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Precious People: Indigenous Medical-Spiritual Relations in the Archaeology of Maya Childhood

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ABSTRACT

Previous studies of bodily ornaments from burial contexts have often fixated on notions of wealth, social inequality, and prestige. Although such considerations are often pertinent, our work provides a complementary perspective incorporating Indigenous and ladino (mestizo) medical-spiritual understandings of bodily ornaments. We find that this perspective is best understood through a focus on children. In particular, this paper examines the marine shell, bone, ceramic, and stone bracelets and necklaces of children from Late and Terminal Classic burials at the Maya site of Ucanal, Petén, Guatemala, and compares them to burials from a range of time periods in the same region of the eastern Maya Lowlands. In addition, by incorporating ethnographic and ethnohistoric research on Indigenous Maya and ladino practices, we underscore the relational understandings of Maya ornaments worn by children and their role in the articulation of caring relations between parents and their precious children, in repelling spiritual forces and winds carrying illnesses, and in the making of social persons. While attention and respect for Indigenous medical-spiritual practices are slowly but increasingly recognized in contemporary medical practices in Guatemala, Mexico, and elsewhere, archaeological perspectives also benefit from such perspectives on children and their well-being.

KEYWORDS

Mortuary practices; health; spiritual-medical; Maya; Mesoamerica; children; ornamentation; amulet

Introduction

Marine and greenstone ornaments are often considered as luxury items in the Maya area, with burials containing such jewelry as reflecting a particular elevated social status or wealth of the interred individuals or their families. In fact, since the Saxe-Binford hypotheses on mortuary treatments over 50 years ago (Binford 1971; Tainter 1978 see also Rakita and Buikstra 2005 for a review and critiques), it has become commonplace to consider the wealth, social ranking, and status of a society based, in part through funerary offerings, a consideration that emerged as part of a cultural evolutionary focus on social inequality. Children, of course, have been integral in these social reconstructions as high value items placed in children's burials have often been identified as a sign of social ranking with inherited or ascribed wealth rather than achieved rank or wealth, which would

accrue with the accomplishments of an individual over their life course (Peebles and Kus 1977).

Although we acknowledge the important role of funerary objects in interpreting social standing, wealth, and inequalities in any society including that of the ancient Maya (Krejci and Culbert 1995; Rosenswig, Briggs, and Masson 2020), in this paper we highlight the potential medical-spiritual significance of ornaments as amulets, looking at not only ornaments of marine shell and greenstone but also bone and other materials. Their consideration as such emphasizes the relationality of family members and care-givers forged through emotion and social connection as well as the relationality of Indigenous systems of health. While amulets may have been used by individuals of all ages, we find that a focus on children, in particular, underscores not only new interpretations for bodily ornaments in Maya society but lends a deeper understanding of medical-spiritual systems among Maya peoples.

In order to enrich our understandings of ornaments in the archaeological record, we turn to burials at the ancient Maya city of Ucanal, in Southeastern Petén, Guatemala

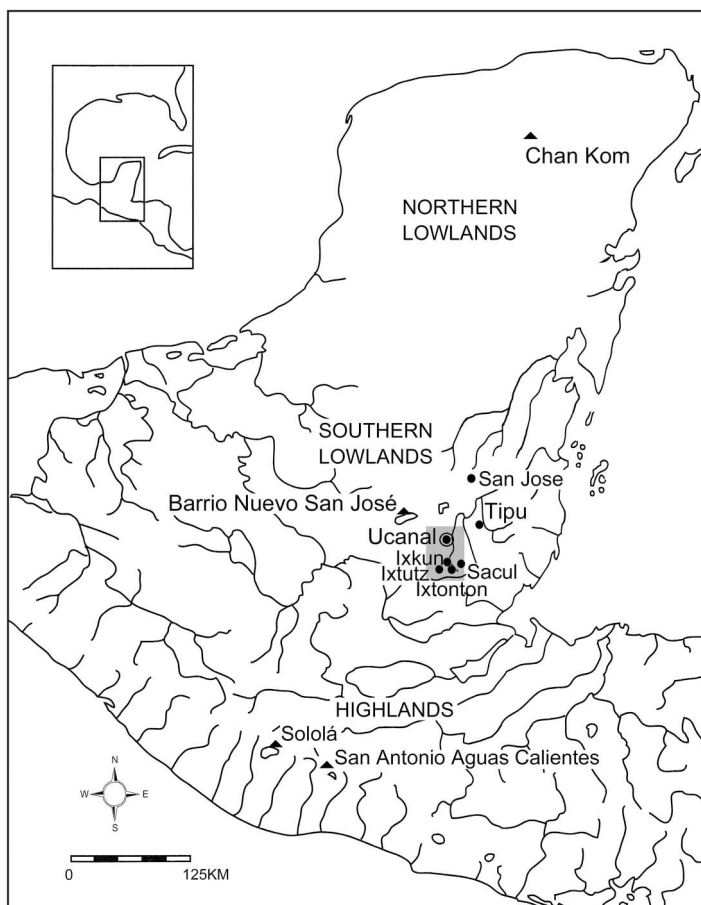


Figure 1. Map of the Maya area showing the zone of Southeast Petén investigated by AAG and PAU (gray box), archaeological sites (circles), and contemporary towns (triangles) mentioned in the text.

(Figure 1). These Late Classic (ca. 600–810 CE) and Terminal Classic (ca. 810–950/1000 CE) burials are further contextualized with published excavations in the same region, the Southeast Petén, and eastern Belize, two zones connected by the same riverine network but separated by contemporary nation-state borders. These archaeological findings are then assessed in relation to ethnohistoric and ethnographic studies that discuss wellness practices surrounding the care of children among Maya and mestizo populations in the Maya region. To augment ethnographic understandings, a handful of interviews with Maya Kaqchikel interlocutors on the contemporary significance and use of bracelets by children in Guatemala was also conducted by Maria Fernandez López López. We find that the potency of such ornaments emerges from their relationality as part of intimate relations of love and care and as mediations with the spiritual world – in addition to their potential values as wealth. As such, they highlight the preciousness¹ of children beyond inheritance and family privilege.

Relationality Approaches in an Archaeology of Children

Although our archaeological and ethnographic study on ornaments benefits from a focus on children, in particular, our positionality or standpoint – drawing from feminist standpoint theory (Harding 2004, 2009; Wylie 2004) and the importance in deriving knowledge from particular social positions or perspectives – is not *specifically* that of a child or children. Rather, our understanding of the archaeological materials here is one of relationality between children and parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and other care-givers as part of relations of care. In mortuary studies in general, scholars have increasingly examined human remains as part of a series of on-going relations between the dead and the living rather than a mere reflection of the life of a single deceased individual (Rakita and Buikstra 2005; Novotny 2013; Murphy and Le Roy 2017). Such a perspective is also part of a larger movement in archaeology that includes the ‘bioarchaeology of care’, which examines health-related caregiving in archaeological research (Bohling, Croucher, and Buckberry 2022; Powell, Southwell-Wright, and Gowland 2016a; Tilley 2015). Although most studies on the bioarchaeology of care have focused on elderly and disabled individuals (Dongoske, Cox, and Rogge 2015; Powell, Southwell-Wright, and Gowland 2016b; Tilley and Oxenham 2011; Tilley 2015), increasing attention has also been placed on the relations of care between care-givers and infants or children (Dawson 2016; Halcrow et al. 2020; Lewis 2016). This bias towards elderly and disabled individuals is partly due to the perspective that care is a normalized aspect of all infancy and early childhood and thus not exceptional or worth noting. Nonetheless, the ways in which such care manifests, or is neglected, should also be a subject of investigation.

While many previous studies on the bioarchaeology of care do not consider the emotive aspect of the ways in which relations of care transpired, there has been increasing attention to emotion in archaeology in general (Creese 2016; Fleisher and Norman 2016; Harris and Sørensen 2010; Supernant et al. 2020; Tarlow 2012). Such studies do not attempt to recapture the intersubjectivity of individuals in the past, an impossible task, but rather to recognize the possible ways in which emotion may have been tied up in particular social contexts, relations between peoples, and material objects and landscapes with entangled histories charged with affective meaning. Archaeological studies

that incorporate children into their analyses have focused heavily on emotions of loss, sadness, and mourning surrounding children's death or death in general (Baxter 2020; Cannon and Cook 2015; Murphy 2011). Intimate care-taker and child relations, however, also invite the possibility for thinking about compassion, love, and emotional attachment. These approaches speak to a more encompassing sense of personhood whereby individuals are not isolated beings, but entangled in webs of relationality.

Anthropological studies in many regions of the world have shown that the essence of personhood is highly relational – not just a quality of individuals but forged through relationships – between individuals (e.g. genders, family members, elders, etc.), between humans, non-humans beings and material things, and between bodies and animating essences resident both in those bodies and elsewhere (Descola 2012; Mauss 1990; Strathern 1988). In the Maya area, epigraphic, iconographic, and ethnographic data indicate that Maya personhood was part of a nexus of relations of members of households that include names, titles, and material objects, such as heirlooms and the physicality of the house itself (Gillespie 2001; 2021; Hendon 2018; Vogt 1969). Maya personhood is also produced through relations with souls and other animating essences, some of which are resident in the body and if lost can cause illness or even death. Other animating essences are outside the human body but tapped into or appeased through reciprocal relations of gifts, offerings, and bodily transference (e.g. via blood, saliva, bones) (Boremanse 1998; Carlsen and Prechtel 1991; S. Houston and Stuart 1998; Pitarch 2012).

In turn, ontologies of personhood are intimately tied to notions and practices of well-being and health. Among the Classic period Maya, spiritual entities and deities are both the sources of illness as well as forces in the healing and protection against illnesses (Helmke and Nielsen 2009; S. D. Houston and Stuart 1989). Among contemporary Maya peoples, spirit-souls can be 'illness-givers' and capable of interfering with human well-being through the infliction of diseases or ailments (Pitarch 2012, 106). As June Nash (1970, 137) notes for the Tzeltal Maya, 'Sickness is a sign of upset relations between the spirits or people and those of relatives, neighbors, or places. In the curing ritual, the curers not only treat the disease, but also try to bring about spiritual readjustment by dramatizing the ill effects of animosity.' While attention and respect for Indigenous medical-spiritual practices are slowly but increasingly recognized as part of a broader swath of contemporary medical practices in Guatemala, Mexico, and elsewhere (Groark 2005; Hatala and Waldrum 2017; Orellana 1987), archaeological perspectives also benefit from Indigenous and non-Western ontological perspectives on children and their well-being. We suggest, in particular, that some bodily ornaments may have been tied up in these relationships of families, care, and spiritual and bodily well-being.

Archaeology of Children's Burials in the Eastern Maya Lowlands

Recent research at the archaeological site of Ucanal (Figure 1) has uncovered a number Late and Terminal Classic period (ca. 600-950/1000 CE) child burials containing marine shell and greenstone beads excavated from modest residences in which such imported ornaments might not be normally expected. The site of Ucanal is located in the eastern Maya Lowlands in the Middle Mopan River Valley in Southeastern Petén, Guatemala. The site was occupied from at least the Middle Preclassic to the Postclassic period with its largest population peak during the Terminal Classic when it was the capital of the

K'anwitznal kingdom with an urban core of at least 7.5 km² and larger extent of at least 26 km² (Halperin et al. 2020). Archaeological excavations at the site began in the late 1990s with the Proyecto Atlas Arqueológico de Guatemala (AAG), directed by Juan Pedro Laporte, and more recently by the Proyecto Arqueológico Ucanal (PAU), directed by Christina Halperin, Jose Luis Garrido (2014–2022) and Carmen Ramos (2023 – present). Human osteological analyses by the PAU were directed by bioarchaeologist, Katherine Miller Wolf.

PAU excavations reveal that despite a small sample size of 38 Late Classic and Terminal Classic period burials excavated to date (2014–2024)², ornaments are more commonly found in child burials than in adult burials (Table 1). In all cases of child burials with ornaments, the burials were from modest residential groups ranked as Rank 3, the smallest of the three group size categories in terms of architectural volume (Halperin and LeMoine 2019). All adult burials with ornaments were also from Rank 3 residential groups with one exception, a burnt deposit (Burial 20-1) containing what has been interpreted to be the remains of a Late Classic royal tomb with at least four adult individuals and tens of thousands of burnt greenstone ornament fragments and marine shell beads (Halperin et al. 2024). Despite this single royal example emphasizing a distinction in both quantity and in some cases quality, the ornaments found in child burials from more modest residences are somewhat surprising and warrant further exploration.

For example, Burial 8-1, was found in the foundation of a modest structure in a small, commoner household, Group 133, dating to the Terminal Classic period (Halperin, LeMoine, and Flynn-Arajdal 2016) (Figure 2). It was of a small child about 5–6 years old buried in a seated position within an unfired ceramic bowl. The child wore a necklace of beads of perforated human teeth, greenstone, ceramic, freshwater shell, and marine shell (Figures 3 and 4). Many of the beads and the necklace itself were quite small, perhaps even suggesting that it was made specifically for a child – and perhaps for this particular child.

Another burial, Burial 6-2, was similar to Burial 8-1 in that it was a child about 5–6 years old and buried in the foundation of a modest, commoner residential building from Group 139 (Cano Estrada, Thibodeau, and Flynn-Arajdal 2017). The child wore a necklace of 2 greenstone (UCPV-016, UCPV-017) and 4 marine shell beads, which were also small in size (Figure 5). A more extravagant ornamental ensemble was found in Burial 24-2 located in the modest, Rank 3 residential Group 166 (Cano Estrada 2023). This burial contained two children, a 4–5 year old (Individual 24-2A) placed directly next to and almost overlapping with a child around 1 years old (Individual 24-2B). The burial contained a small bracelet of 8 greenstone (UCPV-026) and 1 marine shell (UCMM-74) beads as well as a necklace or other ornamentation of 23 disk/tubular-shaped beads, 2 *Dentalium* sp.

Table 1. Percent of Classic period Ucanal (PAU2014–2024) burials containing beaded ornaments by age category.

Age	Years	Burials	Burials with Ornaments	%
Neonatal	0 +/- 4 months	4	0	0.00
Child	6 months–2 years	3	1	33.33
Child	4–6 years	4	3	75.00
Child	6–8 years	2	0	0.00
Young Adult	17–30 years	4	1	25.00
Adult	20–50 years	21	3	14.29
Total		38	8	

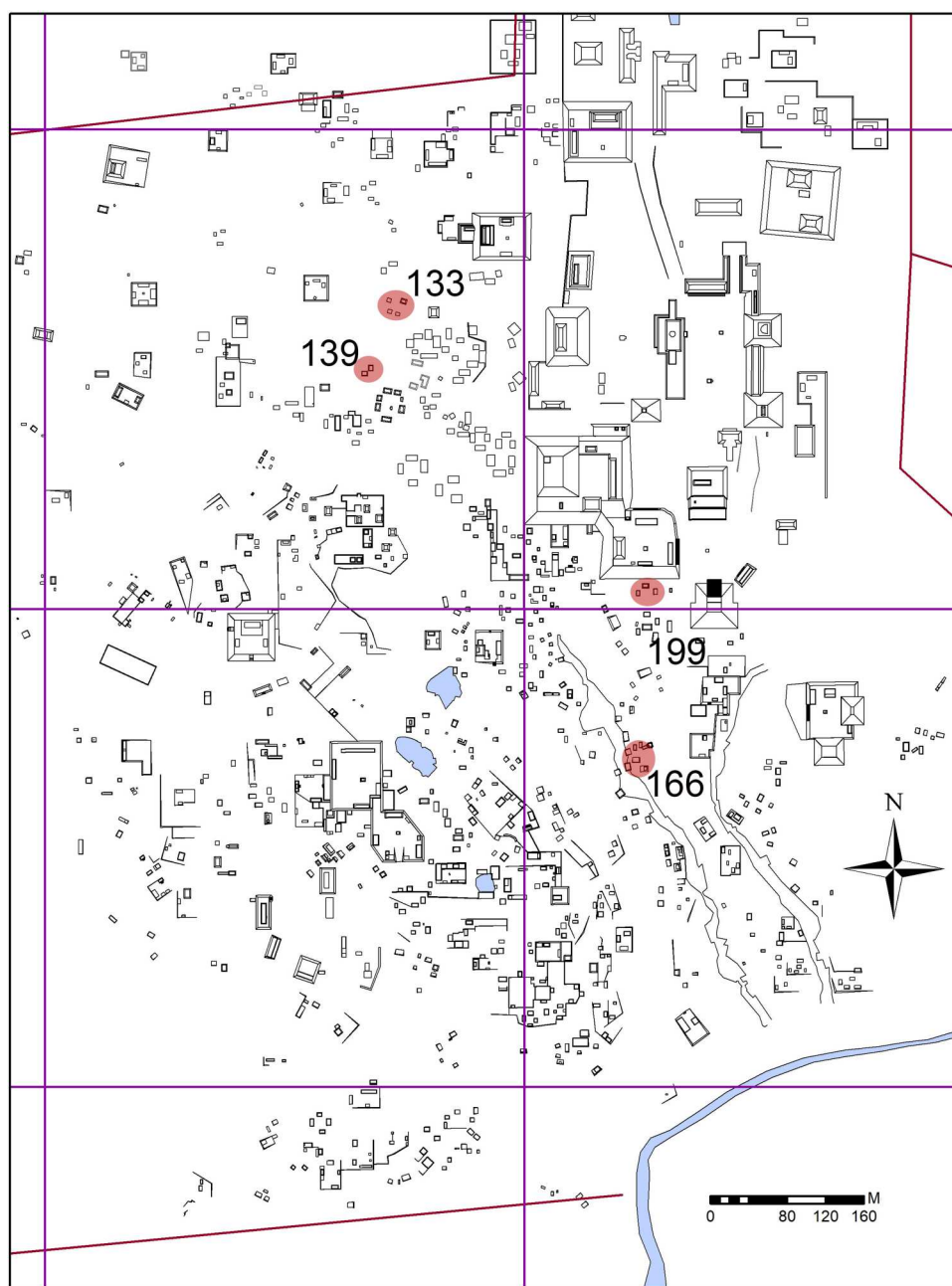


Figure 2. Map of the site of Ucanal showing the locations of small residential groups, highlighted in red, with child burials containing ornaments (PAU map 2014-2023).

beads, and 75+ *Prunum apicinum* marine shell beads, which clustered closer to the older child (UCMM-077) (Figures 6 and 7). In turn, some ornaments were more modest with a single dark greenstone bead found with the burial of an 18-month child buried (Burial 33-1) in the patio foundation of Rank 3 residential Group 199 and protected by a half fragmentary jar.

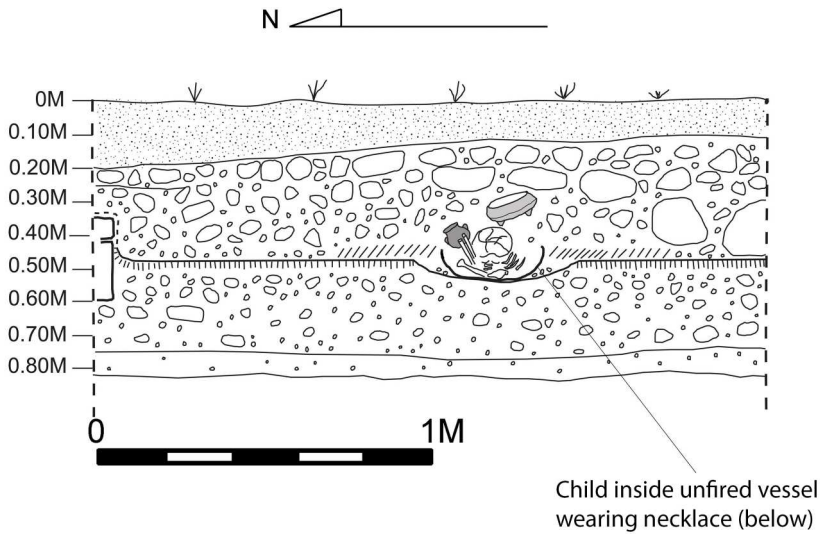


Figure 3. Ucanal Burial 8-1 of child wearing a necklace of marine shell beads, greenstone beads, freshwater beads, human teeth, and a ceramic bead (drawing and photo by C. Halperin).

While the Ucanal burial corpus represents a relatively small sample size, when these finds are combined with burials from sites throughout Southeastern Petén excavated by the AAG, however, it is clear that children aged 0–8 years from Classic period burials (primarily Late and Terminal Classic in which sample sizes are the largest) are more frequently found with pendants, beads, and other small ornaments than adults (combined sub-adults and adults ranging 15+ years) and whose differences are statistically significant (Pinto Vásquez 2004; Pinto Vásquez and Laporte 2005) (Table 2 and Table 3 (Figure 8).



Figure 4. Necklace beads from Ucanal Burial 8–1 in adult human hand for scale (photo by C. Halperin).

These ornaments appear in contexts in which social status may play a role in the quantity and quality of ornaments recovered, such as Burial 183 from the site of Sacul, which was a cist burial placed in an eastern structure of a large architectural group associated with the governing elite at the site. The burial included an alabaster vase, nine carved shell rings, 24 ring-shaped artifacts that may have been part of a headdress or clothing adornment, mother-of-pearl and pyrite beads, and a fragment of a green stone pendant (Ramos Hernandez 1999). Others, however, were found with child burials from more modest architecture and other accompanying grave offerings, such as Burial 95 from Ixtonton, a child 4–6 years old found with a small marine shell bead (C-144) and a ceramic pendant (T-103) that was deposited just above bedrock and covered by utilitarian jar fragments (Pinto Vásquez and Laporte 2005, 504).

Patterns in the age ranges of the child burials with ornaments are difficult to pinpoint with the reported data from the AAG. Nonetheless, it is of note that neonatal infant burials from Southeast Petén were not buried with ornaments. In fact, they were not typically buried with any grave goods at all. Contemporary Maya peoples often considered small newborns to be of a special status in that their souls were not completely tethered to their bodies. While newborn babies a few weeks old are unable to fully see the world, newborns during this stage are considered among the Lacandon Maya to, nonetheless, be able to ‘see the gods’ (Boremanse 1998, 80). Among the Tzeltal Maya, a newborn baby’s soul does not get fully lodged to the body until about a month after birth, after which the baby may be taken out in public and a *ki’n ha* (water ceremony) may be performed (Nash 1970, 116). It is possible that the giving and wearing of jewelry did not occur until after this very early stage.

The patterns found in Southeastern Petén may also occur in the neighboring zone of western Belize. For example, shell and bone pendants were also found to be more common among child burials than adult burials at the site of San Jose in Belize

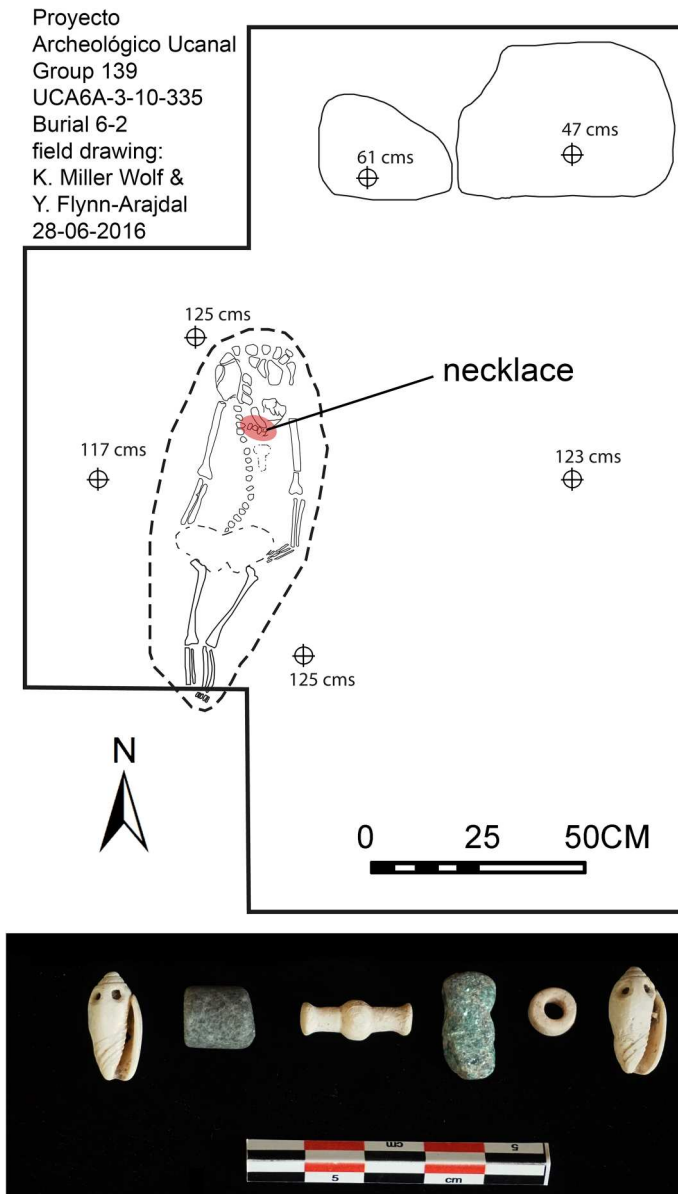


Figure 5. Ucanal Burial 6–2 of child with marine shell and greenstone necklace (drawing by K. Miller Wolf and Y. Flynn-Arajdal; photo by C. Halperin).

(Thompson 1939, 193–219), located not too far away from the Mopan River Valley. While 14% (6 of 42) of adult burials contained shell (freshwater or marine) beads or pendants of some form, 21% (5 of 24 burials) of child burials contained marine shell and or bone beads or pendants. Similar to patterns in Southeastern Petén, neonatal burials possessed no ornamentation and tended not to possess grave goods at all. The burials with shell and bone ornaments from San Jose were found in the public, elite Group A, the elite residential Group C, and the elite to middle-status Group B. No small-sized commoner

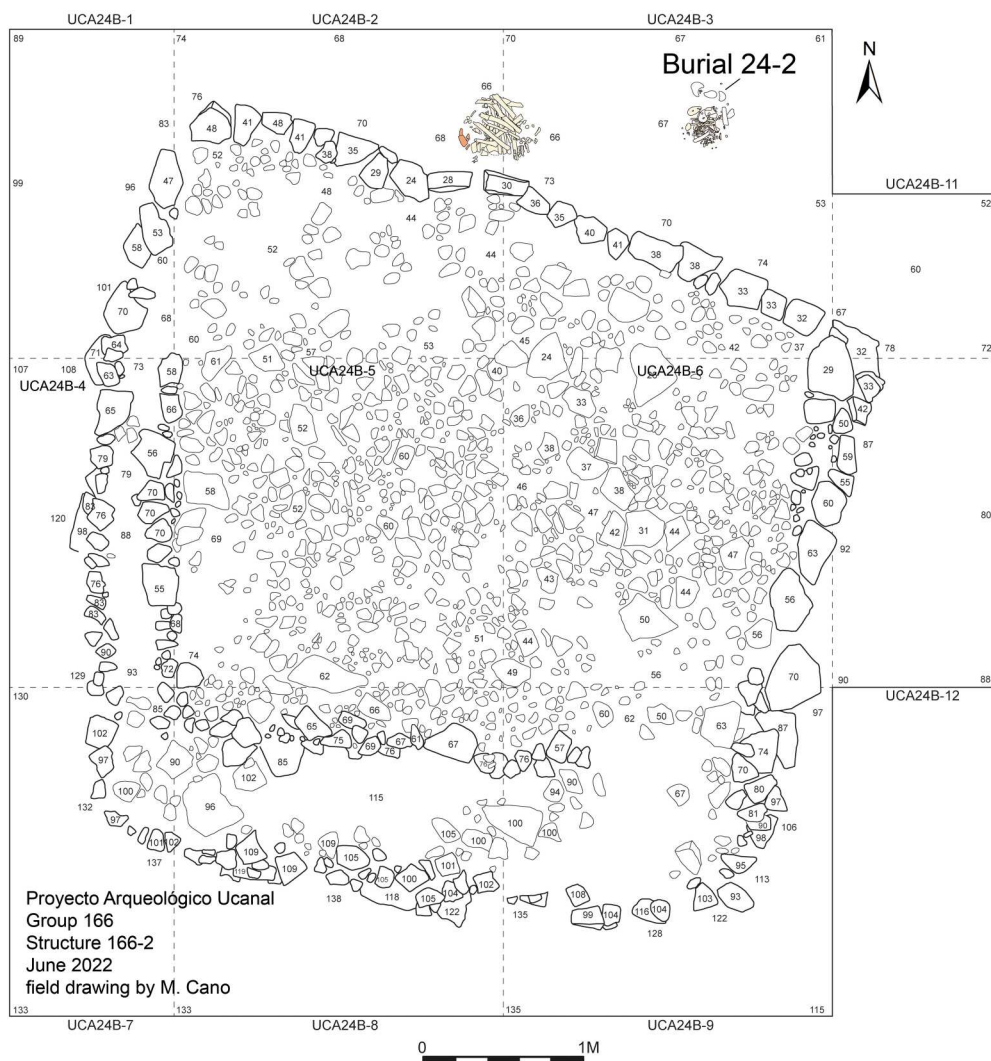


Figure 6. Ucanal Structure 166-1 from small residential Group 166 showing the location of the child pit burial, Burial 24-2 (drawing by M. Cano).

households were excavated at the site for comparisons in social status. Similar to Ucanal Burial 8-1, Late Classic San Jose Burial A3 comprised a child 6–8 years old wearing a necklace of a carved bone pendant representing a face, a drilled pendant of an adult tooth incisor, 2 *Olividae* marine shell pendants, and a shell disk. Other ornaments clearly formed bracelets, such as San Jose Burial C11, a Late Classic child burial (approx. 6 years old) with 12 bone beads found around the individual's wrist.

These necklaces and bracelets appear to differ from ornamentation practices in Northern Yucatan in which it was common for young women who wore shell pendants over the pelvis, perhaps to 'mark or materialize a perception of potency in the young' (Ardren 2015, 113). Nonetheless, at some sites, such as Yaxuna, Xuenkal, and Dzibilchaltun (Late to Terminal Classic burials), 32% of child burials (13 of 41) contained shell ornaments of some kind (Ardren 2015, 93).



Figure 7. Ornaments found in Ucanal Burial 24-2, UCA24B-3-2-3351 (photo by C. Halperin).

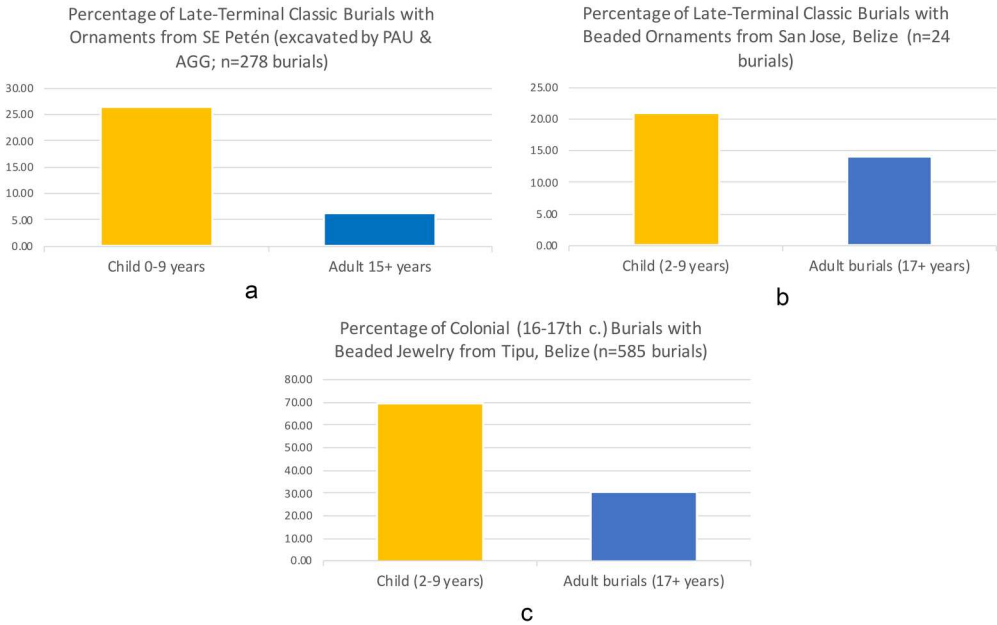


Figure 8. Percentages of burials with ornaments by general age category from (a) Southeast Petén sites excavated by the PAU and AAG (see [Tables 1, 2, 3](#)); (b) from San Jose, Belize ([Thompson 1939, 193–219](#)); and (c) from Tipu ([Graham 2011, 22–23](#)).

Table 2. Burial demographics with ornaments* from the Atlas (AAG) investigations as reported in Pinto Vásquez (2004) and Pinto Vásquez and Laporte (2005). *ornaments = pendants, shell rings, necklaces but does not include ‘placas’, **does not include indeterminate age individuals.

Region	Time period	Children			Sub-adults			Adults		
		Burials	Burials with ornaments	%	Burials	Burials with ornaments	%	Burials	Burials with ornaments	%
Middle Mopan River	Late Preclassic	2	0		0	0		0	0	
Upper San Juan River	Late Preclassic	4	2		1	0		0	0	
Parte Aguas	Late Preclassic	0	0		0	0		8	0	
Poxte River	Late Preclassic	1	1		0	0		1	0	
Upper Mopan River	Late Preclassic	0	0		0	0		10	1	
All regions	Late Preclassic	7	3	42.86	1	0	0.00	19	1	5.26
Parte Aguas	Early Classic	0	0		0	0		1	0	
Upper Mopan River	Early Classic	1	1		0	0		3	1	
All regions	Early Classic	1	1	100.00	0	0	0.00	4	1	25.00
Middle Mopan River	Late Classic	2	1		0	0		8	2	
Upper San Juan River	Late Classic	1	0		0	0		8	0	
Parte Aguas	Late Classic	1	0		4	0		16	0	
Poxte River	Late Classic	2	0		5	0		39	1	
Upper Mopan River	Late Classic	2	0		5	0		50	1	
Salsipuedes River	Late Classic	0	0		0	0		4	0	
All regions	Late Classic	8	1	12.50	14	0	0.00	125	4	3.20
Middle Mopan River	Terminal Classic	8	1		3	0		9	2	
Upper San Juan River	Terminal Classic	0	0		0	0		6	0	
Parte Aguas	Terminal Classic	0	0		0	0		1	0	
Poxte River	Terminal Classic	0	0		2	0		8	0	
Upper Mopan River	Terminal Classic	3	2		7	1		38	2	
Salsipuedes River	Terminal Classic	1	0		0	0		2	0	
All regions	Terminal Classic	12	3	25.00	12	1	8.33	64	4	6.25

Table 3. Child and adult Classic period burials from Southeastern Petén (PAU and AGG burials); AGG sample reported in Pinto Vásquez (2004) and Pinto Vásquez and Laporte (2005).

Age	Years	Burials	Burials with ornaments	%
Infants and Children	0–9 years	34	9	26.47
Subadults and Adults	15+ years	244	15	6.15
Total		278	24	

Calculated $z = 5.07$ with 1.96 to -1.96 at $\alpha 0.05$.

The practices of preferentially adorning children, at least at the time of death, may have continued into the Colonial period as seen from burials in the cemetery below and to the side of the mission church at Tipu, Belize, also located in the Eastern Maya Lowlands. Excavations by Elizabeth Graham and colleagues reveal that high frequency of children were buried wearing necklaces (at the neck or skull area) or bracelets (at the wrist or arm/torso area) with exotic beads (Smith, Graham, and Pendergast 1994). Approximately 4% of the burials contained jewelry (23 of the 585 burials) with 70% (16 of these 23 burials) of the burials containing children. The most common jewelry were necklaces and bracelets of Venetian glass, although glass bead bracelets, silver earrings, and jet pendants were also found, all imported and of European origin (Graham 2011, 22–23). Although the trends found in this preliminary research cannot be said to necessarily be universal throughout the Maya area, it nonetheless suggests that we might be overlooking the ways in which some children were considered to have been particularly precious.

Ethnography and Ethnohistory of Amulets among Children

Ethnographic and ethnohistoric data enrich our understandings of ornament use among children in the Maya area by providing possible medical-spiritual understandings of such practices. Beliefs and practices surrounding healing and preventative care in the Maya area were influenced by peoples of Spanish and African descent since the Colonial period (Foster 1953; Restall 2009, 247–277; Weller et al. 2015), and today Indigenous medical practices in the region are seen as quite pluralistic (Hoyler et al. 2018). In some cases, Indigenous practices were amplified through parallel or similar Spanish and African ones and in other cases were replaced or reworked. Despite many changes, it is undeniable that many Indigenous practices today have deep roots in Pre-Columbian traditions and attested through codices and glyphic texts, archaeological data, and contact-period documents (Ferrier et al. 2020; Groark 2005; Orellana 1987; Knowlton 2016; Vail 2019).

While ornaments with apotropaic properties may have been worn at any age, children's health is often found to be especially precarious and perhaps in greater need of protection. Such practices of care were documented in detail by Redfield and Villa Rojas among early twentieth century Yucatecan Maya from Chan Kom and other communities where they noted that mothers commonly put amulets on their children to protect them from illnesses, evil winds carrying diseases, *mal ojo*, and the entry of unwanted souls or spirits into the child's body (Redfield and Rojas 1934). They note (1934, 176):

The fact that sickness and death strike children more often than adults is sometimes explained by pointing out that they are not able and experienced enough to avoid the

evil winds and other kinds of *ojo*. An adult may exercise judgment and take care of himself. If he is sick, in many cases he has only himself to blame; he has offended the deities, or the souls of his relatives; or else black magic is in operation against him. But children do not make enemies. The special need of children is met by the wearing of amulets.

The amulets consist of small objects, such as seeds, bones, and shells that are tied together by a thread dyed with the juice of the *choh* plant (indigo). They can be worn as necklaces or bracelets. Redfield and Rojas (1934, 177) reported that small oyster and snail shells have protective powers and that the *coc-ac* (plastron of the tortoise) is used to prevent whooping-cough, asthma and other respiratory afflictions. Amulets may also include a small bone from an agouti's head known as *ppuc tzub* (agouti's cheek) in order to keep evil winds away. The hoof or horn of a deer, *sucure-baac*, or a little fish bone called *jiga* can also be used as a protective amulet (ibid).

Among the Chorti Maya, infants are donned with bracelets or necklaces of red beads of the coral tree to protect them from illnesses from *mal ojo* (evil eye), strong blood, sorcery, and *aigres* (winds) (Wisdom 1940, 293–294, 331). 'Persons, like infants and the aged, with inherent weaknesses, are especially vulnerable at all times ... The wind-gods are the bearers of all *airgres*', (Wisdom 1940, 318). Their parents and sibling may also carry them with a red cloth over their heads for further protection against these dangers. At times, a metal *peso* coin is perforated and used as an ornament by men, women, and especially children to ward off sorcery, evil spirits, and illnesses (Wisdom 1940, 37). The first author's own work with communities living in Barrio Nuevo San José in the Petén Lakes region of Guatemala reveals that the dried seeds of allspice and red beads are used to make a bracelet and protect small babies from illnesses (Figure 9a). These practices underscore the possibility that protective amulets and jewelry in the past may have been made of perishable materials and thus not easily recoverable in the archaeological record.

A small ethnographic study of 6 Kaqchikel Maya participants from San Antonio Aguas Calientes and Santa Catarina Barahona in the Highlands of Guatemala by Maria Fernanda

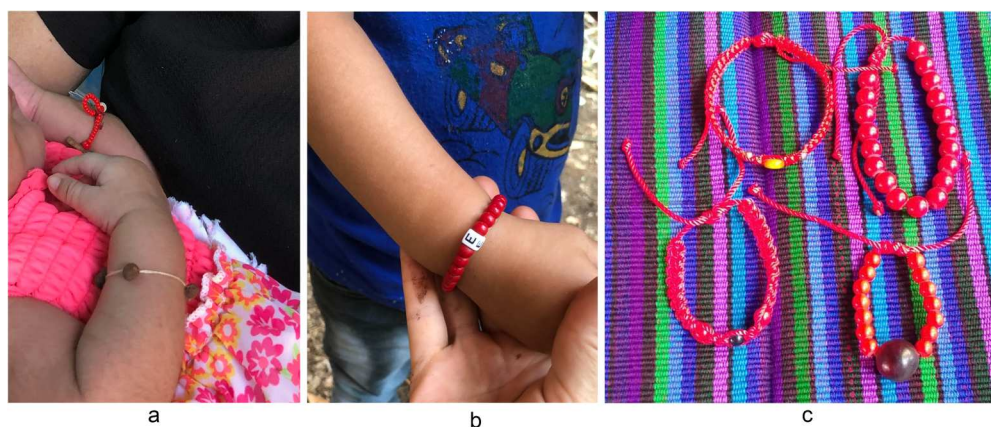


Figure 9. Bracelets worn by children in Guatemala: (a) bracelets dried allspice beads and red plastic beads, 4 month girl, Barrio Nuevo San José, Petén (photo by C. Halperin); bracelet of red plastic beads with personalized initial of child, 2.5 years, Pichelito II, Petén (photo by C. Halperin); bracelets of red beads and 'camaleones', San Antonio Aguas Calientes (photo by M. López López).

López López, who is also Maya Kaqchikel, reveals that many parents tie small bracelets around the wrists of their newborns to protect them from *el mal de ojo* or *ojeo* (evil eye), which is the cause of illnesses of various kinds. The babies wear them until they are about 2 years old or until their baptism in the Catholic Church. The bracelets have red thread with one or multiple beads of various materials, including shell, ‘camaleones’ (dark, multi-colored stones), or red beads (Figure 9c). All participants in the interviews noted that the bracelets are single-use in the sense that they are meant only for the individual child and are not passed on to siblings or other children once the child grows out of them. Interestingly, participants of the study note that some pregnant women have begun to wear these bracelets to protect their unborn baby. Elsewhere in the Guatemalan Highlands but also heavily inhabited by Kaqchikel Maya speakers, Fien-Helman (2018, 9) notes that those living in Sololá also often adorn their babies and young children with red bracelets to protect them from *mal de ojo*. Similar practices of young children (ages several months to up to 4 years) of wearing red-beaded bracelets for protection and good health have also been noted among villagers of Pichelito, Petén, located near Ucanal, and can include a personalized plastic bead with the child’s initials (Figure 9b).

Some Spanish sources from the Contact and Colonial periods have also remarked on the custom among Indigenous peoples to adorn their children with tokens and beads of various sorts. Diego de Landa mentions that among the Yucatec Maya, parents would adorn their small boys with a little white bead on their head and their little girls with a small shell along their waist over their pelvis. These adornments were not removed until their *caput sihil* (‘to be born anew’ or baptism) rite of passage, held between the ages of three and twelve (Tozzer 1941, 102). In turn, Diego Durán (1971, 419–420), writing in the sixteenth century, noted that Aztec children under the age of 12 often wore little objects suspended by red, green, blue, black or yellow threads around their necks or wrists as protective devices against illnesses and evil that may befall them. The little objects were suspended from threads and consisted of small snake bones, stone beads, and sometimes little figurines. In the seventeenth century, Martín Alfonso Tovilla remarked that young Chol Maya children ‘wore many necklaces, of animal canine teeth and marine shells, on the waist, throat, and feet ...’, although he did not specify the reason so many children were so highly decorated (Cano 1984, 8).

Conclusions

We do not assert that *all* ornaments found in Pre-Columbian Maya children’s burials were amulets to protect against malevolent spirits and the diseases they may bring, but we would like to open the door to this *possibility* for some burials in the ancient past. Firstly, its consideration helps move beyond the myopic focus of funerary offerings as solely reflective of social status. The burial of children with their jewelry or with the jewelry of others was indeed tied to wealth, although our findings underscore that we would be better served, in some cases, by replacing the concept of material wealth with value – that is value as an amalgamation not only of economic or labour potential (children being one of them), but one also actualized by social and emotional values that emerge in and with both people and objects (Graeber 2001). Indeed, children were precious and made so through these intimate relational webs.

Secondly, the consideration of amulets in the ancient Maya context highlights a form of caring relations within what has emerged in the field as the ‘bioarchaeology of care’. Rather than focus on the survival of adults with disabilities who are aided by their community, as has often been the case in bioarchaeological studies of care, our work contributes to the possible preventative care for children, complementing other studies on feeding, nutrition, weaning, and other practices to ensure childhood well-being (Dawson 2016; Dunne et al. 2019). As seen in the ethnographic cases of Maya peoples, mothers, fathers, and other family members take great care to ensure the well-being of their children whose concerns are embodied in the small bracelets they adorn their loved ones with as preventative measures to guard against illnesses. While recent archaeological attention has rightly focused on aspects of grief and sorrow in regards to mortuary practices, the practices of adorning precious young people with jewelry were also part and parcel of intimate relations that emphasized hope and love, as well as the coaxing, binding, and making of social persons as part of larger communities.

Lastly, the ethnographic and ethnohistoric studies related to the wearing of amulets by children also underscore the need to consider well-being as part of relations between children and spirit-illnesses and other animate essences. Although *mal ojo* (evil eye) and *malos aires* (evil winds) may have been influenced, in part, from Medieval European medical influences, Classic Maya epigraphic texts indicate that diseases were indeed thought to have been acquired or seized through winds, which could be both benevolent and malevolent (Dunning and Houston 2011; Helmke and Nielsen 2009; Taube 2000). In fact, there existed an entire suite of *wahy* (spirit essence) beings some of whom have been identified as personifications of diseases (Helmke and Nielsen 2009). Thus, considerations of Indigenous relationalities of personhood in the context of Pre-Columbian child burials at Ucanal and elsewhere in the eastern Maya Lowlands bring to the fore not only children in the past, but children’s identities created through relations with their families and the spiritual world propelled through the receiving, wearing, and internment with ornaments.

Notes

1. The word for ‘precious’ in Classic Maya hieroglyphic texts was k’an (K’AN), denoting not just ‘precious’ but also ‘ripe’ and ‘yellow’ and was used to refer, in particular, to ripe yellow ears of corn and jewelry (Stone and Zender 2011, 126–127). The sign was often affixed to ornaments to denote their preciousness. As such, the adorning of children with ornaments could also be seen as imbuing them with preciousness.
2. Two burials, Burials 6–1 and 6-3, were not included in the totals due to their earlier dates in the Terminal Preclassic and Late Preclassic period respectively.

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