

Materialized Landscapes of Practice: Exploring Native American Ceramic Variability in the Historic-Era Southeastern United States

John E. Worth
University of West Florida

Abstract

Despite the fact that archaeological ceramics have long been viewed as a proxy for ethno-political identity, recent research exploring the precise relationship between ceramics and identity during the historic-era southeastern United States provides increasing support for the conclusion that geographic variability in archaeological ceramics is best viewed through the lens of practice, and that archaeological phases correspond better to communities of practice than communities of identity. When viewed through the lens of practice theory and social learning theory, it becomes clear that the coexistence of both communities of practice and communities of identity within the same social landscape does not guarantee automatic correspondence between the two realms, nor even does any demonstrated correspondence necessarily prove a causal link between a community of practice and a community of identity that happen to be coterminous. Each type of community must be studied independently using appropriate and available data, and only by first disentangling the two can any demonstrable connection between communities of practice (such as archaeological phases) and communities of identity (such as historically-documented polities or ethnies) be established empirically. Only then can the exact reasons for any congruence (or lack thereof) be explored in a systematic and rigorous manner.

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Of all the areas where historical archaeology has the potential to make significant contributions as a discipline, one of the least well-explored is its ability to make simultaneous use of documentary and archaeological data in an effort to refine, calibrate, and sometimes correct the methodological inferences and assumptions of purely prehistoric archaeology (e.g. Deagan 1982:29-32; 1988:10; Cleland 1988:15; Little 1994:48-49). One of these assumptions is both significant and widespread, namely the inferred relationship between material culture and social identity, and more specifically between ceramics and ethnicity. This is also a question that I have literally spent the past quarter century musing over and evaluating, and it is this topic that I would like to explore briefly here.

For the southeastern United States, as for many other regions, the indigenous social landscape of the historic era appears populated by comparatively straightforward sociopolitical units identified variously as chiefdoms, tribes, or “nations” noted in the documentary record, while the archaeological landscape of the prehistoric era is populated by a dizzying array of artifacts and other material traces that display a range of spatial and temporal variation that generally ranges from continuous to somewhat less continuous. It has always been the task of the archaeologist to impose order on that variation, using the geographic distribution of material culture to infer units of social integration at various scales, from households to regional culture areas. Sometimes the empirical correspondence between archaeological material distribution and historically-documented social groups is relatively good; many times, however, the situation is far more complex. This is particularly the case after European contact, when previously stable polities began to move and fission and re-aggregate across the landscape at a breakneck pace, resulting in a myriad of increasingly multi-ethnic populations that left sometimes ambiguous and short-lived traces on the archaeological landscape.

In an effort to explore the archaeological manifestation of these otherwise poorly documented phenomena, I, like many others, am following the precedent of many previous and current archaeologists in using the geographic and chronological distribution of utilitarian household ceramics to trace where people lived and when. The past residential communities where people lived are of course quite readily derived from the present distribution of the abundant ceramic debris of daily life. But where I diverge from routine archaeological practice is in identifying precisely who lived at these sites. Pots do not equal people, and potsherds do not possess ethnicity. Although all archaeologists would agree with these assertions, in practice most nonetheless tend to correlate specific ceramic types or series with specific Native American groups with documented names and social identities, commonly justifying this approach by inferring active communication of social identity through decorative motifs or stylistic variations on pottery. In contrast, my own focused research during the past couple of decades has revealed the exact opposite with regard to the archaeological record of well-documented historic Native American groups in the Southeast (Worth 1997, 2009a, 2009b, 2012, 2015a, 2015b, n.d.). There is no level of social integration or group identity that corresponds to an internally cohesive and homogenous assemblage of archaeological ceramic types that could be interpreted as a communication of a distinctive community of identity, and this is even the case at the sub-typological level, where individual motifs used in incised ceramic decoration correlate neither to households nor villages nor chiefdoms, but instead match a pattern of similarity in a small suite of motifs used by each potter that decreases with physical and social distance, following a model of social interaction rather than one of emblematic style. As a result, I have found that a different approach fits the evidence better.

In a forthcoming publication (Worth n.d.), I have proposed that (1) greater social interaction between individual potters tended to result in greater similarity of ceramic practice, reflecting an ethic of conformity and social unity rather than distinctiveness and social division, (2) the current social and material environment of a potter tended to exert a greater, though not exclusive, influence on her ceramic practice than her past social and material environment, and (3), physical proximity (geography) tended to play a more important role than social proximity (political/ethnic identity) with respect to social interactions within the broader landscape of practice. These propositions are supported empirically by several case studies from the Atlantic coastal mission provinces (Worth 2009b), and more recently by work along the Spanish-French borderlands along the Gulf coast (Johnson 2012; Pigott 2015), confirming not just that well-documented Southeastern Indian groups with different political, ethnic, linguistic, and religious identities could produce essentially the same inventory of ceramic types and series, but also that individual groups migrating to new regions could adopt or assimilate a completely new ceramic practice tradition without any accompanying change to their distinctive social identity. Similarly, locationally stable groups could also adopt the ceramic practices of neighboring groups when both were assimilated into new patterns of regional interaction. In simple terms, available evidence indicates that ceramic practices varied independently from social identity.

What I refer to as a landscapes of practice approach draws on concepts from practice theory, social learning theory, and landscape theory to explore the relationship between the geographic distribution of the materialized practices that we call the archaeological record, and the original social and historical context of those practices as the products of individual agents within the broader social and physical landscape in which they found themselves (e.g. Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1984; Ortner 1984:144-160; Marquardt and Crumley 1987; Lave and Wenger

1991; Eckert and McConnell-Ginnet 1992; Dobres and Hoffman 1994; Lightfoot et al. 1998; Wenger 1998; Knapp and Ashmore 1999; Dobres and Robb 2000; Pauketat 2001; Silliman 2001; Dornan 2002; Joyce and Lopiparo 2005; Eckert 2008:2-3, 57-58). More specifically, this approach decouples individual practice from social identity, separating communities of practice that emerge organically among interacting practitioners with a shared history of learning and practice, from communities of identity defined by explicit shared social perceptions of membership, which correspond more directly with traditional concepts of political or ethnic groups. And neither of these types of communities can be presumed to share a necessary correspondence with a third type of community, the community of residence, which is defined by geographic proximity on the physical landscape, and which has historically been the focus of archaeological studies of settlement patterns. Simply put, while there are obvious relationships between where people lived and the extent to which they shared bonds of identity or practice with their proximate neighbors over the courses of their lives, correlations between these three dimensions of community must be demonstrated, not assumed. And furthermore, since the archaeological record is comprised first and foremost of the surviving material traces of practice on archaeological sites with both residential and public contexts, if we are to have any hope of extrapolating social identity from the present distributional patterns of materialized practice, we must first develop a robust understanding of the precise social context of practice.

Without delving too deep into theoretical jargon, if we conceptualize the Bourdieuan concept of *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977:72-95) as the mental dimension of each individual's socially contextualized habitual practices, then the practices themselves become the behavioral dimension, with the objects or other physical traces of those practices becoming the material dimension. Of these three dimensions, of course, we as archaeologists can only have direct

access to one—the material dimension—in the present day. And it is only by using these material traces in the reconstruction of the past spatial distribution of practices that we can evaluate the specific social and historical context of these practices at different scales of analysis, which in turn allows us some glimpse into the *habitus* of both individuals and the various types of communities within which they lived as the locus of engagement between the individual and broader social structure. This approach therefore focuses on how *habitus* itself was formed and maintained through socially-contextualized learning and practice among interacting individuals.

What I am essentially talking about here is an explicit and intentional focus on the practices of individuals as the producers of the material traces we study as the archaeological record. Though it may be provocative to say this, while we archaeologists commonly lament our inability to identify the individual in the archaeological record, when viewed through the lens of practice, the individual is actually the only component of past societies that we see directly through archaeological traces. Each potsherd, each arrowpoint, each posthole, all were materialized through the actions of one individual working alone, or several individuals working together. Likewise, all social structure, and indeed culture itself, can be viewed as an emergent phenomenon that exists only through the reflexive agency of individuals reproducing practices within their socially contextualized mental *habitus*. Neither society nor culture exists without individuals, and it is these same individuals whose practices sometimes leave the material traces comprising the archaeological record. And since the only way to link the material archaeological record to the mental *habitus* of each individual that produced it is through the rigorous analysis of the practices that shaped and were shaped by it, individual practice actually represents the analytical nexus between artifacts and culture, and hence an unavoidable bridge between the material and the mental in the past. We cannot effectively access the big-picture social structures

of the past using the spatial distribution of artifacts in the present without carefully considering how individuals and their practices fit within those broader structures.

A landscapes of practice approach could potentially examine virtually any class of spatially distributed practices that left material traces, ranging for example from not just the original production of material objects, but also their distribution, utilization, and loss or discard. But for our purposes here, what I will focus on is just one category of material culture, albeit the one that commonly dominates archaeological inferences regarding the “where and when” of Southeastern Indians for the later prehistoric and early historic eras. What is perhaps not so routinely apprehended and emphasized by archaeologists who make use of ceramics to define group identity is the fact that available evidence indicates domestic household pottery production among Southeastern Indians was gender-specific, and more to the point, was produced by women (e.g. du Pratz 1758:178-179; Romans 1776:96; Bartram 1792:511; Holmes 1886:371-372; Swanton 1946:549-555,710; Hudson 1976:264; Thomas 2001:33; Sassaman and Rudolphi 2001:408,420). The significance of this is more far-reaching than might initially be thought, because not only does gendered household craft production mean that only a specific subset of the population actually produced pottery, but more importantly it means that developing an understanding of how potters learned and practiced their craft over the course of their lives mandates a careful and detailed analysis of the role of gender in the social fabric of the societies in which they lived. And in the case of the Southeastern Indians, female potters were situated within residential communities characterized by matrilineal lineages with predominantly matrilineal postmarital residence patterns, while at the same time these communities were distributed across a landscape shaped and framed by a political and military structure heavily

dominated by men, who are precisely the people who did not produce the household pottery that archaeologists normally use to reconstruct the spatial extent of these same chiefdoms.

A landscapes of practice approach provides a lens through which to conceptualize the social context of household ceramic production among indigenous Southeastern Indians, and provides a platform from which to operationalize these insights through archaeological research. As I have elaborated in previous research, following many others who have examined ceramic production from a practice perspective (e.g. Minar and Crown 2001; Minar 2001; Sassaman and Rudolphi 2001; Crown 2001; Michelaki 2007), if we are to situate the individual practices involved in ceramic production in their original social context, not only do we need to identify and characterize the relevant steps in the ceramic *chaînes opératoires*, or production sequences (e.g. Lemonnier 1986; Dietler and Herbich 1989, 1998; Stark 1998; Gosselain 1998, 2000; Tite 1999), but we must also highlight those specific practices that have the greatest likelihood of being altered by postlearning social interaction among practicing potters (e.g. Carr 1995:185-215; Gosselain 2000:191-193). Moreover, we need to identify those practices that are readily observable from sherds in the absence of whole vessels, and thus are best suited for routine archaeological analysis (e.g. Colton and Hargrave 1937:2-3; Krieger 1940:9; Willey 1949:5-6; Wheat et al. 1958; Phillips 1958:119, 123; Scarry 1985:199-210).

For our purposes here, the materialized practices that are most salient in evaluating the existence and spatial distribution of communities of ceramic practice using collections of archaeological potsherds are temper and surface treatment, and to a lesser extent vessel form and other secondary vessel features, though these latter practices are commonly limited to sherds encompassing rims or other major profile breaks. More specifically, however, not all aspects of these practices should be given equal weight in evaluating the extent to which specific practices

were more or less likely to be shared or adopted by female potters. Certain practices, for example the use of incising as a decorative technique, could be easily shared, and the suite of incised motifs or designs used by each potter would also be easy to copy with only minimal interaction between potters. Less easily shared by casual interaction, however, might be more subtle differences such as the overall size and spatial patterning of such motifs on the vessel, the presence or type of any background design elements, or even the precise tool used for incision and how dry the clay had to be for decoration. Likewise, the selection of temper is another category of ceramic practice that seems less likely to have been shared by casual interactions between potters.

A ceramic community of practice therefore represents a geographic area within which a group of female potters whose individual ceramic *chaînes opératoires* had come to resemble one another as a result of the mutual and reflexive influence of other potters from whom and with whom they learned, with whom they practiced, or whose crafts were routinely available for firsthand inspection. The material trace of such a community of ceramic practice was a geographic area within which utilitarian household pottery assemblages (analyzed as aggregate collections of sherds) evidence substantial similarity in both the overt characteristics of surface treatment, vessel form, and temper, as well as more visually obscure characteristics of both temper and decorative style. Each specific practice presumably had its own geographic distribution, which I would call a horizon of practice, but the term “community” must imply something more specific than simply a collection of craftspeople at any scale who happened to share one or two practices in common. Consequently, I conceive of a community of practice as being manifested materially as a geographic area within which multiple horizons of practice overlap to reflect a shared *chaîne opératoire* among interacting female potters. And by

evaluating the degrees of geographic variation between overlaps and relative frequencies of all these horizons of practice, archaeologists are actually mapping past landscapes of ceramic practice, corresponding to patterned historical interactions between potters.

In my opinion, the key to all of this lies in evaluating the exact nature of social interactions between the female potters who actually produced the household ceramics we already use for archaeological analysis, and how these past and present interactions were shaped by the individual life-histories of potters living in extremely mobile populations within a multiethnic colonial landscape. To what extent did their various communities of residence correspond to their communities of identity, and how did their ceramic practices persist or change depending on new neighbors and new patterns of interaction with other potters? By mapping the evolving landscapes of practice that continually evolved and adapted to new residential and sociopolitical circumstances, we should be able to gain important insights into what the archaeological record is actually telling us, not just for the turbulent and more well-documented colonial era, but also for the innumerable individuals and groups who lived long before the dawn of the documentary record.

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