exception. During the Middle Preclassic period (c. 1000-350 BC), many solid, modeled, anthropomorphic figurines were used and deposited in domestic areas. Then, ceramic figurines became rare throughout the Late Preclassic and Early Classic periods. Here, we focus on the Late and Terminal Classic (c. AD 600-950), when a new style of ceramic figurines was popular in the Maya area.

During the Late Classic and Terminal Classic periods, most Maya figurines were wind instruments, also called “aerophones” (Figure 1). Consistent with Triadan’s work at Aguateca, we refer to these artifacts as “figurine whistles,” but the majority could be classified as “ocarinas” according to many archaeological typologies (Benton 2010; Bourg 2005; Hammond 1972; Healy 1988; Katz 2018; Kosyk 2022). These hollow whistles were normally mold-made, but more elaborate figurines were hand modeled or partly hand modeled. Both elite and commoner Maya households had access to figurines, which were produced at the household level and exchanged within and among sites (Halperin 2014). Lopiparo suggests that using molds could have allowed the participation of inexperienced artisans, including children, in the production of ceramic figurines (Lopiparo 2006:160).



Figure 1. Back of hollow figurine whistle (ocarina) FG200-1 (CB-211C-2-4-1), showing mouthpiece at bottom and two tone-holes that were covered and uncovered by the player’s fingertips above. Photo by Triadan, courtesy of the Ceibal-Petexbatún Archaeological Project.

Late-Terminal Classic period figurines may depict men, women, supernaturals, animals, or human-animal hybrids. Triadan has argued that the corpus of figurines represents a repeated cast

of characters with which to enact dramas, and that these dramas must have been performed for a small, intimate audience due to the size of the figurines (Triadan 2007). She notes their absence from depictions of public musical performances in Classic Maya artwork. Triadan and others suggest that figurines may have been used to educate children about social roles (Halperin 2014; Ruscheinsky 2003; Tourtellot 1988a:116, 1990:139; Triadan 2007). Halperin also sees figurines as potential foci of everyday reflection on and resistance against cultural norms (Halperin 2014:209).

Few Classic Maya figurines are found in primary contexts, making it challenging to interpret their uses. The Aguateca project was able to recover many figurines *in situ* on floors of elite houses (Inomata et al. 2002; Inomata and Stiver 1998; Triadan 2007). These figurines were often found in side rooms or other storage areas, in association with ceramic storage and cooking vessels, groundstone tools, spindle whorls, and other musical instruments. The Aguateca project associated the side rooms with crafting by men and women, food processing by women, and children's activities. In contrast, central rooms were associated with male heads of household and administrative activities. Based on the identification of gendered spaces within the Aguateca households, Stöckli argues that women and men played instruments, but that women and children may have dominated music making within the domestic sphere (Stöckli 2007).

Figurine whistles are well-suited to use by children. In our own society, children are often given plastic recorders (a wind instrument resembling a flute) as first instruments. They are relatively easy to learn to play and fit well into small hands, and can be cheaply produced, purchased, and replaced. Similarly, Jared Katz suggests that Classic Maya ocarinas could have been played by young children, while more complex flutes were played by older children (Katz 2018:180–181). In 2016, he taught U.S. sixth-graders to play 3D-printed replicas of three ocarinas from Ceibal but found that a more complex replica flute was too challenging for many middle schoolers (Katz 2018:243–257). Figurine whistles were also played by adults in Classic Maya society, just as ocarinas and recorders are played by professional musicians today. The adults and older children in a household would have taught the younger children, passing knowledge and practices across generations through musical performances and play (see Kosyk 2022). Ceramic whistles must have been broken frequently by children, but being mold-made, they would not be difficult to replace.

Classic Maya figurines were not prestige items, separated from everyday life. Nor were they inalienable goods, excluded from commerce and passed down as heirlooms (Helms 1993; Kovacevich and Callaghan 2013; Weiner 1985). Figurines were not ritually killed, smashed in termination deposits, or put through other known rites of passage (Fogelin and Schiffer 2015). They are rarely found in caches. Most often, they ended up fragmented in domestic middens that were sometimes reused as construction fill.

Some figurines have been found in burials (Halperin 2014:193–196) (see Supplementary Table A1). While we cannot assume that grave goods directly reflect the identity of the interred individual, patterns in mortuary practices tell us something about the position of that person within the society (Ashmore and Geller 2005; Brück 2004). At several Maya sites, figurines were buried with children. Jaina-style figurines, which are large, elaborately modeled, and not musical instruments, were included in many burials at the island site of Jaina (Benavides Castillo 2002,

2006, 2021; Piña Chan 2001 [1948]). However, the only figurines described as “whistles” at Jaina are associated with five child burials (Halperin 2014:193–194; Piña Chan 2001 [1948]). Julia Hendon and colleagues have reported whole or partial figurines from seven burials at Copan (Diamanti 1991:196–203; Hendon et al. 2014:28–30). Five are child burials, one is a burial of an adult and child together, and the age of the person interred in the seventh is not mentioned. Five child burials at San José, in northern Belize, contained figurines, and these represent a third of all child burials from that site (Thompson 1939). At a royal palace at Holmul, a child burial contained six figurines (Mongelluzzo 2011). Three child burials at Cancuén contained figurines (Sears 2016).

As of 2015, the Harvard Seibal and Ceibal-Petexbatún projects had excavated a combined total of 68 Late-Terminal Classic burials at Ceibal (Palomo 2020; Palomo et al. 2017; Tourtellot 1990:89–90; Willey 1978:31–32) (see Supplementary Table A2). Fifteen were of children, and an additional three were of an adult and child together. Only four (Burials 3, 134, 152, and 155) contained figurines, and all four were child burials (26.67% of the Late-Terminal Classic child burials). In addition, one burial of an adult and child together (Burial 35) contained a miniature ceramic mask, too small for a human child to wear but too large for the average ceramic figurine (Tourtellot 1990:112–113; Willey 1978:51–52, fig. 58).

Figurines are also sometimes found in adult burials. Several figurines were uncovered, along with other musical instruments, in the burial of an elite woman at Pacbitun (Healy 1988). Elite women at Palenque were also interred with finely modeled figurines, although it is not clear if those objects functioned as musical instruments (López Bravo 2000). Pendergast reports a partial figurine from the burial of an adult sexed as female at Altun Ha (Pendergast 1990:10–11, fig. 3a). That burial was originally dated to the Early Classic period, but the figurine is Late-Terminal Classic in style. Whole or partial ceramic figurines were found in six adult burials at Lubaantun (Gann 1925).

In a particularly striking case, a tableau of 23 ceramic figurines representing members of a royal court, including a king wearing ballplayer gear, a queen holding a shield, musicians, ballplayers, and dwarves, was found in the tomb (Burial 39) of an unsexed, elderly ruler at El Perú-Waka’ (Freidel et al. 2010; Freidel and Rich 2017; Rich 2011:270–322, 349–359). During the Late Classic period, the royals of El Perú-Waka’ intermarried with noble women of the Kaan lineage, which seems to have held nontraditional ideas about gender roles. In most Classic Maya art, warriors are shown as male. However, Kaan queens, including Lady K’abel of El Perú-Waka’, are shown as warriors on public monuments, and as equals to their male partners on opposite sides of a stela (Navarro-Farr et al. 2020; Reese-Taylor et al. 2009). The warrior queen figurine may represent Lady K’abel (Navarro-Farr et al. 2020). Some of the figurines from Burial 39 are whistles, with orifices for airflow on their shoulders and backs (Los Angeles County Museum of Art 2017). Other cases are unclear, possibly due to conservation and reconstruction. Unfortunately, there are no published scientific drawings of the Burial 39 ceramic figurines. The main individual in Burial 39 is often assumed to be a king, but the bones are gracile, and the tomb contains a deposit of many spindle whorls – an artifact class associated with Maya women (Rich 2011:273–276, 319–321). A second individual in Burial 39, a child of about seven years, is interpreted alternately as a sacrifice or a secondary burial added upon the tomb’s reentry. The

figurines and several miniature vessels in Burial 39 could be associated with this child or represent the relationship between the child and adult.

Although we cannot know for certain who played the Classic Maya ceramic whistles, the people who created these burials tended to associate those figurines with women and children. At Ceibal, they restricted figurines to child burials. Based on the mortuary data, as well as the domestic contexts in which most figurine and figurine fragments are found, it is probable that women and children played figurine whistles in household performances. These activities were part of the socialization of Classic Maya children.

Later, at Postclassic Mayapán, ceramic whistles, other musical instruments, and other ceramic figurines were disproportionately placed in burials of children (Kohut 2011). During the colonization of the Maya area, Diego de Landa associated certain figurines with women and children, noting that midwives would place “idols of a goddess called Ix Chel” under the beds of women in labor (Tozzer 1941:129). Similarly, ceramic rattle figurines were used by Aztec women in birth and healing rituals (Overholtzer 2012). Landa also described a dance by elder women holding clay dogs that involved the sacrifice of a living puppy (Tozzer 1941:145). While we cannot draw a straight line from Landa’s account back to the Classic period, the historical document hints that clay figurines continued to be used by Maya women for centuries after the political decline and depopulation of the Classic Maya city-states.

Ceibal in the Late and Terminal Classic

Ceibal is a large ancient Maya site located on the Río Pasión in the Petexbatún region of the Department of Petén, Guatemala, near the modern town of Sayaxché. The site boasts a very long occupation, beginning around 950 B.C. and ending around A.D. 950. From 1964 through 1968, Harvard University’s Seibal Archaeological Project, led by Gordon Willey, conducted extensive excavations and restored some of Ceibal’s architecture (Willey et al. 1975). Since 2005, the Ceibal-Petexbatún Archaeological Project, directed by Takeshi Inomata and Daniela Triadan, has carried out further excavations, focusing on the site’s early foundation as well as its Terminal Classic period (c. AD 829-950) resurgence (Inomata, Triadan, and Aoyama 2017; Inomata, Triadan, MacLellan, et al. 2017; Triadan 2012). The current Ceibal project has refined the site’s ceramic chronology (Table 1), originally defined by Jeremy Sabloff (Sabloff 1975).

Table 1. Late and Terminal Classic ceramic chronology of Ceibal.

Ceramic phase	Approximate dates
Tepejilote-Tepeu 1	AD 600-720
Tepejilote-Tepeu 2	AD 720-761
Tepejilote-Tepeu 3	AD 761-829
Bayal	AD 829-950

During the end of the Late Classic period, the Petexbatún region saw an unusually high rate of warfare, resulting in the partial abandonment of Dos Pilas in AD 761 and the destruction of Aguateca around 810. Ceibal experienced a hiatus until 829, when the foreign ruler Wat’ul K’atel took the throne. Wat’ul K’atel and his successors oversaw Ceibal’s Terminal Classic florescence and erected many carved stelae that include non-Maya traits, probably indicating

connections with Yucatán or Central Mexico. The gradual collapse of the Classic Maya political system continued, and Ceibal was mostly abandoned around AD 950.

The Terminal Classic, Bayal phase ceramic assemblages of the Petexbatún region reflect disruptions in trade networks alongside stability among local commoner populations (Foias and Bishop 1997; Sabloff 1975). While most Late Classic, Tepejilote phase ceramic types continued into the Terminal Classic, a few new types appeared. Most notably, fine paste ceramics of the Altar, Balancan, and Tres Naciones groups began to be imported in small numbers (Foias and Bishop 1997; Sabloff et al. 1982). According to the results of instrumental neutron activation analyses (INAA), these ceramics were likely produced in the area of the Pasión and Upper Usumacinta rivers (Foias and Bishop 1997; Sabloff et al. 1982). We suppose that the government of Wat'ul K'atel oversaw the importation of exotic fine paste ceramics, while most residents of Ceibal continued to make and trade Tepejilote-style ceramics locally.

Burials with Figurines at Ceibal

As mentioned above, four child burials excavated at Ceibal contained figurines. Three date to the Terminal Classic, while the fourth dates to the Late Classic period. Here we describe those contexts in more detail.

Two of the Terminal Classic child burials containing figurines were uncovered at the Karinel Group, a residential area west of the Central Plaza of Group A (MacLellan 2019a). In 2014, Jessica MacLellan excavated a series of four burials (Burials 152, 155, 156, and 159) deposited along the north-south axis of the last phase of the patio group (MacLellan 2019b:102–104; 148–149; 151–153; 231–233; 239–240). Three of the four individuals were children. Bayal phase ceramic vessels were interred with all four. Burials 152 and 155 contained figurines. All four burials were oriented east-west, with the heads in the east. All individuals were in an extended position, lying on their backs.

Burial 152 was covered by large, flat stones. A mold-made ceramic figurine whistle (FG200-1) was deposited above the flagstones (Figure 2). This figurine represents a seated man wearing an elaborate macaw-shaped headdress. It was painted with Maya blue pigment. The burial below the flagstones contained the remains of a small child (aged as an infant by Juan Manuel Palomo). The burial is primary and articulated, but many elements are missing, suggesting that the burial was re-entered. Therefore, the figurine might be associated with a re-entry, rather than an interment. With the partial skeleton were three styles of beads, made of bone and shell, and a Pabellon Modeled-Carved bowl.

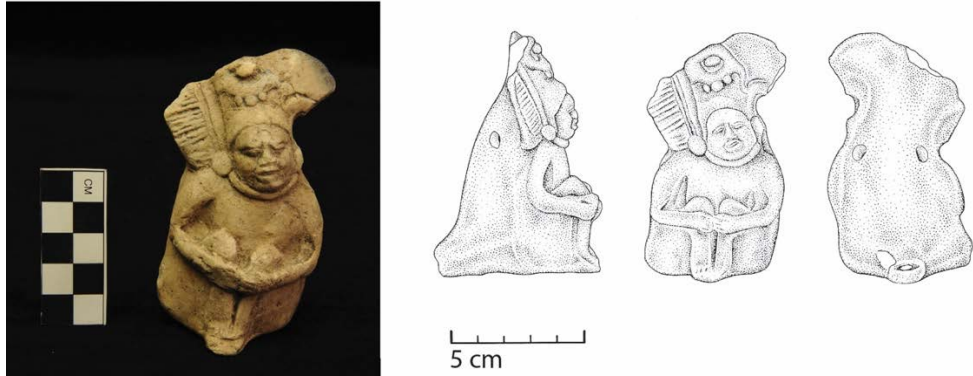


Figure 2. Figurine FG200-1 from Burial 152 (CB-211C-2-4-1). Photo by Triadan and drawing by Alfredo Román, courtesy of the Ceibal-Petexbatún Archaeological Project.

Burial 155 was of a child aged 4 ± 1 years old, according to Palomo. There was no formal cist. The offerings included a Pabellon Modeled-Carved bowl and a Cameron Incised (Tinaja group) bowl. There were also several beads made of bone and greenstone and a tiny piece of worked quartz. Burial 155 contained two mold-made ceramic figurines (whistles), and both were painted with Maya blue pigment. One figurine (FG211-1) is an anthropomorphic bat character (Figure 3). The other (FG210-1) is a seated man with puffy, round cheeks and a headband. Called the “Fat-God” or “Fat-Face” by Willey, this is a reoccurring character in the figurine assemblage of Ceibal (Willey 1978:31–32) (Figure 3). Halperin refers to such figurines as “fat men,” since they appear to be tricksters or clowns, rather than gods (Halperin 2014:99–107).

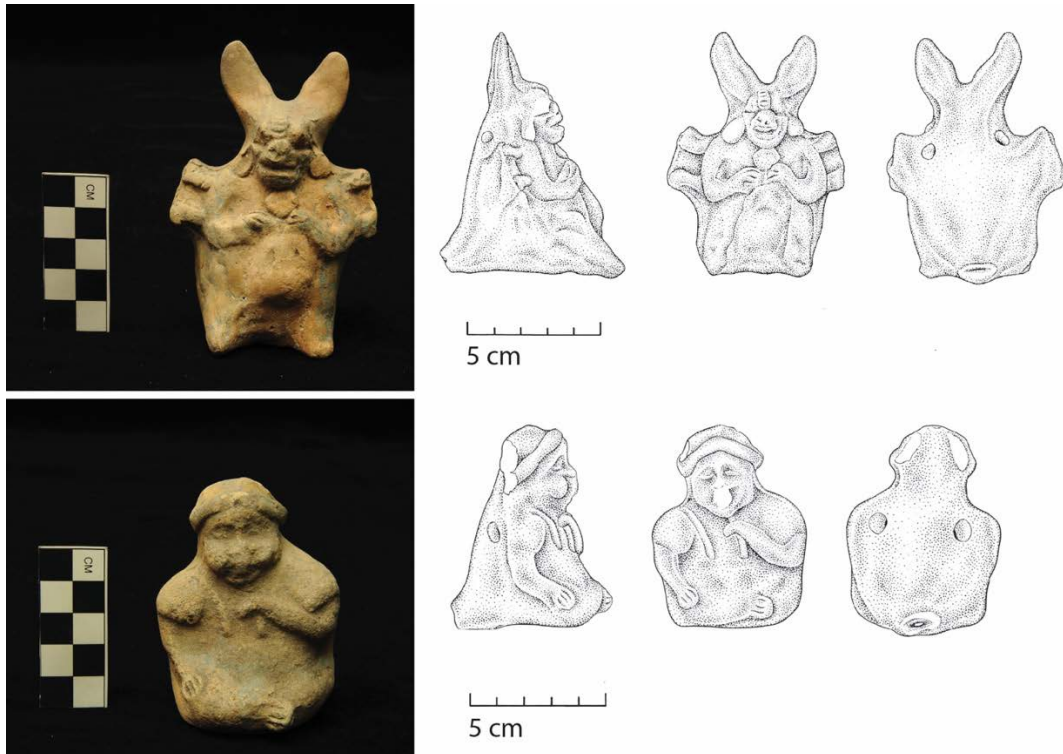


Figure 3. Figurines FG211-1 (top) and FG210-1 (bottom) from Burial 155 (CB-211C-4-4-3). Photos by Triadan and drawings by Alfredo Román, courtesy of the Ceibal-Petexbatún Archaeological Project.

A different fat man figurine (S-379) was found in Ceibal Burial 3, a Terminal Classic child burial excavated by the Harvard project in the North Plaza of Group A (Tourtellot 1990:89–90; Willey 1978:31–33). This was the only burial uncovered by the Harvard project that contained a figurine. Based on the individual’s stature, Tourtellot estimated an age at death of 4-10 years. The figurine whistle was the only grave good. It is missing the hands and legs but is otherwise complete. Perhaps it was broken by the child or a sibling during play. This fat man stands and raises his right arm. He wears a long, flowing cloth headdress and is bare-chested, with a visible navel. A drum and a conch shell hang from his belt, indicating that he is a musician.

In addition to Burials 3, 152, and 155, one other burial excavated at Ceibal contained figurines. Burial 134 dates to the end of the Late Classic period (Tepejilote 3 phase) and was excavated at a residential patio in Group D (Ponciano 2012). The interred child was aged 2 years ± 8 months by Palomo. As in the case of Burial 152, Burial 134 was covered by flagstones and some skeletal elements were missing, suggesting possible re-entry. The offerings comprised six ceramic vessels, including one polychrome vase, and two ceramic figurine whistles (Figure 4). Both figurines were painted with Maya blue pigment. One (FG151-1) is a seated fat man, and the other (FG154-1) is a standing noblewoman in elaborate clothing.



Figure 4. Figurines FG-151-1 (L) and FG-154-1 (R) from Burial 134 (CB-212A-3-4-4). Photos by Triadan, courtesy of the Ceibal-Petexbatún Archaeological Project.

Ceibal Figurines

The Ceibal-Petexbatún Archaeological Project recovered 253 Late to Terminal Classic ceramic figurines and figurine fragments during our 2005-2015 excavations at Ceibal. One hundred nine come from contexts dated to the Tepejilote ceramic phase (c. 600-800 AD), and 115 come from contexts dated to the Bayal ceramic phase (c. 800-950 AD). The remaining 29 were found in earlier contexts or unclear contexts, due to stratigraphic mixing.

Building on her work at Aguateca, Triadan categorized these artifacts according to several variables, including surface decorations, paste color, possible functions (whistle, mold for figurine, etc.), identifiable body parts, and shape (male with headdress, monkey, etc.). In terms of function (Table 2), most figurines (72%) are categorized as a kind of whistle or as figurine-or-

whistle, and the function of 19% is unclear. In terms of shape (Table 3), 39% of figurines represent adult humans, 10% are non-human animals (often anthropomorphized), 4% are deities/grotesques (including the “fat men” with puffy cheeks and potbellies) (Halperin 2014:94–142), and 45% are uncategorized. The humans are about evenly divided into men (38), women (30), and unknown (31), and one child is shown in the arms of a woman. Of the men, two (5%) are classified as wearing simple clothing, 11 (29%) wear elaborate clothing, and 11 (29%) are dressed as warriors. Of the women, 14 (47%) wear simple clothing and/or are engaged in household work, while seven (23%) wear elaborate clothing. As one might expect, this sample of Late-Terminal Classic figurines resembles that of Harvard’s Seibal Project (Willey 1978:7–38).

Table 2. Late-Terminal Classic ceramic figurines by function.

Function	Quantity	Percent
Figurine (not flute or whistle)	12	4.74%
Flute (long musical instrument)	2	0.79%
Whistle (round musical instrument with a simple resonator)	81	32.02%
Hollow head figurine	2	0.79%
Mold for figurine	1	0.40%
Figurine or whistle	92	36.36%
Whistle with multiple resonators (three most common)	4	1.58%
Clapper (for bell)	5	1.98%
Whistle with double resonator	5	1.98%
Unknown	49	19.37%
Total	253	

Table 3. Late-Terminal Classic ceramic figurines by shape.

Shape	Quantity	Percent
Anthropomorphic, unclear	29	11.46%
Male, unclear	12	4.74%
Male with headdress	5	1.98%
Male with cowl-like headdress	2	0.79%
Male with macaw headdress	1	0.40%
Male with noble attire, not warrior	3	1.19%
Male with grotesque-face/monster headdress	2	0.79%
Seated male	2	0.79%
Warrior, unclear	6	2.37%
Warrior with padded armor	4	1.58%
Warrior with fat-man mask	1	0.40%
Female, unclear	9	3.56%
Female with headdress	4	1.58%
Female with simple cap or cowl-like headdress	1	0.40%
Female with elaborate coiffure and scarf, knotted in front	1	0.40%
Female with noble attire	1	0.40%
Female with noble attire and monster headdress	1	0.40%
Female with simple attire	8	3.16%
Female with simple attire, carrying bundle	1	0.40%
Female and child	1	0.40%
Female holding food or vessel	1	0.40%
Female with mano and metate	1	0.40%
Female holding water jar	1	0.40%
Adult with crossed arms, holding something	1	0.40%
Adult holding deer	1	0.40%



Zoomorphic, unclear	3	1.19%
Bird, unclear	2	0.79%
Owl	1	0.40%
Other bird (not owl, not turkey)	6	2.37%
Mole	1	0.40%
Monkey	7	2.77%
Dog	1	0.40%
Bat	1	0.40%
Deer	1	0.40%
Frog	1	0.40%
Snake	2	0.79%
Deity, unclear	1	0.40%
Grotesque head or monster	2	0.79%
Fat man	5	1.98%
Old man	1	0.40%
Drop shaped	1	0.40%
Long, partially hollow conical shape (bell?)	5	1.98%
Unclear	113	44.66%
Total	253	

We wondered if the cast of characters differed between the Tepejilote phase (Late Classic) and Bayal (Terminal Classic) phase contexts. The new regime of Wat'ul K'atel could have influenced the types of ceramic figurines used by Ceibal households. At least two of the Bayal figurine fragments are made of fine paste ceramic and therefore likely imported. However, in general the characters represented in the figurines do not differ between the Tepejilote and Bayal phases (Table 4). Looking at the data in more detail, we can say that there were more warrior figurines in Tepejilote contexts than in Bayal contexts (7 vs. 3), more women holding objects in Tepejilote contexts (4 vs. 0 or 1, depending on gender assigned to Bayal figurine), and more birds in Tepejilote contexts (6 vs. 1). There were more monkeys in Bayal contexts (6 vs. 1) and more “fat men” in Bayal contexts (4 vs. 1). However, these sample sizes are too small to allow us to draw significant conclusions. Thus, the ensembles of household figurines seem not to have changed much from the Late Classic to the Terminal Classic period, despite political turmoil. We take this to mean that households controlled the production and exchange of ceramic figurines throughout the Late and Terminal Classic periods, with little top-down interference. We might also have seen bottom-up, household-driven changes in figurine iconographies (see Brumfiel 1996; Overholtzer 2021). However, Maya figurine styles remained relatively stable and conservative until the end of the Classic period, as is supported by Halperin’s analyses of assemblages from central Petén (Halperin 2017).

Table 4. Shapes of figurines from clearly identified Tepejilote vs. Bayal contexts.

Category	Tepejilote count	Bayal count	Total
Ungendered adults	22 (73%)	8 (27%)	30
Men	15 (42%)	21 (58%)	36
Women	10 (53%)	9 (47%)	19
Animals	11 (46%)	13 (54%)	24
Monsters/deities/grotesques	3 (38%)	5 (63%)	8
Geometric	3 (50%)	3 (50%)	6



Unknown	45 (45%)	56 (55%)	101
Total	109 (49%)	115 (51%)	224

Discussion

Based on contextual information from rapidly abandoned houses at Aguateca and on the preferential inclusion in burials of children, we interpret Classic period figurines as objects of socialization, used by adults and children together in domestic spaces. We argue that children played with these musical instruments as toys, although toy-ness was only one part of the life histories of these objects.

By examining the ceramic figurine whistles as material of socialization, we can learn something about what adults thought was appropriate for children in Classic Maya society (Baxter 2022:68–78; Kamp 2001a:19, 24). The material form of a figurine whistle constrains not only the musical notes that can be played, but also the stories and norms spread through household performances. To give a modern comparison, the physical characteristics of Mattel’s Barbie doll send messages about beauty standards, gender norms, and other cultural values (Chin 1999; Harriger et al. 2019; Rice et al. 2016; Rogers 1999). For this reason, the dolls’ available body shapes, skin tones, and outfits have changed over time, as the dominant values in the United States have shifted. A child can create countless adventures for a Barbie doll that may subvert dominant ideologies, but the form of the doll is a solid fact that influences, and even limits, creativity.

Gender

A major part of the socialization of children in pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica, as in modern societies, was the reproduction of gender norms (Joyce 2000a; Kamp 2001a:14). The depiction of human adults in the corpus of figurines tells us about ideal gender roles at Late and Terminal Classic Ceibal. While women are less common and less prominent in Classic Maya public art, we find roughly equal numbers of male and female figurines (see also Halperin 2014:68, 83). Men are often shown in noble attire and elaborate headdresses, or as warriors. These portable depictions of masculinity match what is shown in public art, where men are shown active in public life, fighting battles, holding political audiences, conducting rituals, dancing, and impersonating deities (Joyce 2000b:54–89). Some male figurines wear simple, everyday attire, including two from Ceibal that wear cowl-like headdresses (Table 3). However, Classic Maya men are not shown in the domestic acts of producing food, weaving, or caring for children.

In contrast, about half of the female figurines from Ceibal wear simple attire, and five (17%) are engaged in domestic activities of production and reproduction (see also Halperin 2009, 2014:85–93; Joyce 1993, 2000b:68–73). One woman holds a child, one grinds maize or other food with a mano and metate (Figure 5), one carries a bundle, and two carry vessels for food or water. An ungendered adult holding a deer could be an additional example. The Harvard project also found one figurine (S-1375) of a woman using a mano and metate in a Terminal Classic context at residential group C-24 (Willey 1978:28–31). Murals at Calakmul show Classic Maya women of different ranks in similar activities, including carrying water jars and selling food and crafts at a market (Carrasco Vargas et al. 2009; Halperin 2014:83–93). Brumfiel and Joyce note that for the Postclassic Aztec and the Classic Maya, respectively, women’s economic production and reproduction are featured in figurines much more than in public art (Brumfiel 1996; Joyce 1996). In both cases, they suggest that the state may strategically underrepresent the economic and

political power of women and households, while the subjects, through popular images, show the importance of women's labor in everyday life. Interestingly, examples of women doing household work are rarely reported among Classic Maya figurine assemblages, including that of nearby Aguateca (Triadan 2007:286). This is especially true if one excludes the finely modeled, non-whistle, Jaina-style figurines. As far as we can tell, the Late and Terminal Classic households of Ceibal had an unusual preference for representing domestic activities in figurine whistle form.

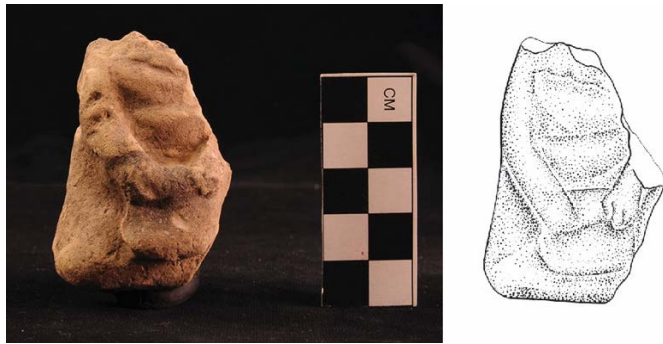


Figure 5. Figurine FG-577-1 of woman using mano and metate (CB-211C-13-4-6). Photo by Triadan and drawing by Alfredo Román, courtesy of the Ceibal-Petexbatún Archaeological Project.

As in the Aguateca corpus, the Ceibal figurines also represent women active in public life (Triadan 2007). In addition to managing households, Classic Maya women were active in political affairs and public rituals (Halperin 2014:54; Joyce 1996; Navarro-Farr et al. 2020; Reese-Taylor et al. 2009). While the Ceibal figurines do not include a warrior queen like the example from El Perú-Waka', we identify at least seven (23%) women in elite attire and elaborate headdresses. This accords with images of noblewomen in courtly scenes on the polychrome ceramics of the Classic period (Joyce 2000b:54–89; Kerr n.d.). Women's involvement in public life is also clear in the famous lintels of Yaxchilán, at the house of Lady K'abal Xook (Martin and Grube 2008:125–126; McAnany and Plank 2001). The lintels depict Lady K'abal Xook engaged in a bloodletting ritual, conjuring an ancestor spirit, and helping her husband, the ruler, dress for battle. In the nearby murals of Bonampak, noblewomen are shown engaged in a bloodletting ritual and participating in public events at the royal court, and a female child is publicly presented, potentially as a royal heiress (Miller and Brittenham 2013). On Dos Pilas Panel 19, blood is sacrificed from a male child's penis as the ruler and a noblewoman look on (Houston 1993:115; Palka 1997:300–302). Triadan notes a strong resemblance between the woman's headdress and that of a female figurine from Aguateca (Triadan 2007:286–287).

The gender norms made material in the Ceibal figurines intersect with status, or class, and are more complex than a simple dichotomy. While men are shown active in public life and warfare, and not in the domestic sphere, women are not confined to the household. Women – particularly, elite women – are shown as active in both domestic and public life. As in the case of today's Barbie and Ken, to return to an imperfect analogy, women are shown as capable of and responsible for a broader range of activities than men. This bias may be due to the fact women were making, trading, and using the ceramic figurines more often than men. We do not argue that women displayed themselves as superior to men, but rather that they emphasized women's

economic and political contributions much more than did the elite men who commissioned most public monuments. The messages about gender solidified in the figurines influenced the elite and nonelite children of Ceibal throughout the course of daily life, more than hieroglyphic inscriptions, codices, or polychrome vases would have. As manipulable and flexible as the figurine whistles were, they must have discouraged boys from taking on domestic roles and prepared girls to take on duties inside and outside the home.

Interestingly, Classic Maya figurines do not represent children, apart from the occasional infant carried by an adult (Triadan 2007:287). Subadults are also very rarely depicted on public monuments and polychrome ceramic vessels, but that is less surprising since they were not major actors in public events. In contrast, children should have been omnipresent in everyday, domestic life. Their absence from the figurine corpus may tell us something about personhood among the Classic Maya. Juveniles likely participated in gendered rites of passage to transition between age grades and eventually to adult social status (van Genneep 1960; Houston 2009; Joyce 2000a). Perhaps only initiated adults were considered full, complete persons by the crafters of the figurine whistles. Interacting with figurines, children did not see themselves, but rather the people they were expected to become in the future.

In addition to solidifying gender roles, the figurines also perpetuated aesthetic ideals about adult Maya bodies (see Houston et al. 2006). As in public art and on painted vessels, most men and women are shown as relatively young and able-bodied. In contrast, archaeologists and art historians classify the figurines shown as aged, overweight, or disabled as “grotesques.” Dwarves are often shown as court jesters, as is the case for the four dwarves in the figurine tableau from El Perú-Waka’ (Rich 2011:302). Fat men figurines occupy a similar role. While dwarves occasionally appear in public art, images of fat men are found almost exclusively in small-scale media and household contexts (Halperin 2014:100). Like characters with dwarfism, the fat men are performers – most likely “ritual clowns” (Halperin 2014:99–107, 2021; Miller and Taube 1993:63, 86; Taube 1989; Triadan 2007). Some are shown dancing, posing humorously, impersonating warriors, waving fans, or playing musical instruments. While entertaining the elites was not necessarily a bad job, the Classic Maya seem to have marginalized people with atypical bodies. Like gender norms, ideals of physical beauty influenced the children who saw and played with figurines daily. These norms were not necessarily imposed top-down by the state, but rather were materialized and reinforced at the household level.

Mythology and Storytelling

The variety of characters (human, animal, and supernatural) in the Ceibal figurine corpus allowed the enactment of many narratives among children and adults (Halperin 2014:94–142). These could include myths like that of the *Popol Vuh*, told by the K’iche’ Maya during the Colonial period and traced back to Preclassic times (Taube et al. 2010; Tedlock 1996). Both the *Popol Vuh* and modern Maya folktales feature interactions between humans, animals, and gods (Rodríguez-Mejía and Sexton 2010).

The ancient Maya materialized mythology in multiple media. The Late Preclassic painted murals of San Bartolo (c. 100 BC) provide one example (Saturno 2009; Saturno et al. 2005; Taube et al. 2010). The murals are laid out like pages of a codex, indicating that the Preclassic Maya recorded myths in books that do not survive in the archaeological record. In addition, the Classic

Maya depicted scenes involving humans, animals (including the animals represented in the Ceibal figurine corpus), and supernaturals on polychrome ceramic vessels (Kerr n.d.). Among these, “codex-style” vases recall the ancient books we are missing from the record. Using figurines, the two-dimensional stories could also have been performed in three dimensions. Adults could have enacted myths, folktales, and histories to teach moral lessons to children, accompanying the stories with songs played on the whistles. The musical performance of the stories would in some ways resemble the highly choreographed public dance dramas still performed in the Maya area (Hutcheson 2009; Krogstad 2014; Looper 2009; Tedlock 2003; Žračka et al. 2020). However, the highly portable and accessible figurines lend themselves to more free-flowing play. Although children would be constrained by the figurine forms selected by adults, they could put the characters into endless situations, potentially changing traditional stories and subverting norms.

For example, the two figurine whistles included in Burial 155, a fat man and an anthropomorphic bat, could have been played with in many ways. The fat man from Burial 155 is seated and wears simple clothing, with one hand raised to his chest. This is the same pose as that of a fat man figurine (S-1121) excavated at domestic group A-60 by the Harvard project, although the two figurines are not from the same mold (Tourtellot 1988b:73–77; Willey 1978:31–32). In contrast, the bat figurine stands and wears jewelry: earspools and a pendant necklace. In general, bats have darker and less humorous associations than fat men. In Maya mythology and art, bats are associated with the underworld, death, and sacrifice by decapitation (Grube and Nahm 1994:701; Miller and Taube 1993:44–45; Rodríguez-Mejía and Sexton 2010; Tedlock 1996:125–129).

The ritual clown and bat seem unrelated, from what we know of Classic Maya iconography. However, a Tz’utujil Maya folktale told in highland Guatemala features bats and “fat men” in an “enchanted place” called Paruchi Abaj (Rodríguez-Mejía and Sexton 2010:18; Sexton and Bizarro Ujpán 1999:67–70). In the story, the supernatural master of Paruchi Abaj receives offerings from the people and gives permission to hunters to take a certain number of animals. A man hunting without permission wanders into Paruchi Abaj and learns that people there are fattened, sacrificed to feed supernatural beings that include bats, and reincarnated only to be sacrificed again. This story is reminiscent of events in the *Popol Vuh*: Hunahpu is decapitated by a bat in the “Bat House” of the underworld, and both Hero Twins later sacrifice and reincarnate themselves through magic (Tedlock 2003:125–138). In Paruchi Abaj, the “big bat” and “big owl” send smaller bats and owls to bring back human victims. The number of people taken offsets the number of animals hunted without permission, and those sacrificed include the rich who have exploited the poor. In contrast with the story of the Hero Twins, the modern Tz’utujil story seems to contain moral lessons about greed and environmental conservation.

It is tempting to connect the folktale to the two figurine whistles from Burial 155, but the sacrificial “fat men” in Paruchi Abaj do not resemble the dancing jesters of Classic Maya art. In addition, the bat figurine could have elicited laughter instead of fear. Halperin points to human-animal hybrids as a part of Classic Maya humor (Halperin 2021:32). The bat character’s bipedal pose and jewelry could be a joke. The bat figurine also has a potbelly reminiscent of the playful fat men, dwarves, and monkeys in Classic Maya iconography. The dissonance of an underworld creature cavorting with a court jester created the opportunity for a funny story that disrupted norms, rather than a scary story that enforced a moral code. Even if an adult in the household

used the bat figurine to pass on myths about the underworld, the young child interred in Burial 155 could have played with the bat and fat man in a variety of scenarios, along with other children and other figurines. One day, the bat could be spilling the blood of the fat man, and the next day the two characters could be dancing together in the royal court. The musical instruments could have provided different soundtracks for the different narratives.

Ritualized Activities

As discussed above, Classic Maya figurines, like many other household objects, experienced ritual use (as well as toy use) in their life histories (Brady and Peterson 2008). Here, we adopt Catherine Bell's definition of "ritualization" as the process of setting apart certain social actions from "other, usually more quotidian, activities" (Bell 1992:7–8, 74, 90). Bell also identifies six common characteristics of rituals and ritual-like activities: formalism, traditionalism, invariance, rule-governance, sacral symbolism, and performance (Bell 1997:138–169). Building on Bell's theoretical work, Richard Bradley argues that ritual "emphasises some of the concerns of daily life through a kind of performance. It is not opposed to domesticity, and often it grows out of it" (Bradley 2005:xiii). We view domestic practices on a continuum of more to less ritualized. Unlike some Mesoamerican ceramic figurines (see Overholtzer 2021; Tozzer 1941:108–111), Classic Maya figurine whistles were not placed on altars or treated as conduits to the supernatural. Nevertheless, as musical instruments, they were well suited to use in ritualized performances.

We know that figurine whistles were part of mortuary rituals at Ceibal because they were deposited in about a quarter of known Late and Terminal Classic child burials (Supplementary Table A2). It is possible that these musical instruments were also played during interments or burial re-entries. We do not know to what degree other household musical performances were ritualized, but the similar cast of characters represented in the figurines over space and time hints at the possibility of a relatively repetitive and formalized activity. Elsewhere, Triadan makes an analogy to German "Kasperletheater" puppet shows employing a standard, well known set of characters (Triadan 2007:289). Groups of household members may have enacted more formal performances on special occasions, using objects that were also part of everyday life. As mentioned above, those performances could resemble modern Maya dance dramas, which are highly ritualized.

Material Considerations

The material qualities of ceramic whistles shaped the interactions between humans and the objects. Even if figurine whistles were used by adults, they lend themselves well to the socialization of children, due to their physical characteristics. As discussed above, the hollow, thin-walled figurines were easily broken and easily replaced. While the bat and the fat man ended up in Burial 155, most figurines at Ceibal were broken and deposited with other garbage in middens. Readers from certain backgrounds may be reminded of ink-stained Barbie dolls missing limbs and dropped carelessly on bedroom floors or in backyards. Compared to American Girl dolls, for example, Barbies are inexpensive, plentiful, and disposable. They are not generally heirlooms. This does not mean that Barbies have less influence on consumers. Accessible, everyday objects can materialize norms and ideals as well as prestige goods, and are, by definition, engaged with more frequently than prestige goods. Quotidian objects like ceramic

figurines played a major role in the socialization of children in past societies that did not include formal schools or formal toys.

The mold-made, replicable nature of the Classic Maya figurine whistles contributed to stability, or continuity, in the forms over time. New molds were made, figurines could be individualized by adding modeled details or paint, and we do not find identical figurines preserved at Ceibal. However, we do see the same cast of characters represented throughout the Late and Terminal Classic periods (see also Halperin 2017). The relatively conservative method of making figurines limited the cultural values and narratives they mediated.

The material characteristics of the figurine whistles determined how they were seen and heard. They are decorated in three dimensions, but the backs are much less detailed than the other sides (Figures 1-3). When these instruments were played, their forms would be obscured, faced down and covered by both hands of the musician. The iconography was visible when the figurines stood upright, on their flat bases, or were held upright and silent. The physical forms of the instruments also determined the sounds produced. We did not analyze the musical capabilities (e.g., tone, pitch, volume) of the figurines, but we refer the reader to Katz, who included the Ceibal assemblage in his dissertation research on ancient Maya music (Katz 2018).

The size of the figurines is another factor in their social role. Because they represent much larger creatures – humans and animals – figurines can be considered miniatures, or effigies. Lopiparo argues that miniaturization distills key information about “social roles and practices” and “creates a category of ‘plaything’ though which these ideals are discursively and nondiscursively inculcated in children” (Lopiparo 2006:161). As discussed above, the small, light instruments could be played by young children. They could also be easily carried around, moved into imaginative scenarios, tossed through the air, and turned upside down – literally inverting norms. The details of the figurines could only be seen from a short distance, suggesting they were used in intimate performances among small groups of people (Mills 2007; Triadan 2007). Those relatively private events were free from oversight by state officials or the wider community and would therefore have allowed transgressions against dominant ideologies.

Halperin argues that several material qualities of Classic Maya figurines – ephemerality, disposability, replaceability, small size – in addition to their informality and wide availability, facilitated their use in humor (Halperin 2021). She writes that figurines were ideal for “eliciting a laugh, engaging in play, and highlighting the inversion of social norms” (Halperin 2021:32). Perhaps the people of Ceibal associated figurines with children because figurines were fun. Although socialization was a serious endeavor, there was room for silliness. In addition, humor could be used by children and adults to challenge dominant ideologies. Considering all the characteristics of the material, children and adults reproduced *and* contested social structures by playing with figurine whistles. However, as Victor Turner argues, the inversion of norms through social dramas does not always transform society (Bell 1997:39–40; Turner 1974). These acts can relieve tensions and legitimize the existing social structure, as well as modify it.

Conclusions

The Classic Maya made ceramic figurine whistles, and the figurine whistles made the Classic Maya. As materials of socialization, they helped reproduce norms and shaped relationships

between adults and children. As quotidian, accessible objects used in intimate performances, they imbued households with cultural values – but could also facilitate transgressions.

The solid forms and mold-replication of figurines made social norms more stable and resistant to change. Children learned gender roles in the household, and male and female roles were materialized in the figurines. In comparison to depictions in public monuments, women were shown taking on a broader range of activities and harnessing more economic and political power. People whose bodies did not fit Maya beauty ideals, including fat men and dwarves, were relegated to jester roles. The physical characteristics of the figurines allowed more freedom in storytelling than did two-dimensional art forms. Nevertheless, they solidified social structures and limited play. While household members likely reimagined myths and contested ideologies, the history of these musical instruments at Ceibal is conservative overall. The characters represented in figurines were consistent over the three centuries, despite considerable political turmoil. The Classic Maya values passed on at the household level through the intergenerational use of figurines were long lasting.

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Data Availability Statement

Excavated materials are stored by the Guatemalan government at the Salon 3 facility in Guatemala City. Contact *Instituto de Antropología e Historia*, 12 Ave. 11-65, Zona 1, +502 2232-5571 for access to materials. Spanish language reports on excavations and artifacts are also held by the *Instituto de Antropología e Historia*. Contact the corresponding author for copies of reports or other information.

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