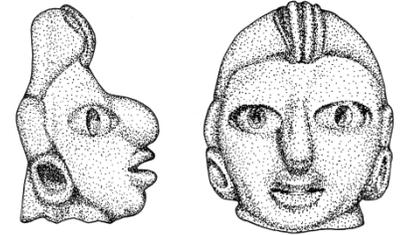


La Tinaja



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A Letter from the Editors

Dear Colleagues,

In this issue of *La Tinaja* the focus is on tradition and change in Central America. In the first article, Karen Olson Bruhns and Paul Amaroli describe the indigenous ceramics tradition of Santo Domingo de Guzman, El Salvador and the perils it faces from well-intentioned foundations and organizations. Their description of the context and sequence of pottery manufacture will be appreciated by those interested in ceramic production, while their discussion of the challenges to the indigenous tradition from well-meaning but ill-informed non-governmental organizations resonates with processes occurring throughout the world. We echo their hope that publishing this piece in *La Tinaja* will draw the attention of a researcher who can document the Santo Domingo de Guzman tradition before it is changed beyond recognition.

The second article, by Jim Weil, focuses on a single ceramic vessel in the Oslo Collection of the Science Museum of Minnesota. Whereas the first article calls attention to a disappearing tradition, Weil's ethnographic and ethnohistoric investigation into the age and origin of the Oslo Collection *múcura* recaptures a small part of a tradition that had been lost by the late 20th century in northwestern Costa Rica. Moreover, his story of how potters began making the form after being shown a published photograph of another *múcura* underscores both the unintended consequences of ethnographic fieldwork and the interplay of

producers' experimentation and consumers' choices in the maintenance of ceramic styles.

We also are delighted to bring you the 17th installment of Charles Kolb's useful compendium of recent reviews of books on ceramic topics.

We thank all of the authors for their contributions and invite you, the readers, to submit your own articles, reports, and notes to *La Tinaja*.

Best regards,

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Santo Domingo de Guzmán, El Salvador: An Indigenous Ceramics Tradition Imperiled

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One of El Salvador's major indigenous ceramic traditions is centered at Santo Domingo de Guzmán, a small town located in western El Salvador in a hilly area of Sonsonate Department (latitude 13°43.04'N, longitude 89° 47.86' W). It is often mentioned as one of the most traditional communities of Pipil origin. At the time of Spanish conquest, the Pipil were a relatively newly arrived ethnic group in western El Salvador, with smaller enclaves of this Nahua-speaking group in Guatemala, Nicaragua, and perhaps Honduras.

Originally known as Huitzapan (Spine River, Spiny River), Santo Domingo de Guzmán acquired its present name in the colonial period while it was under the religious administration of friars of the Dominican Order. It is located only 9 kilometers from Sonsonate, which, from its establishment in 1552 as the Villa de la Santísima Trinidad de Sonsonate, was the regional hub of Spanish dominion and commerce (a role in many respects continued by the present city). Despite its proximity to Sonsonate, Santo Domingo de Guzmán long remained relatively isolated due to very poor roads, and because its inhabitants continued to depend on local subsistence agriculture rather than traveling to labor on the sugar, indigo, and cattle haciendas which thrived in other sectors of Sonsonate's jurisdiction.

This isolation helped Náhua (the Pipil language) and traditional lifeways in general to survive longer in Santo Domingo de Guzmán than in most other communities in the region. In our globalized times these enduring practices are sadly coming to an end. Náhuat is practically extinct. Traditional women's clothing, consisting of a wrap-around skirt and blouse, is now limited to a few elderly ladies. The younger generation is largely disengaged from traditional agriculture and community life, seeking instead education and salaried city jobs, or choosing to emigrate.

Until recently, the indigenous ceramic tradition centered at Santo Domingo de Guzmán was characterized by open-fired, hand-modeled ollas and comales. This is an unusual and highly local tradition in which the formation process and, indeed, some of the forms hark back to earlier times.

Several households in this small community specialized in ceramic production and sold their wares in Sonsonate and elsewhere. Up to the 1980s, it was common to see men bound for markets carrying a *cacastle* (the local term for the Mesoamerican backpack) loaded with pottery. Today some potters mainly make ollas and jars of various sizes, plus some tourist ware. Comal making is in the hands of other potters, so there is a degree of specialization in the village.

Traditionally, ceramics were always constructed by potters sitting on the floor of a patio or room (chairs are not indigenous to Mesoamerica; even royal thrones were benches or a sort of very low cushion/stool). Inside their houses, comal producers prepared one room by carefully spreading a layer of fine river sand to create a flat surface over the normal compacted earth floor. They then spread very wet clay by hand on the sand in expertly swirling movements, quickly constructing the thin circular clay griddles which are comales. The ceramics were left to dry and then fired against a patio wall in an open fire (Figure 1-3).



Figure 1: Comales formed on the prepared fine sand floor of the potter's work room. Photo by Paul Amaroli, 1988.



Figure 2: Comales drying outside the potter's house. Photo by Paul Amaroli, 1988.



Figure 3: A low wall was used to stack the comales for firing in the open air. Photo by Paul Amaroli, 1988.

Traditional ollas are hand built. In this series of photographs, Doña Dionesia Garcia, a well known local potter, shows how she builds a jar. First she throws a heavy lump of clay several times onto a board (Figure 4), kneading it (Figure 5), and then pulling it up manually (Figure 6). This is hard



Figure 5: Doña Dionesia kneads the clay.

work and she braces herself with a foot on a slanted board. After pulling the clay up to the height of the vessel shoulder (Figure 7) she will put a very fat coil of clay on top and start pinching it in. The use of coils is minor, and mainly employed to form a shoulder or to add a thick coil to the rim of an olla.



Figure 4: Doña Dionesia makes a jar, throwing a heavy lump of clay several times onto a board.



Figure 6: The walls are pulled up manually. Note the slanted board on which she braces her foot.



Figure 7: The clay is brought up to the height of the vessel shoulder.



Figure 9: Doña Dionesia makes a tortilla of clay for the neck of the water jar.



Figure 8: Doña Dionesia places a fat coil of clay on top of the body of a water jar and pinches it in. Note the tourist ware jar with the ruffled rim to the left.

Doña Dionesia works quickly and makes a jar with a ruffled rim (tourist ware) and then a smaller water bottle (Figure 8). For the water bottle, she makes a tortilla of clay (Figure 9), rolls it into a tube (Figure 10), and then pinches and smoothes it onto the pulled bottom of the vessel.



Figure 10: The tortilla of clay is rolled it into a tube.

Other details, such as handles, are hand formed through rolling, pulling, and pinching, and added while the clay is still wet. Both vessels are smoothed by scraping with a piece of gourd rind, a half bivalve shell, and a stick (Figure 11). When leather hard they will be burnished.



Figure 11: A stick is used to smooth the vessel. A gourd rind and half bivalve shell may also be used.

Doña Dionesia works in the family house where she lives with her grown children and their children. As shown in the preceding series of photographs, the shelves around her hold both tourist wares and ollas she has made for sale and family belongings. It is hard to see where the dedicated space necessary for the kick wheel promoted by the NGOs would fit into this crowded ménage.

After forming, vessels are set out to dry in the patio (under the eaves or a plastic shade). Doña Dionesia reports that she fires once a week or once every two weeks, depending on how many vessels she had made (itself contingent upon how many had been sold).

A Ceramic Tradition Threatened

The indigenous ceramic tradition of Santo Domingo de Guzmán has been hard hit by foreign foundations and organizations dedicated to bettering the life of the natives, whether they want it or not. The first blow against this surviving Pre-Columbian industry was about 10 years ago, when a European NGO (non-governmental organization) came to town for some months with a wonderful new idea. The foreigners perceived the traditional methods as “dirty” and “inefficient,” so they built European-style brick kilns in houses, not patios, and

encouraged potters to work on a table or bench as it was “cleaner”. These changes have been widely adopted; after all, the foreigners were “civilized” and adamant, and they paid for and built the kilns (Figure 12). The NGO also pushed potters to abandon their strictly domestic ware production of cooking jars, water pots, comales, and the like, and to start producing tourist wares (Figure 4). According to the potters, these wares have not been a commercial success; the market for painted flowerpots and garden sculptures is limited and quite crowded by ceramics from other, even more transformed, traditions, such as that of Ilobasco in central El Salvador.



Figure 12: An NGO-built kiln in the house of Doña Dionesia Garcia. Between firings, the kiln is used for storage.

Recently, another NGO is trying to introduce more “innovations” to the abused ceramic heritage of Santo Domingo de Guzmán. Now that the indigenous potters have been saved from their dirty habits of sitting on floors to work and firing in the open, they need to be saved from what the European NGOs perceive to be the “primitive” means of vessel formation. Potters’ wheels are

being introduced and pushed upon the potters as being modern and progressive. If the few potters left give into the pressure of the NGO “community developers” it will be the end of a centuries’ long tradition.

Unfortunately, this imperiled tradition has not been at all well documented. The NGOs are more interested in their own agenda, forced change for the “betterment of the community”, that is, in destroying the native aspects of this industry, than in documenting an important part of the little surviving of indigenous culture in El Salvador. We are publishing this note in the hopes that the case of Santo Domingo de Guzmán will attract a ceramics interested researcher before it is too late and all that is left is some flower pots and knick knacks, made on a wheel and painted with acrylics, the fate of several other pottery traditions in El Salvador.

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A “Múcura” in the Collection of the Science Museum of Minnesota

Jim Weil

Science Museum of Minnesota

An interesting ceramic piece in the collection of the Science Museum of Minnesota (Figure 1) is attributed to the Greater Nicoya archaeological area, which extends through northwestern Costa Rica and southwestern Nicaragua. The anonymous donor gives its date as A.D.750-950, representing the Middle Polychrome Period, and its provenience as Nicaragua. He

purchased the artifact well before 1982 (when he made the donation to the Science Museum), apparently through the antiquities market in the 1960s, before definitive legislation had made the business illegal (Aguilar Bonilla 2007). Pieces obtained in this way were not discovered through scientific excavations, and any information about them is notoriously unreliable. Although it does appear to be from the Greater Nicoya area, its age is almost certainly misidentified.



Figure 1. The *múcura* in the Science Museum of Minnesota’s Oslo Collection (Accession Number A82:11:38).

The purpose of this report is to assess the vessel’s age and place of origin in light of illustrations of strikingly similar pieces known to have been used during the first half of the twentieth century on the Nicoya Peninsula in northwestern Costa Rica. Earlier prototypes may have been made, but the time depth of this form and style is poorly known.

The piece at the Science Museum merits attention, not only because the information about it has come into question, but also because contemporary artisans in the Greater Nicoya area have resumed the manufacture of this type of vessel. The vessel's usefulness as part of the museum collection will be enhanced by any pertinent historical and ethnographic information that can be obtained. Scholars, museum professionals and other interested people—including artisans working in the Greater Nicoya region—can learn about the material properties of such artifacts in ways that only a physical specimen can provide. While similar pieces may exist in private collections in Costa Rica, they have not appeared in any museum collections there.

Description and Accompanying Data

The vessel is part of a series of anonymous donations called the “Oslo Collection” and was assigned accession number A82:11:38. The letter A indicates “anthropology” and the 82 indicates the acquisition year 1982. The accession form identifies the piece as an “Effigy Vase – Woman,” with a height of 28.5 cm and with a maximum diameter of ca. 16 cm. The following remarks were attached to the accession form:

Human effigy vase of a woman carrying a baby: the baby is now missing, but the evidence on the spot where it was attached, shows. The lower part of the right arm is broken off. The clay is reddish. The entire piece has a red slip and white paint. The lower part of the body consists of a large sphere (6 1/2” diam), the design depicts the pattern of the dress in strong black circles, randomly placed next to each other, with white circles within them. Most of the white has been eroded [sic.]. Above the thin waist, the torso with token breasts, is covered with much smaller black circles. The left hand rests on the hip. Over the short, thin neck is the head with a protruding nose, incised slit-eyes and mouth. The head dress [sic.] is flat, like a

hat and has a small opening on the top. The hollow figure is heavy. Nicaragua. 10 3/4” tall. Highly burnished to a gloss. Middle polychrome. 750-950 AD.

This description, along with those of all of the other pieces in the set, probably was written by the donor. This is the only one of the 43 pieces in this donation identified as deriving from Nicaragua, which is a clue that something may be amiss.

Unlikelihood that the *Múcura* is Pre-Columbian or from Nicaragua

Several matters raise doubts about the information given about the piece. First, there is no reason to assume the woman was carrying a baby, since illustrations of similar pieces without a broken arm do not have this attribute (Figures 2 and 3).



FIG. 164.—Red Ware figurines. a, Costa Rica; b, Nicoya peninsula, Costa Rica (height, 12 in.).

Figure 2. A similar *múcura* illustrated in Lothrop (1926: Figure 164a).

Next, we can consider its appearance. The double spherical gourd-like shape of this effigy jar, with the form of the face, the polka-dots, and other decorative features do not resemble any pre-

Columbian styles known from northwestern Costa Rica and southwestern Nicaragua, the area in which the Greater Nicoya style prevails.

The piece is anomalous geographically as well as stylistically. Of the 14 ceramics in this part of the Oslo collection that are listed as Costa Rican, 8 are from the Greater Nicoya area. For instance, the provenience of acquisition A82:11:19, similarly identified as a “Woman and Child Figurine,” is given as Nicoya (Guanacaste Province in Costa Rica). The *múcura* is the only piece listed as Nicaraguan. The spatial range of the rest of the set covers ceramic and stone artifacts from Mexico (12), Ecuador (3), Panama (1), Peru (2), Guatemala (1) and the U.S. (1). The provenience of one item is not given.

Evidence considered here also suggests that this type of vessel has a much shallower time depth than indicated on the accession form. It was prevalent during the first half of the twentieth century, and perhaps derives from as long ago as Spanish colonial times. By the 1990s the type no longer was in use, but has reappeared as an artifact of the research process itself and the demands of a new market for tourist arts and souvenirs.

Samuel Lothrop’s Assessment of Similar Pieces in the Early Twentieth Century

Distinguished Harvard archaeologist Samuel Lothrop’s (1926) exhaustive two-volume description and classification of Greater Nicoya ceramics is a classic, based on most if not all the collections existing at that time. For the most part, his stylistic distinctions are still in use today.

The *múcura* in the SMM collection closely resembles the figurine depicted in Lothrop’s Fig. 164a (Figure 2). Note in particular the facial features, the disk-shaped headwear or hair-do, and the overall shape. Despite the comprehensive range of his survey, though, he could not relate this subtype to those grouped with it as Red Ware Figurines, nor to any other category. He concluded that these are vessels that “...may date from post-conquest times, and which recall certain types of effigy vessels now [i.e., the 1920s] in use in the Peninsula of Nicoya” (Lothrop 1926:271). They

were still being used as of 1950, as shown by the source discussed next.

Doris Stone’s Depiction and Assessment of Similar Pieces in the Middle of the Twentieth Century

Anayensy Herrera Villalobos, a Costa Rican archaeologist who was shown a photo of the Science Museum piece merits credit for pointing out its similarity to the one illustrated by Lothrop. Previously, Ed Fleming recognized the similarity between the piece and the illustrations in an article by Doris Stone. Photos “c” and “e” from Stone’s (1950:279) article (Figure 3) bear a close resemblance to the SMM piece. Stone does not go into detail about the manufacture and use of this type of vessel, but her account of the ceramic cottage industry at the midpoint of the twentieth century provides a crucial stepping stone in the path from the remote past, through the near past, and into the present.

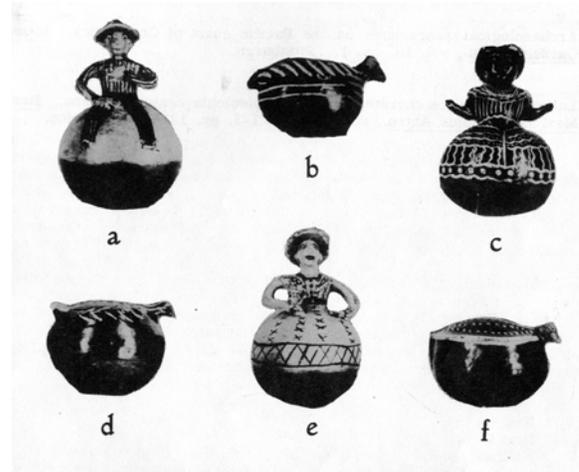


Figure 3. Similar *múcuras* illustrated in Stone (1950: Figure 7).

Ethnographic Findings From the 1990s Onward

In several Latin American countries the name *múcura* is used for clay vessels, especially those used to carry water, as in a song popularized

by Pérez (“Prez”) Prado’s band in the middle of the twentieth century.¹ Residents of the two adjacent artisan villages of San Vicente and Guatíl on Costa Rica’s Nicoya Peninsula used this name when shown Stone’s (1950: 279) illustration of similar pieces.

In 1993 I showed Stone’s illustration to Maribel Sánchez Grijalba, one of the leading artisans in the community and then close to forty years old. She responded with excitement:

I know what that is. We don’t make them anymore, but I still know how. People used them for drinking water when working in the fields. They were carried by a rope that went under the arm. There was a hole in the top that was stopped up with a rag.

Maribel then took Stone’s report to her mother and her grandmother, whose sister appeared in the same article in a series of photos demonstrating the manufacture of a pot called a *nimbuera*, which was used at the time for cooking beans. The three women looked through and discussed all of the illustrations. It was a magical fieldwork moment. Since that first showing, the article has elicited memories from other community residents who have seen it. On other occasions these illustrations have continued to stimulate conversations about ceramic styles and uses (Weil 2011).

Implications

Field research in San Vicente and Guatíl has created a “Heisenberg effect” (meaning, as in its original application to subatomic physics, that the process of studying a phenomenon changes it). This became apparent when I ended the fieldwork season several months after I had first shown Maribel the Stone article, and she presented me

with a new *múcura* as a gift. She shaped it, and a friend, a specialist in decorative painting, dressed the effigy in the kind of clothes she might have worn to a modern dance (Figure 4). That her dress has red polka dots which are nearly identical to those on the SMM piece is uncanny, to say the least, since there is no way the artist could have seen it.



Figure 4. A *múcura* made in 1994, similar to the older one found in the SMM’s Oslo Collection.

Once other artisans of the 1990s had been shown *múcura* photos they began to make them again. Visitors occasionally find *múcuras* for sale, which, while not “best sellers,” continue to appear as part of the market “dialectic.” That is to say, artists try out their ideas and continue with those that sell; “best sellers” are adopted by other artisans. Figure 5 shows Maribel Sánchez Grijalba and the wife of one of her brothers painting and polishing *múcuras* in 2005.



Figure 5. Maribel Sánchez Grijalba and the wife of one of her brothers painting and polishing *múcuras* in 2005.

Conclusion

The potential of exploring the convergence of archaeological, ethnohistorical and ethnographic fieldwork in the vicinity of San Vicente and Guaitil is great. A small excavation was carried out in 1978 under the auspices of the National Museum at a burial site near a creek in San Vicente, and there are sites throughout the entire valley (some 20 km long) where occupation may extend as far back as 1000 years. The materials and techniques still used there suggest a continuity of ceramic production through the intervening centuries. Finding out where and how *múcuras* fit into this picture is a challenge worth pursuing.

The significance of the *múcura* lies in its positioning, both in the way it bridges the more recent and more ancient ceramic traditions and in the way it reveals gaps in our understanding of what appeared when, where, how, and why. Ongoing interviews with elderly residents and continuing archaeological discoveries in the area may shed more light on uses and meanings of the *múcura*, but not without a prior awareness of what the scattered existing evidence suggests about its history.

Note

1. Apparently, the *múcura* was well known throughout much of the Caribbean rim of Latin America. The words to the simple song, La Múcura, conveyed double entendres of certain experiences a daughter shared with her mother. This wording is taken from the web site:

<http://www.mariachi4u.com/lyrics/Lamucura.htm>

La mucura está en el suelo
ay! mamá no puedo con ella
me la llevo en la cabeza
ay! mamá no puedo con ella
(Se repite)

Muchacha, sí, tú no puedes
con esa mucura de agua
muchacha, llama a San Pedro
pa' que te ayude a cargarla.
(Se repite)

Es que no puedo con ella...
Ay, nena, quién te rompió
tu mucurita de barro
fue Pedro que me ayudó
pa' que me hiciste llamarlo?
(Se repite)
Es que no puedo con ella...

The mucura is on the ground
oh, mama, I can't do it
carry it on my head
oh, mama, I can't do it.
(repeat)

Girl, if you can't do it
with that mucura full of water
girl, call on St. Peter
so he can help you carry it.
(repeat)

I can't do it...

Oh, little goose, who broke
your little clay mucura?
It was Peter who helped me,
why did you have me call him

(repeat)

I can't do it...

The video of the catchy 1949 production with Prez Prado's band, featuring Cuban singer and dancer Niñon Sevilla is accessible on the internet at this website:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3fkxR-v_YFk

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CERAMICS: RECENT BOOK REVIEWS 2009-2010

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This 17th tabulation of recent reviews of books and monographs concerning ceramics and ceramic technology emphasizes those reviews published within the past year. Previous syntheses have appeared in *La Tinaja* 5(3):7-11 (September 1992), 6(2):5-8 (June 1993), 8(1):5-8 (January 1995), and 8(4.1):4-9 (September 1995), 9(3):6-10 (September 1996), 10(3):11-15 (September 1997), 11(3):3-9 (September 1998), 12(3):6-10 (September 1999), 13(1):9-13 (2000), 13(2):14-17 (2001), 14(2):10-15 (2003), 16(1-2):21-31 (2005), 17(1-2):23-20 (2006), 18(2):24-32 (2007), 19(2):16-25 (2008), 20(2):13-19 (2009), and 21(1):14-20 (2010). The first ten tabulations were annual but the more recent syntheses cover the periods 2001-2002, 2003-2004, 2005-2006, and 2006-2007, 2007-2008, 2008-2009, and 2009-2010, with the current listing covering 2010-2011.

Reviews often provide salient summaries and useful addenda, corrections, clarified citations, additional references, and updated materials as well as assessments about the contents and significance of the books and monographs. I have undoubtedly overlooked some reviews which have been published in sources outside of the usual anthropological, archaeological, and ceramic journals (at least the ones to which I subscribe and those I read and review at the Library of Congress for The Getty Conservation Institute's *Art and Archaeology Technical Abstracts*). Therefore, I request that readers inform me of any additions or corrections; e-mail is preferable: ckolb@neh.gov In addition, I wish to thank colleagues who have taken the time to correspond and encourage the continuation of this summary and for their courtesy by reporting reviews significant to ceramic studies.

I have also included relevant book reviews from the SAS [Society for Archaeological Sciences] *Bulletin* column on "Archaeological Ceramics" These contain reviews of 750-2,500 words. After three months, complete issues of the *Bulletin* may be downloaded free of charge as pdf files from the SAS website at <http://www.socarchsci.org/sasb.htm>

The following citations are organized alphabetically by the name of the author of the book or monograph being reviewed, with the year of publication, publisher, and series information appended for further reference. Published and known "in press" reviews are tabulated within the entries. These citations include the name of the reviewer, journal title, volume and page numbers, year of publication, and any additional information or comments that would be of interest to the reader. If the book or monograph has been reviewed previously and those assessments were cited in earlier issues of *La Tinaja*, a notation appears (e.g., "See also *La Tinaja* 17(1-2):24 (2006).") this refers to reviews already tabulated in those issues of *La Tinaja* cited above.

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