From Inscribed Bodies to Distributed Persons: Contextualizing Tairona Figural Images in Performance

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Following trends in anthropology, the human body has recently become an important topic of discourse in archaeology. While some anthropologists consider the body as a social metaphor or site of symbolic inscription, others have questioned the validity of approaches based on the dichotomization and hierarchization of the mind and body. Semasiology, in particular, offers an epistemologically sound basis for interpreting the body, by grounding agency in the socially-structured actions that constitute corporeal space. This article applies the semasiological concept of the action-sign to archaeological problems through an examination of the interrelationship between Tairona anthropomorphic imagery and remains of ceremonial architecture at Pueblito, an archaeological site in Colombia. In both cases, physical remains constitute the traces of the actions through which agential persons created sacred spaces, and the meanings of these spaces may be more fully reconstructed by comparing diverse modes of embodiment. Tairona figural art and architecture constitute a creative technology, serving as an indexically-bound nexus of embodied social action.

The Kogi (or Kággaba), an indigenous group occupying the northern and western slopes of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta of northern Colombia, preserve elaborate lore concerning the creation of the world. According to accounts of the Kogi *mámas* or priests, who are responsible for conducting the rites that sustain the universe, the cosmos was born in several distinct steps:

> At dawn the universe was still 'soft, wet like clay', and the Mother had to stabilize it and harden it by thrusting her enormous spindle into the center, penetrating the nine layers as a world axis (kalvasánkua). It is usually said that this world axis penetrates the highest snowpeak of the Sierra Nevada . . . The task of consolidating the earth (kággi) took a long time. First, the Lords of the Universe pushed back the sea and heaped up the Sierra Nevada around the world axis, thrusting their pubic hairs (gelda, or kályi/firewood) into the soil in order to give it strength so it would not slide downward. Next, in her incarnation as Mukuludzhi Haba (Mother of Pottery), the Goddess scattered potsherds on the newly created earth to stabilize it. This done she unrolled a length of cotton thread from her spindle that stood upright in the center and, tracing with the end of the thread a circle around the Sierra Nevada, she proclaimed: 'This will be the land of my children.' (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1987, 93)

This narrative explains cosmogenesis in terms that are profoundly tactile and gestural. Their significance is dependent upon a practical knowledge of several technologies, including ceramics, spinning, architecture, and agricultural terracing, in addition to the bodily modification of hair removal. By sequencing familiar technological acts and naturalizing them in the landscape, the Kogi priests provide a compelling and totalizing image of social order. The world is conceived as the trace or index of a history of mighty actions performed by the Mother Goddess and her sons, the ancestors of the Kogi people.

Although this example is drawn from ethnog-

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raphy, it resonates with current interests in archaeology that seek to 'humanize' the ancient world through the situation of specific actors in the landscape. In part, this discourse has been conceived as a critique of Cartesian dualism and social determinism, with the trope of 'the body' serving as a new focus of research (Meskell 1996; 1998; 1999). Proposed models of embodiment have not, however, entirely escaped the old paradigms. One of the principal reasons for this is an inadequate conceptualization of agency and causality and their relevance to archaeological contexts. In addition, archaeological formulations of the body often consider only one of three classes of evidence at a time: architecture, landscape or other performance spaces; physical human remains; and figural (anthropomorphic) images. One particularly telling example is the division of a recent edited volume on this topic (Rautman 2000) into two sections: 'Reading the body from mortuary remains' and 'Reading the body from representations of the human form'.

A consequence of such a treatment has been the development of somewhat divergent theories of the body in archaeology, which seem to apply to the evidence presented, but upon closer examination, do not adequately address fundamental problems of the relationship of the body to action and ideology. While discussions of architecture, landscape, and representation remain fundamentally 'collectivist', the focus on embodiment in skeletal remains, often predicated upon a confusion between the socially-constructed body and biological organism, has sometimes led to biographical and often highly conjectural treatments along the lines of what James Bell (1992) terms the 'empathetic' approach to archaeology. Meskell's (1996; 1999) focus on the 'individual', although more nuanced and theoretically grounded, also relies heavily on burial data and seems better suited to historic, rather than prehistorical contexts. Within the scope of this article, my aim is to show that figural images are in fact of fundamental importance in understanding human agency and embodiment in prehistoric archaeological contexts, through their integration with other classes of data. At the heart of this argument is the suggestion that prevalent materialist theories of the body need to give way to the more dynamic and agential concept of personhood (see Mauss 1985; Poole 1994, 842). Because figural imagery will constitute the focus of this discussion, it is first necessary to critique some of the interpretations of the body in archaeology and particularly those that involve representation.

Figural imagery and embodiment

Figural images occupy an important place in the discourse concerning ancient bodies, especially in relation to sex and gender (Hill 2000; Knapp & Meskell 1997; Lesure 1999). These studies typically endeavour to show the ways in which gender is constructed and reified through naturalization in the form of human images and they have made important strides in elucidating the structures of gendered performance (Joyce 1993; 1996; 1998; 2000; see also Butler 1990). Either explicitly or implicitly, however, much of this discourse remains couched in social-determinist paradigms, mainly under the influence of Foucault (1977) and Douglas (1966; 1978; 1996). While Foucault presents the body as a 'docile' entity, upon which codes of behaviour are inscribed, Douglas sees the body and its exuviae as a metaphor for social order. Although distinctive, both theories perpetuate the Cartesian dichotomy of mind and body, relegating the body to a decidedly secondary role. Thus, Douglas (1978, 87) is concerned with how, 'In its role as an image of society, the body's main scope is to express the relation of the individual in it'. Accordingly, the typical approach to figural images in archaeology has been to see them as vehicles for ideas, akin to figural allegories in Western art. Gender, taken to be a 'cultural' concept, is thus given expression in the 'naturally' sexed human form. The language of 'social inscription' is one of the most prominent tropes of this theoretical position, reducing figural imagery to the status of a sign vehicle, that is, an ideogram. For instance, Joyce (2000, 10) suggests that representational images, body ornaments, and architecture served to 'inscribe bodily practices', transforming singular performances of gender into more permanent forms that transcend the temporal frame of the individual. Representational imagery is seen as particularly useful for the negotiation of social ideals, as its ostensibly 'natural' appearance disguises its ideological function. Even conceived as sites of resistance and control, however, this view characterizes the image as a secondary effect of an ideological cause.

Other recent studies of representation in archaeology take this process one step further by presupposing a dialectical relationship between ideology and representation. For example, in an examination of Moche figural art, Hill (2000, 318) concludes that Moche bodies are 'sites upon which social institutions inscribed culturally-specific symbolic meanings'. Yet further it is stated that 'bodies contributed to the inscription of meaning through their corporeality. Variables such as sex, class, and ethnicity, as embodied by the individual, also formed part of the symbolic equation' (Hill 2000, 318–19). The consideration of figural images as 'natural' sign-vehicles for 'cultural' meanings which reify meaning through embodiment, however, is a circular construct in which mind and body are both cause and effect. In the process, intentionality and agency become covert and vaguely defined, masked behind the split Cartesian being.

As this example shows, a major problem in the interpretation of archaeological figural images is the status of their embodiment. Whether interpreted as individual likenesses or representations of social ideals, figural images are generally viewed as *things*, as surrogate bodies that share an essential physicality with the human biological organism. This interpretation is probably motivated in part by ethnographic examples where anthropomorphic images are referred to as 'bodies', as in India (Eck 1998, 38).[1] Nevertheless, it has been pointed out that the tendency to locate, designate, or otherwise identify 'bodies' in the archaeological record should be tempered by the realization that bodies are not empirical facts, but culturally and historically situated media (Lock 1993). Embodiment, defined as the cultural evidence of the body, is the result of the social construction and empowerment (or disempowerment) of the person (Farnell 1995, 12). Thus it is just as problematic to attempt to 'read the body' directly from figural images as it is to 'read the mind'.

In fact, it can be argued that the emphasis on the materiality and product-status of images has structured much of the debate concerning the nature of representation throughout the history of the West. Viewed as expressions, images are relegated to a secondary status relative to the mental images (or ideologies, social categories, gender statuses, etc.) to which they supposedly correspond. This conception is traceable to Plato, who thought of images as

> dissimulations, inherently culpable because they represent themselves as something they are not. At the same time, they have the power to make us other than we are; we in our turn may be swayed by an apparent reality, the mask and not the actor, neither of whom is subject to reason. This unease about images, this sense of their inevitable duplicity, has persisted in critical language at all levels to modern times (Summers 1996, 5).

As an alternative to the ethnocentrism of 'representationalism', Summers (1996, 15) suggests the reconceptualization of representation in terms of social and practical process, rather than imaginative formation. As he sees it,

> The world is not simply projected from the mind, it is made, and even the simplest artefacts involve techniques of gathering and working as well as the teaching and transmission of these techniques. They are thus irreducibly integral with human action and purpose, both individual and social (Summers 1996, 15).

In other words, the examination of images should proceed from the perspective of their cultural context of ways of embodiment. In an ethnographic context, this investigation would consider the ways in which human agents create the image, interact with it through performance, and finally destroy or discard it. The image would be theorized as a nexus of complex cultural interactions through which persons achieve diverse and historically contingent embodiments. The historical reconstructions possible in archaeology, of course, are limited by preservation and techniques of recovery; nevertheless, they are theoretically possible. What is required is a clear conceptualization of the relations between artefacts, agency, and embodiment.

Regarding the first two elements, artefacts and agency, Alfred Gell (1998, 68) states that artefacts are 'congealed residue of performance and agency in object-form, through which access to other persons can be attained, and via which their agency can be communicated'. This formulation implies that artefacts may be interpreted as traces or *indexes* that reveal the means by which agents manipulate social relations. The mode for this interpretation is abduction, in which a substantive part-whole or part-part relation is posited from the sign. In addition, drawing upon concepts forged in Melanesian anthropology, Gell suggests that images and artefacts can be understood in terms of distributed personhood (see Strathern 1988; Wagner 1991). In this view, the person is not synonymous with the bounded biological organism, but rather refers to 'all the objects and/or events in the milieu from which agency or personhood can be abducted' (Gell 1998, 223). Artefacts thus constitute nodes of 'secondary' agency, distributed through space and time.

One of many examples drawn upon by Gell to illustrate this concept of the distributed person are the anthropomorphic sculptures called Malangan of New Ireland, as described by Küchler (1985; 1988; 1992). These images, which are understood to be the 'skin' of the deceased, are endowed with social efficacy by a sculptor, using techniques of heating and burning. During the final display of the image, the accumulated 'heat' of the image is registered in the participants' memory. In particular, certain privileged participants who have made the necessary ritual payments receive 'the knowledge of Malangan', which includes both the rights to reproduce the objects and the land-rights signified by the figures they have painted on the sculptural surface. As Gell (1998, 227) sees it, these onlookers

> receive the substance — not just of the ancestral body, but the entire *agentive capacity* of the deceased — for future redeployment. This is, as it were, the supreme abduction of agency from the index; it is also thereby perpetuated and reproduced.

Similar conclusions have been reached in archaeological contexts as well, for instance, in the study of Classic Maya portraiture by Houston & Stuart (1998). In a study of the 'ancient Maya self', monumental images are interpreted not as abstract 'representations' of rulers, but as sites of agency which shared a personal identity with rulers. As extended persons, the monumental images were thought to act on behalf of the rulers, supervising the activities that took place under their watchful gaze (see also Houston & Taube 2000). While most of the evidence for such conclusions comes from interpretations of hieroglyphic texts, certain aspects of monumental usage also seem to be relevant, in particular the mutilation of sculpted faces, especially the eyes. These sculptures were part of a process of embodiment, acted upon and acting in place of human agents.

While Gell's theory is useful for underscoring the importance of indexicality in material culture, it is problematic with regard to the location of agency. Gell (1998, 17) himself admits that his principal concern is with 'folk' notions of agency, rather than 'philosophically defensible' theories. In his attempt to differentiate the organismic body from the social person, however, Gell's theory disconnects agency from causation. It presents agency as a 'concept' or a quality that is 'read' from a pre-existing artefact. In addition, Gell does not develop a procedure for analyzing the structure of agential acts. As a corrective to these problems, I propose a reconsideration of agency and art based upon the theory of causal powers (Harré 1984; 1993a,b). In this theory, the human being is seen as endowed with the capacity for agency that is rooted both in natural biological abilities and acquired social power (Shotter 1973; Varela 1995, 369). Further, human agency is a social act,

> a mutual process of consideration whereby persons consider how [other persons] will, can or could act in response to their own act in order to direct themselves to act in such a way that a joint or social act is accomplished (Varela & Harré 1996, 323).

This theory, then, is discourse-centred, locating meaning in the dialogic processes of social interaction. It attributes agency, the causal production of consequences, to a socially-constructed but still substantial person.

An extension of causal powers theory known as semasiology provides an analytical model for the deployment of agency in space (Williams 1975; 1982; 1995; 1999; see also Farnell 2000; Varela 1993). Semasiology proposes that humans become agents (create meaning) through the performance of signifying acts. Such acts are deployed primarily in a corporeal space, conceived as a nexus of intersecting axes established by body movements and structured according to local conceptions of orientation.[2] Action signs, defined as units of human body movement that take their meaning(s) from their place within a system of signs, are both constitutive of corporeal space and embedded within it. Like languages, action-sign systems are open-ended semantic systems, which encompass all human uses of the medium of bodily movement. In turn, corporeal spaces are embedded in larger performance spaces. Because they are part of corporeal spaces, action signs are components of deictic (space/time) reference, indexicality, and performativity. What is particularly useful about semasiology is that it liberates meaning from confinement to a representational function, focusing instead on indexicality. For example, considered as an action sign, a specific instance of 'walking' takes its meaning from the context in which it is performed (Farnell 2000, 412). Brought into focal attention, this act becomes a mode by which an agential person positions him or herself socially. Likewise, when observing movement patterns, people evaluate and position others. The meaning of the movement may not be separated from the context of observation and response.

Although usually considered separately from action or the products of action, figural images, like other artefacts, are indexes of actions. They therefore have no meaning in isolation; but rather are implicated in performances, through which their meanings are generated. As objects of focal awareness, especially in ritual contexts, artefacts call attention to a complex of actions implicated in their creation, use, and disposal. When involved in performances, images are assimilated to corporeal spaces. At the same time that the actor reorients his or her body with reference to the figure, an audience (either perceived or real) evaluates the actor's movements with reference to the image. Viewed from this perspective, a representation not only converts the social

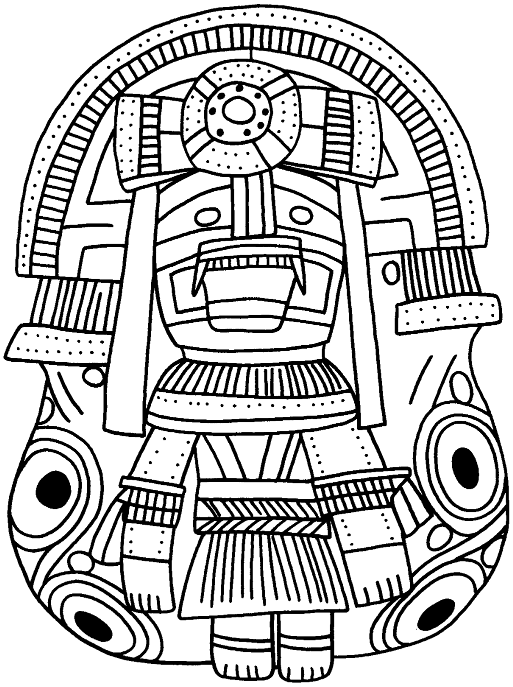

Figure 1. *Ceramic ocarina. (University Museum, Philadelphia; h. 8.5 cm. Drawing by the author.)*

time of performance into the monumental time of a fixed image of an action sign, but also, through its integration into performance, the monumental timeframe is realigned with social time, drawing attention to the convergences and divergences between performers' actions and those depicted in the image. Figural images are therefore not simply surrogate 'bodies', the passive vehicles for expressing ideas, but are a means for modulating space, thereby enabling creative social positioning. They communicate fundamental cultural conceptions of the meaning of movement and, therefore, agency and personhood.

Semasiology provides a basis for relating figural images to the processes by which persons are embodied. This approach begins by considering figural images as a heuristic category of artefacts that are expected to intersect in a structured manner with certain action signs. These intersections constitute the deictic references that organize persons in space and time. A distributional analysis of bodily orientation in the images isolates those that may be elements of important action signs. The structures of these orientations are then compared with spatial contexts that reveal traces of movements that pertain to the same general deictic framework. Through this process of montage, a picture begins to emerge — albeit an imperfectly focused one — of the structures of action that created the social person within an archaeological culture. In sum, the investigation of archaeological persons must consider the following questions: 1) how persons achieve embodiment; 2) how these persons produce and activate spaces as loci of power; and 3) how diverse forms of embodied action are structurally and historically interrelated.

The archaeological culture of the Tairona, the ancient forbears of the Kogi,[3] provide a useful test case for this methodology, as it features both architectural remains and complex anthropomorphic imagery, much of which can be associated with specific performances. The movements of sitting (on a bench or stool), and the grasping of a horizontal bar with both hands, are theorized as action signs of key political and religious significance in this culture.[4] Found in diverse media in Tairona art, these bodily positions are contextually related to each other and, in fact, overlap in certain examples. Further, they are implicated by artefactual remains of stools that are found *in situ*. The indexical linkages among gestures, artefacts, and architectural remains provide a means by which human agency can be reconstructed even in the absence of physical human remains.

Tairona figural imagery

The Tairona culture was one of the most complex and elaborate of ancient Colombia.[5] Over four hundred sites are known, concentrated on the foothills and mountain slopes of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, reaching altitudes of over two thousand metres above sea level. A distinctive feature of the Tairona culture was extensive environmental modification through the construction of stone-faced terraces, building foundations, canals, bridges, roads, and stairways. Based on archaeological information and ethnohistoric data, Late Tairona society has been characterized as a decentralized aggregate of complex chiefdoms (Bischof 1971; 1982–83; Oyuela Caycedo 1998a, 53; 1998b). Late Tairona settlement patterns demonstrate a three-tiered hierarchical organization of sites (Oyuela Caycedo 1987; Serje 1987). Various sites exhibit internal divisions into *barrios* or districts, probably corresponding to the domains of subchiefs (Oyuela Caycedo 1998a, 53). Status differences are documented at many sites, in which the largest and best-built houses occupy privileged positions in site centres (Cardoso 1986, 202–16).[6] Such structures also tend to have the richest contents, including the types of artefacts discussed above. Temples generally are located in the centres of these sites as well, suggesting a close linkage between temple ritual and political authority.

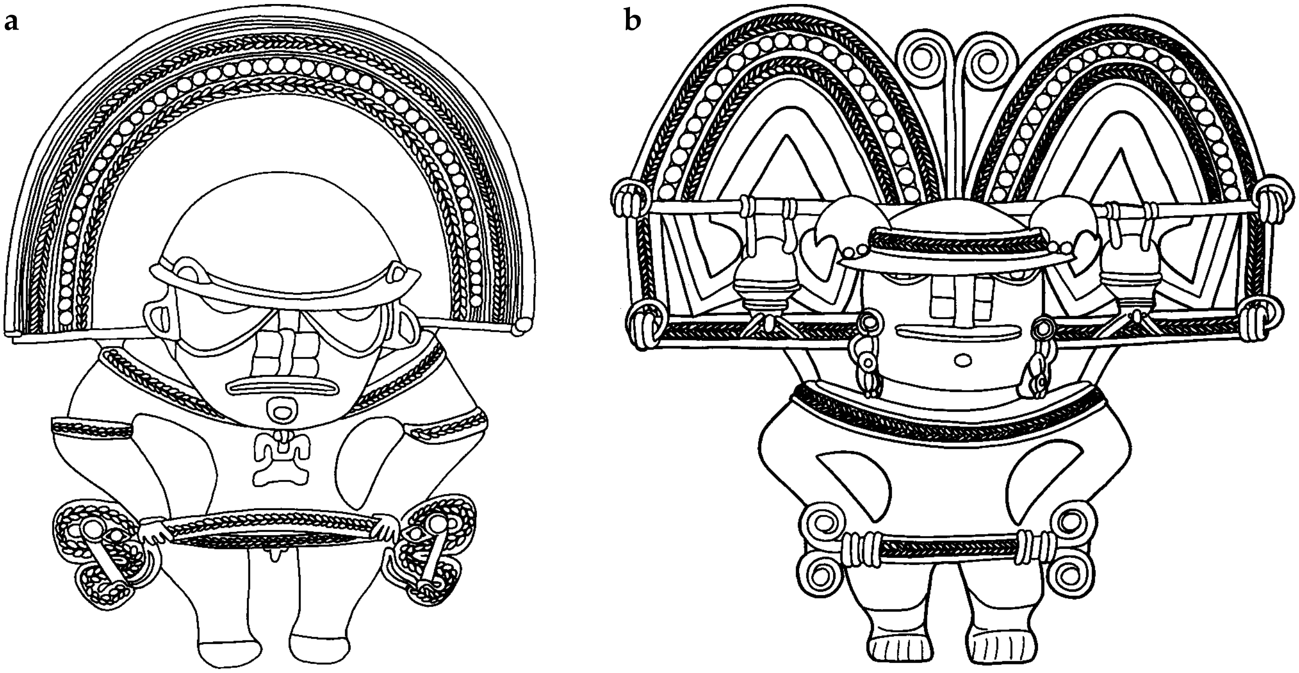

Figure 2. *Tumbaga figurine pectorals. (Museo del Oro, Bogotá: a - MO 11795, h. 7.2 cm, w. 5.9 cm; b - MO 12564, h. 6.2, w. 6.4 cm. Drawings by the author.)*

In addition to architecture, material culture includes artefacts of pottery, bone, shell, stone, and metal (gold and copper). The distribution of anthropomorphic imagery is significant, with a concentration in the media of pottery and metallurgy, mostly dating to the Late Tairona period (*c.* AD 800/1000–1600).[7] Anthropomorphic imagery is frequent on cooking and storage jars, funerary urns, offering jars, carved effigy vessels, and griddles (Mason 1939; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1954a). Faces, hair, and arms are common on such vessels, and some indicate legs and genitalia. Related stylistically to the carved effigy vessels are ceramic tubular flutes and ocarinas, the latter more precisely described as globular duct flutes (Olsen 2002).[8] These depict a variety of imagery, including masked figures either standing or seated on a bench or throne, with elaborate headdresses, loincloths, and other costume elements. In stone, there are a few sculptures, pendants, and baton termini in humanoid form (Dussán de Reichel 1967; Mason 1936). Bone pectorals and staff-heads also depict anthropomorphic forms, sometimes in complicated multi-figure groups (Bianchini 2000, cat. 284). Goldwork displays the most complex imagery in Tairona art, especially lost-wax-cast figurine pendants and *repoussé* plaques. Because of their rarity, fine workmanship, size, and purity, these objects probably pertained to only the highest tier of Tairona society. This may have included priests or warriors, who were reported to have worn, 'golden diadems on the foreheads. On their chests were pectorals or discs that caught the rays of the sun . . .' (de Castellanos 1955, II, 539; trans. Bray n.d.). Some of the ceramic objects, in particular the larger and finer figurines, may also have conveyed high status. The status relationships of ocarinas are not clear, although many of those that depict seated figures are large and of high quality. Thus they too may have pertained to an élite.

Within this rich visual tradition, certain postures occur with great frequency. One, seen often on ocarinas and effigy vessels, consists of the figure seated on a bench or throne (Fig. 1). In such images, the body is displayed symmetrically, with weight distributed evenly on both sides. The back is either upright or slightly hunched forward, and the face is frontal. Costumes are elaborate, and may include kilts, arm and leg bands, jewellery and masks. Both arms and legs are usually directed downward. Typically, the throne has two heads, splayed outward, but the throne may also be headless, in the form of a crescent. The zoological identification of the throne heads is debatable, but is similar to other snake imagery. A similar posture is displayed on effigy vessels of the *canastero* type, which show a masked figure with a vessel fused to the back, seated on a four-legged throne (Mason 1939, pl. 247.5, 6). Twin snake heads often emerge from the body of the vessel or throne. In most of the ceramic images, the figure is either of indeterminate sex or male. On rare occasions, however, the seated figure is a pregnant female (Bray 1978, no. 328; Labbé 1998a, 48, cat. 6).

A second posture is seen most frequently on figurine pendants made of tumbaga (gold/copper alloys) and gold *repoussé* plaques. The figurine pendants are often explicitly masculine, wearing penis sheaths (Fig. 2). The faces may either be masked like the ocarinas, or wear nose bars, labrets, and visors. In these images, the figure clutches a double-headed bar at the level of the waist. In some instances, the bar termini are rendered as serpent heads (Fig. 2a), while others show only the bifurcated tongue (Fig. 2b). Also like the ocarinas, the body and face are rigidly frontal, with even distribution of weight on the feet. The *repoussé* plaques display frontal figures grasping bars, usually with snake-head termini (Fig. 3). When explicit, these figures have male attributes (penis sheaths) and wear gold ornaments. In some examples (Fig. 3a–d), the bar is located at the neck level of the main figure, who holds fast with his hands as the bar is hoisted by diminutive attendants. Elsewhere, the bar is located at the level of the waist of the figure (Fig. 3e,f).

While the postures of seating and bar-grasping seem to be segregated generally according to medium, there are many instances in which they appear simultaneously or are merged. One example appears on a particularly large and elaborate ceramic figurine (Fig. 4). Here, the figure is seated on a four-legged stool with the feet firmly planted in front. The trunk is erect, and the face directed forward. The arms are raised up to grasp a double-headed snake that is supported on the shoulders. The merging of these categories also occurs in a figurine pendant, which shows the masked figure holding the bifurcated bar, but with the lower half of the figure transformed into the crescent-shaped snake-headed throne, similar to an ocarina (see Enslow 1990, 32). Likewise, certain *repoussé* plaques seem to indicate both seating as well as bar-grasping. For instance, in Figure 3e, the main figure's buttocks are supported by a curved sling-like element that hangs from the bar held by the two secondary figures. Figure 3b is similar, except that the seat is rendered as a complete double-headed snake. In Figure 3d, the composition is further simplified, with the seat shown as a straight bar with knobbed termini. These examples in diverse media and techniques suggest that the two postures were part of a continuous iconographic field, but with a tendency to associate bar-grasping with metals and sitting with ceramics.

An examination of additional details of these images suggests a common performative context for their realization. Beginning with the *repoussé* plaques, there is firm evidence for identifying the central figures as Mulkuëxe, one of the manifestations of the sun (Bray n.d.; Looper 1996; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1988, 152). Four elements of the plates support this interpretation. First, the circular pectoral of the figure in Figure 3e is located at the centre of four other circles located near the figure's shoulders and feet. The quincunx figure thus formed has key ritual significance for the Kogi, based on the horizon rising and setting points of the sun at the solstices. Mulkuëxe personifies the sun located at the *muán*, or centre of the quincunx. Second, the figures are shown as the burdens of smaller figures, recalling the Kogi idea that the sun is carried about on the shoulders of Seokúkui and Seizhánkwa, the first two sons of the Mother Goddess. The serpent bar shown on the plates thus symbolizes the ecliptic. Third, in the Kogi narrative of the culture hero Sintána, one of the attributes of Mulkuëxe is a round gold disk that he wears on his chest, corresponding to the pectorals worn by several of the plaque figures. Finally, the bats hanging from the lower bars in Figures 3c and e correspond to Mulkuëxe's fathering of the first bat of creation, Nurlitába (the Kogi word for 'bat', *nuízhi*, is derived from the word for 'sun', *nuí*). Indeed, many of the masks and much of the facial jewellery depicted in Tairona art have the features of bats (Legast 1987; 1989). These include the figurine pendants, the ceramic figurine in Figure 4, and many ocarinas, such as that shown in Figure 1. The semicircular headdresses of the figurine pendants, plaques, and many of the ocarinas may also have solar connotations, manifesting the rays of the sun or its arching pathway through the sky. This suggestion is confirmed upon comparison with Kogi equinox ceremonies, in which a similar headdress is used (see Reichel-Dolmatoff 1953, 44; 1985, II, 141; Looper 1996).

Just as grasping a horizontal bar was a principal posture associated with the sun, so was sitting on a four-legged stool. This significance is demonstrated by the ceramic figurine in Figure 4, in which the four points where the stool legs touch the earth correspond to the four points that frame the image of Mulkuëxe in Figure 3e. Seated on the stool, the trunk of the body becomes identified with the axis passing through the centre point of the quincunx. To the Kogi, four-legged stools, sometimes marked with quincunxes, are specifically assigned to Mulkuëxe.

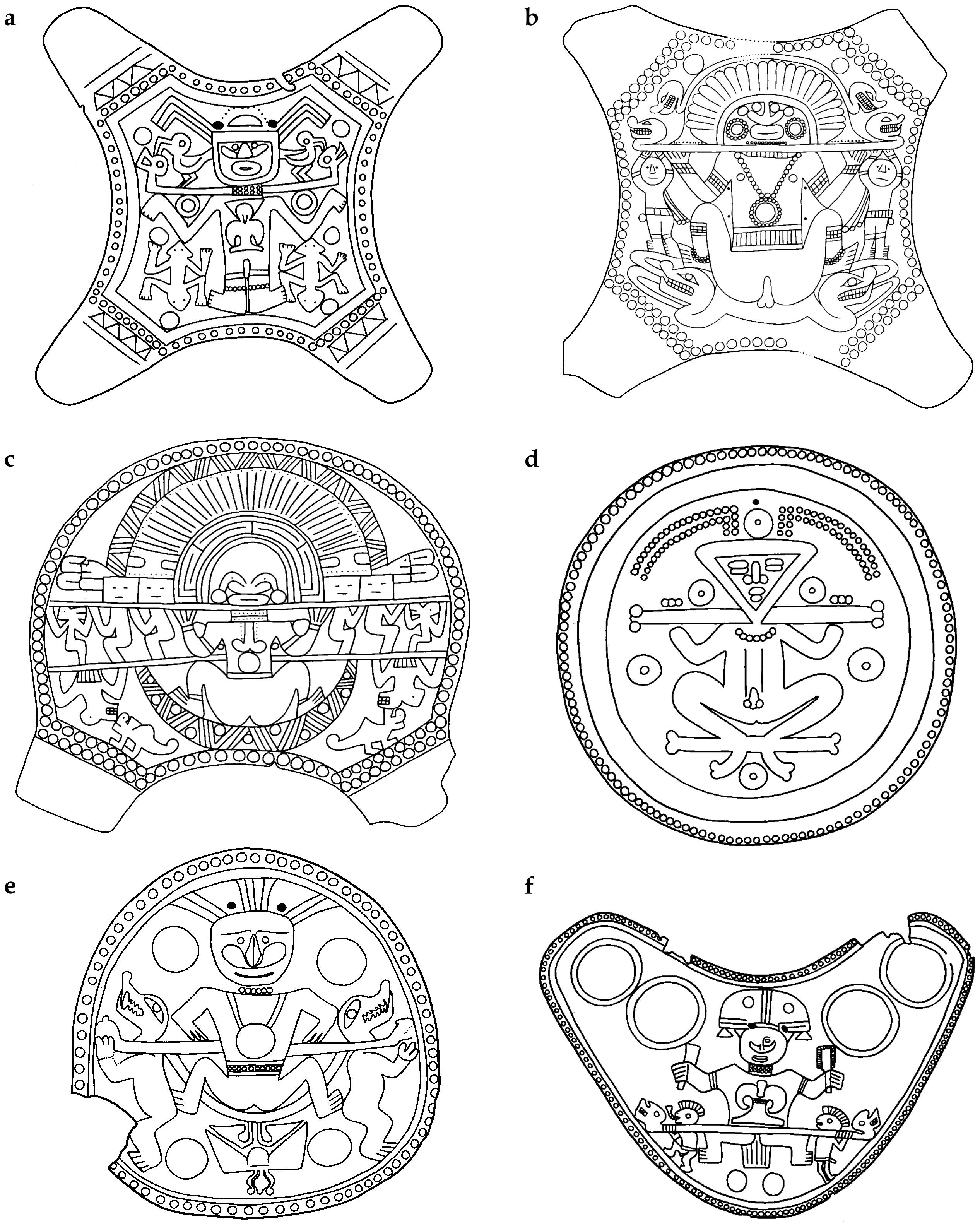

Figure 3. *Gold* repoussé *plaques. (Museo del Oro, Bogotá: a - MO 29.091, h. 10.5 cm; b - MO 12.562, h. 13.5 cm; c - MO 14.451, h. 14 cm; d - MO 16146, h. 14 cm; e - MO 13.977, h. 11.5 cm; f - MO 14.802, h. 16 cm. Drawings by the author.)*

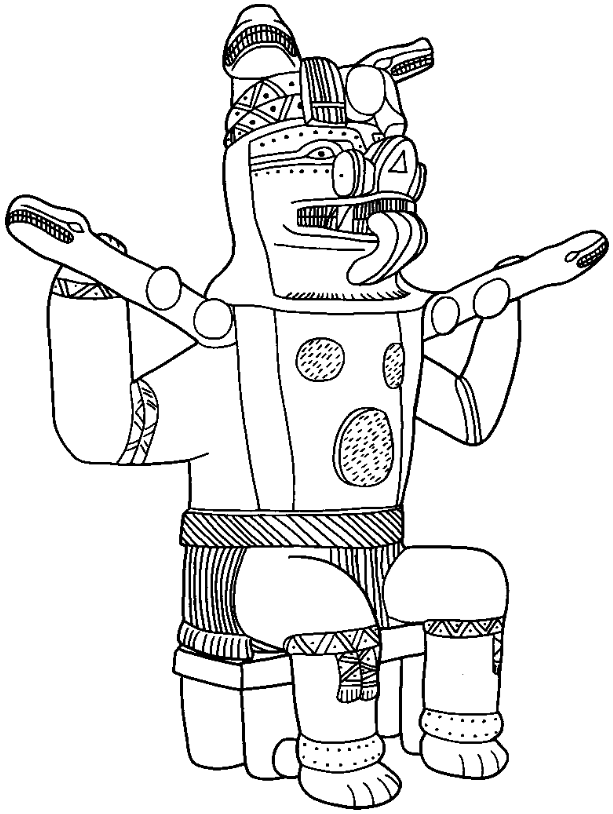

Figure 4. *Ceramic figurine. (Museo del Oro, Bogotá, CT736, h. 34.5 cm, w. 32.6 cm. Drawing by the author.)*

Seated in this way, the deity creates an axis between the visible sun at the zenith and the black sun of the nadir (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1987, 100). As the two suns revolve around the earth in opposition to each other, it is Mulkuëxe who keeps their motions regular and thus maintains cosmic balance. Kogi priests, as representatives of Mulkuëxe, perform an equinox ritual in which they sit in the centre of the temple and hold a mirror facing upward (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1987, 108). In so doing, the mirror reflects the beam of light that is believed to emit from a mirror held by the sun at zenith. This beam manifests the cosmic axis along which communication with the Mother Goddess occurs. The creation of an axis of communication at the *muán* also occurs in divination rites (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1974, 297). During these rituals, a stool surrounded by four objects is placed in the centre of the temple. This seat is reserved for an 'essence,' which answers the questions of the diviner (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1978, 22).

The equinoctial associations of stool-seating are particularly important for the interpretation of Tairona images. As Reichel-Dolmatoff (1990, 7) states,

> The Kogi believe that certain moments in time are of a decisive importance in causing and shaping events. This conceptualization is partly derived from their astronomical knowledge and practice in which, of course, exact time periods or precise moments of observation are all-important.

It is highly unlikely as well that images such as the ceramic figurine are 'timeless'. Rather, they manifest the moment and place in which the sun moves into a position over the centre of the earth, when and where the fertility power of the sun is fully unleashed upon the earth. Likewise, the serpent-bar held by the ceramic figurine suggests the movement of the sun along its path. The implication of these images is that certain postures are more than cosmic diagrams. They actualize a crucial moment in ceremony in which the body serves as a medium for focusing solar powers of light, fertility, and communication. These figures embody a spatially and temporally specific aspect of the sun in movement. While many of them doubtless had additional significance, communicated through costume and other attributes, their fundamental ritual identity was solar. The resplendent gold surfaces of the plaques and pendants, as well as the belief that gold was a solar substance, likely reinforced these meanings.

While the action signs embodied in these artefacts certified a ritually-significant posture, it is important to understand the meanings of these key signs in their performative contexts. Indeed, all of the gold images considered above were personal ornaments, designed to be worn. Those with perforations near the top were likely pectorals, while those with more centrally-located perforations were probably components of frontally-oriented diadems. These conclusions are supported by ethnohistoric data from the sixteenth century, as mentioned above. Likewise, the pendant figurines are designed to be worn as pectorals. When wearing these objects, one literally moved 'with the sun', transporting it across the face of the earth in alignment with the represented figure. The reflexivity and substitutability of image and embodiment in performance are indicated in the plaque shown in Figure 3e, in which the figure wears a circular pectoral, just as the performer wore the plaque itself. A recognition of the relationship of seated versus bar-grasping postures to cosmology provides a possible explanation for their differential distribution in various media. Gold, as a cosmologically celestial material, may have been seen as appropriate to images that embodied the sun in movement. In contrast, objects made of (terrestrial) clay may have been more closely related to ceremonies involving stools, which actualized the fecundation of the earth by the sun. This celestial/terrestrial complementarity seems also to have played out in the gender roles associated with metalwork (male) and ceramic manufacture (female). A fuller understanding of the meanings of these postures, however, comes from examining their relationship to ancient architectural spaces.

Embodiment in architecture

Architecture is often taken to be a metaphor or symbol for the body (e.g. Blier 1996; Hugh-Jones & Carstens 1996; Johnston 1988; Nemeth 1987). Alternatively, we may consider a given building, like a figural image, as an *index* of a history of performances that yield social embodiments.[9] Built and maintained by the hands of a particular person or group, a structure is activated and made socially significant through its use and through the performances that take place in and around it. As a nexus or convergence of highly-marked action signs, architecture is of fundamental importance in social mediation through constraining or modelling movement and spatial sensibilities (Lefebvre 1991). In addition, comparison with the action signs embodied in representational images clarifies the manner in which architecture promoted the distribution of social agency.

Although only the circular stone foundations and adjacent areas of Tairona temples survive in the archaeological record, it is clear that many aspects of their design and performative significance survive in the temples built by the Kogi.[10] According to Reichel-Dolmatoff (1987, 92):

> Kogi temples are meant to be cosmic models, models that convey a sense of world order and, simultaneously, are interpreted as the body of the Mother. They are called *nu-hué* 'world-house', probably from the root *nu* in *nulang*. Each post, beam, or rafter, up to the smallest detail of roof construction, thatch, or vines used in tying together the different parts, has its specific cultural connotations. A temple construction can be read as an anatomical model, a geographical model, a model of social structure and organization, or priestly ritual, or of the upper- and netherworlds; it also is an instrument for astronomical observation, and serves as a school for novices and adolescents who are being prepared for initiation.

With a circular foundation, and a dome-like superstructure, the design of the temple corresponds to the Kogi notion of an egg-shaped universe floating in a vast sea. The same structure is seen in the landscape, in which the Sierra Nevada land mass is considered to float on the Caribbean. The temple also has four shelves built into the roof which correspond to the four upper layers of the universe. The Kogi consider that a second four-layer temple mirroring the actual temple is located underground just below it, making up the other half of the egg-shape. The actual floor of the temple, corresponding to the terrestrial surface, is the fifth or middle layer of the universe. Twin doorways oriented toward the east and west correspond to the sun's positions at the equinoxes, while four hearths and the four primary posts of the circle are aligned to the solstice directions. These alignments integrate the temple into the greater environment, thus emphasizing its cosmological significance.

While the antecedents of these structures are presumed to have existed at many Tairona sites, few have been excavated. Particularly well-preserved temples are known from Pueblito, a large site located close to the Caribbean on the north side of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta (Mason 1931; 1936; 1939; Reichel-Dolmatoff & Reichel-Dolmatoff 1955). Called Chairama in antiquity, the city was built on hilly terrain that had been modified in typical Tairona fashion by levelling and filling to create flat areas for house and temple foundations, burial sites, and plazas. An extensive system of retaining walls pierced by stairways as well as stone paths was also constructed in order to manage the terrain, and elaborate drainage canals and bridges compensate for the many creeks and streams that punctuate the site. Pueblito was one of the larger Tairona sites, having approximately 1000 structures (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1954a, 161). Its temples were located in the core of the site and are easily identified by their large size and high concentrations of ceremonial artefacts. Typically, numerous ceramic offering containers were deposited under the foundation stones and elsewhere in the temple interior.

The main temple at Pueblito was Site 31, located in the site core.[11] A detail of the site plan drawing from Mason (1931), shows the general location of Site 31 and the surrounding structures (Fig. 5). The structure consists of a double ring of foundation stones, twenty metres in diameter, the rings spaced one metre apart. The stones of the outer ring were placed horizontally, those of the inner, vertically. These stones were of rather poor quality, some even being uncut. The threshold stones located on the east and west sides of the ring indicate the location of the entrances. Site 31 testifies to the importance of caching rituals among the Tairona. Within the foundation ring, Mason (1931, 97–9) counted twenty-two caches of pottery vessels containing beads and other ceremonial objects buried under stone caps, and nine caches of stone cer-

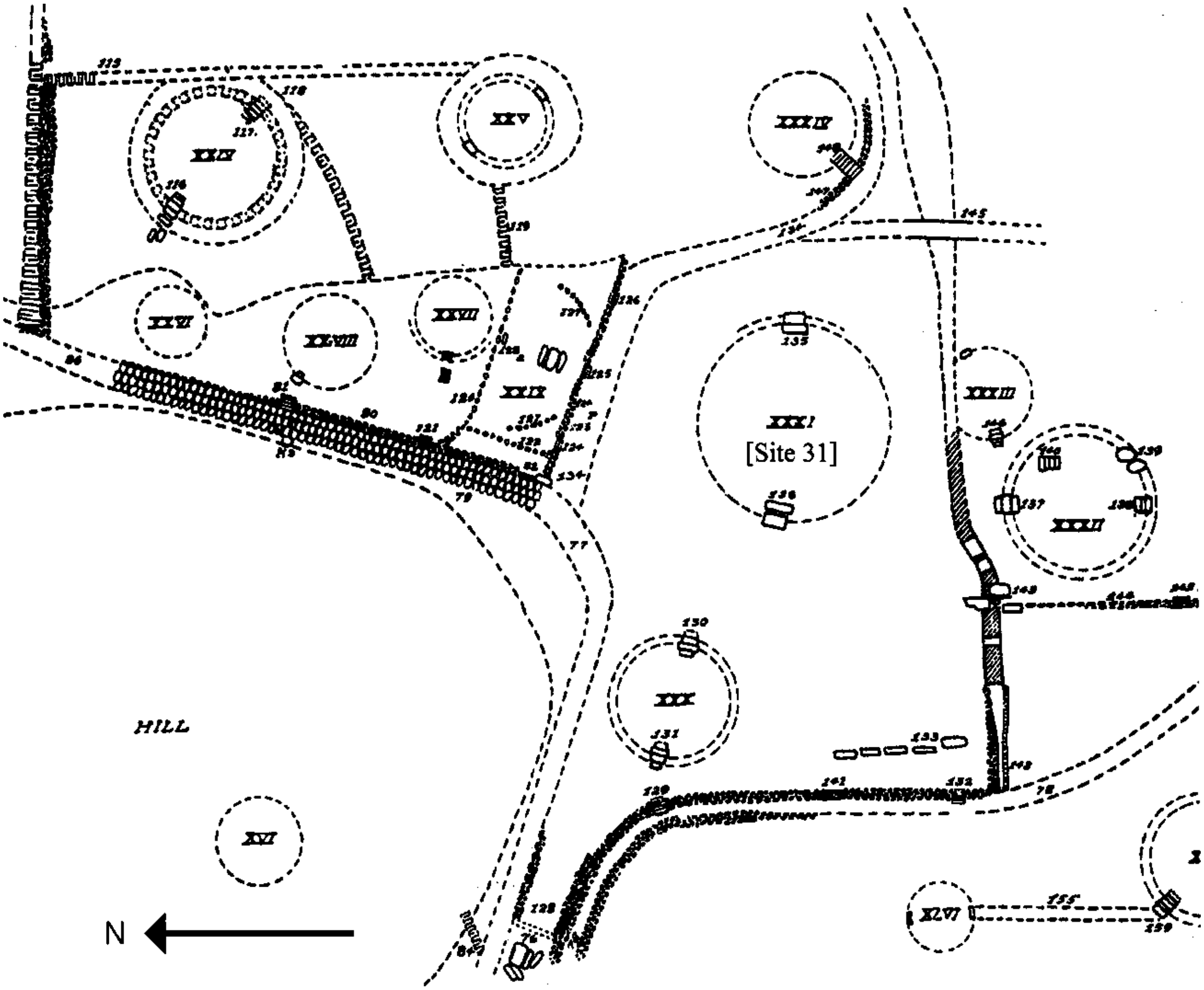

Figure 5. *Map of central area of Pueblito, showing location of Site 31. (After Mason 1931.)*

emonial objects. Upon re-excavation, Reichel-Dolmatoff & Reichel-Dolmatoff (1955, 238–9) found additional offerings in the vicinity of the east entrance. The location of Site 31 just south of a terrace built for an impressive stone-lined burial, Site 29, also indicates the ceremonial importance of Site 31. Based on an analogy with Kogi temples, we can assume that the Site 31 temple would have originally had a conical or paraboloidal superstructure of wood and thatch. Neither modern Kogi temples nor Tairona buildings have centre posts (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1978, 16; 1986, 186).

One way of exploring the relationship of figural imagery to architecture is to examine how these images were used in association with the structure. Site 31 offers little opportunity for this, as the only anthropomorphic image found in association with the structure was an ocarina, found on the surface adjacent to the eastern entrance. Instead, it may be argued that there are certain distinct features of the design of this building which form structural intersections with the solar-associated postures and movements previously described. One clear correspondence is the orientation of its doorways to the east and west. This particular orientation directed exit and entry along a distinctive east–west axis. In so doing, bodily movement was brought into conformation with the general line of movement of the sun and specifically with the rising and setting points of the sun at the equinox. This distinctive orientation may also be referenced by the jaguar cranium found adjacent to the eastern doorway (Reichel-Dolmatoff & Reichel-Dolmatoff 1955, 239). In Kogi cosmology, the jaguar is associated with the east (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1985, I, 248).

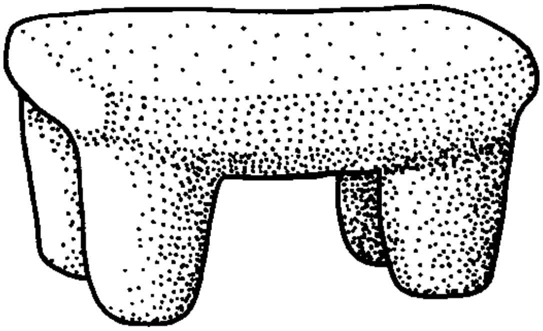

Figure 6. *Stone stool from Site 31, Pueblito. (18.5 × 13 × 9.5 cm. Drawing by the author.)*

Ceremonies for the equinox are suggested by other artefacts from Site 31, especially a small (18.5 × 13 × 9.5 cm) four-legged stool of grey steatite found at the exact centre of the site (Fig. 6; Mason 1931, 96). There is no evidence to suggest precisely how this object was manipulated in ceremony. It could have been an 'actual' seat for a ritual participant, or, like the miniature stools used by the Kogi, a seat for a spiritual essence. By comparison with the images already described, however, we may conclude that the centre of the temple was a locus for sitting, a ritual posture linked to patterns of movement of the sun. Taken in the context of the general solar alignment of Site 31, the stool legs correspond to four outer points of the quincunx and mark the centre of the seat as the *muán*, or cosmic centre. Located exactly at the midpoint of the two doorways, the stool identifies a time and place of transformational potency within a continuous line of movement. In the context of Site 31, these movements are a clear example of geographically-oriented action signs, in which the body is brought into conformity with the cosmos through performance in directionally-aligned architecture. The conceptual space of the ritual is based on the mapping of solar movements onto the terrestrial surface, with the actor seated at the centre.[12] In other words, the monumental time of the equinox and its commemorative stool are assimilated to the social person who used it in performance.

Other aspects of the plan of Site 31 enhance the significance of this space–time nexus. In particular, the foundation circle of the site implies circular motion around a central point. Today, a Kogi *máma* defines the foundation circle of a temple by tracing a line made by a cord tied to the base of a post (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1975, 207). This action is memorialized in the narrative of cosmogenesis in which the Mother Goddess defines horizontal cosmic space by unrolling thread from a spindle. The edge of the temple is made to correspond to the border of the Sierra Nevada land-mass and to the edge of the universe itself through this key movement. The presence of the Mother Goddess in the site may also be adduced by the quantities of thick redware potsherds that Mason found littered over the entire site surface (Mason 1931, 96). The unusual nature of the pottery type at Pueblito and its idiosyncratic distribution at the surface of Site 31 recall the second step of the creation narrative in which the Mother Goddess scattered potsherds on the newly created earth to stabilize it (see Reichel-Dolmatoff 1987, 93). The littering of the floor of the temple with potsherds transformed the interior into a microcosmic version of the earth surface, in which ritual participants acted in agreement with the Mother Goddess.

The performances reflected in the design and use of Site 31 clearly resonate with Kogi cosmology and ritual. As a solar deity of the zenith and centre point of the universe, Mulkuëxe personifies the upper, male half of the egg-shaped cosmos, while the Mother Goddess, lying beneath him at the nadir, personifies the lower female half (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1984, 81–2). The vertical axis that connects them is conceived both as a phallus and as a pathway of 'fertilizing words' through which they communicate. It is through this incestuous coupling of Mulkuëxe and his mother that the cosmos is engendered and maintained. In Kogi temples, a cord that hangs from the orifice at the roof apex replicates this pathway and is manipulated by the priest during prayer. The presence of the stool at the centre of Site 31 is particularly evocative of the Kogi equinox ceremony in which the priest, seated on a stool in the centre of the temple, uses a mirror to communicate with the Mother Goddess through a sunbeam. In this ritual, the sunbeam is the phallus of Mulkuëxe, penetrating the temple-body of the Mother Goddess. Likewise, in Site 31, the foundation ring constitutes a spatial dialectic with the centre, in which the protective womblike realm of the Mother Goddess is pierced by the fertilizing axis of communication.

The embodiment of both the god of the centre (Mulkuëxe) and the Mother Goddess in Tairona temple architecture, prompts a refinement of interpretations of the repoussé plaques discussed earlier. The 'displayed' posture of these figures has been taken by some scholars to indicate a female identity, at least where the penis sheath is not depicted (e.g. Zuidema 1992). And, indeed, the bat emerging from between the legs of the figure in Figure 3e is strongly suggestive of giving birth.[13] Further, even in some cases that include the penis sheaths, there are references to the circular cosmic perimeter laid out by the Mother Goddess. For example, in Figure 3b, the main figure not only grips the snake bar, but one double-headed snake arches above the headdress and another functions as the seat itself. A similar configuration appears in Figure 3c. (The lower snake lacks heads, but it is marked with the pattern of diagonals and circles that the Tairona used to render snake skin.) In Kogi lore, the primordial manifestation of the Mother Goddess was as an invisible force floating in this sea or as the sea itself, surrounded by a great black snake (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1987, 83–4). These structural correspondences suggest that the plaque iconography is analogous to the plan of Site 31 at Pueblito. The surrounding snakes are to the perimeter ring as the central figure of Mulkuëxe is to the stool. Both may embody a sexual union between Mulkuëxe and the Mother Goddess, which, for the Kogi, is the goal of successful ritual in temples.

In summary, it is apparent that figural images and architecture legitimated and enhanced the efficacy of certain performances, particularly those that enabled reproduction among the Tairona. Indeed, the situation of sexual performances in temple sites resonates with the impressions of Spanish chroniclers of the sixteenth century, who associated them with the perpetration of 'abominable sins', i.e. ritualized sexual acts (Simón 1882–92, IV, 356). And yet these performances were not universal, but restricted to a priestly élite. The figural images they wore and temple architecture in which they conducted ceremonies served as nodes of their extended personhood, pointing to their identity as a distinct social class. Through the action of sitting on a bench and/or holding a ceremonial bar, the priests aligned themselves with local conceptions of solar movement, demonstrating the source of their collective social and spiritual power. As sons of the Mother Goddess, these persons drew upon solar energies of fertility and distributed them selectively to the larger human community.

Conclusions

In studies of the body in archaeology, it is sometimes seen as desirable to situate historical individuals in relation to artefacts and spaces (Meskell 1996; 1999). This approach has particular relevance in examinations of burials, in which posture and gesture can be adduced from actual human remains. Such an approach is certainly valid for the Tairona. In fact, some nobles were interred in vaulted tombs seated on stools (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1951, 92–3). Nevertheless, I have purposely avoided such discussion in order to explore the intersecting dimensions of embodiment in both architecture and figural images. As indexical action signs, certain postures that appear in Tairona figural images are interpreted as being necessary to the conduct of solar rituals. In some temple spaces, these acts facilitated the fecundation of the earth by the sun during the equinoxes. The preferential location of these temples in the settlement, combined with restrictive access to media and gender markings, implies the control of these ceremonies by a male-dominated priestly class. In this view, ritual, and in particular ritual magic such as that conducted by the Tairona and the Kogi, is a technology for the assertion of priestly agency in the world that is performative and therefore historically constituted. Permanent media such as goldwork, ceramics, and architecture served as devices for distributing this authority, encoded in intersecting action signs.

A useful conclusion to these thoughts regarding the meaning of technology is to consider the meaning of spinning in modern Kogi life:

> According to the Kogi, 'to live is to think' and the act of spinning is compared to the process of human thought (alúna hangutè), with meditation that should go 'by a thread'. To spin is a solitary activity; the Kogi say: 'When one is spinning, one thinks. Seated this way, spinning the thread on one's thigh, one thinks a lot: about work, about the family, about people — everything' (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1975, 222).

To the Kogi, the act of spinning is a form of private meditation. Weaving, in contrast, is a public act, a form of mental and physical discipline that manifests participation in the community and acceptance of its laws. By sitting in front of a loom and working, a man 'weaves his life' in a manner taught by the *mámas*. Likewise, throughout this essay, I have stressed the primacy of embodied action as a fundamental constituent of culture. Action is not conceived of as opposed to thought, but rather is a mode of thought that defines the social person. Repetitive actions manifest conventional and yet still agential modes of thinking. To the archaeologist, artefacts and architectural remains are the traces of thoughtful acts through which human agents changed their world.

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Notes

1. Although note that native references to images as 'bodies' often imply subtle meanings that differentiate them from the materialist concept of embodiment.
2. It should be emphasized that semasiology does not conceive of agency as unfettered, but rather grounds agency in the structured dualisms of semantic primitives, namely up/down, right/left, front/back, and inside/outside. Indeed, it is explicitly stated that 'all human conduct and actions are generated out of a finite field of movement possibilities' (Williams 1982, 167).
3. On the historical relationship of the Tairona to the Kogi see Reichel-Dolmatoff (1965, 157–8).
4. The seated posture has been considered previously in Tairona art as related to the institutions of shamanism (Labbé 1998b, 26–57; Pineda 1994). The interpretations offered here are not intended as a refutation of that thesis, but as an expansion of it.
5. The term 'Tairona' was originally used to designate the Indians of the Sierra Nevada and adjacent coastal areas during the sixteenth century (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1951; 1953, 17–27; Bischof 1971; 1982–83). On the definition of the Tairona archaeological culture see Mason (1931; 1936; 1939); Reichel-Dolmatoff (1954a,b; 1986); Reichel-Dolmatoff & Reichel-Dolmatoff (1955; 1959); Bischof (1971); Valderrama (1981); Cadavid & Herrera de Turbay (1985); Groot de Mahecha (1985).
6. On the hierarchies apparent in Tairona architecture see Reichel-Dolmatoff (1954a); Cadavid & Groot de Mahecha (1987); Cadavid & Herrera de Turbay (1985); and Serje (1987).
7. There is considerable disagreement about the starting date of the Late Tairona period, with estimates ranging from AD 600 to 1000.
8. Tairona ocarinas are generally of thick black or brown pottery, measure approximately 9 × 8 × 3 cm on average, and have incised lines generally filled with white pigment (Mason 1939, 383–98).
9. For example, Alexander *et al.* (1977) describe architecture as a pattern language built from multiply-linked structures embodying modes of experience and ways of being. This notion is highly indexical.
10. For a more extensive discussion of Kogi temples see Reichel-Dolmatoff (1975).
11. Reichel-Dolmatoff & Reichel-Dolmatoff (1955) redesignated Site 31 as Site 240.
12. Compare with the conceptual space of the Tai Chi exercise as analyzed by Williams (1995, 68–9).
13. The Kogi also recognize a relationship between bats and menstruation (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1975, 211–12; 1985, I, 249; 1985, II, 105–6).

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