



## Moche Sex Pots: Reproduction and Temporality in Ancient South America

**ABSTRACT** This article asks the question: What is a reproductive act? Ceramics produced by the South American Moche (A.D. 150–800) depict a wide variety of sex acts but rarely feature vaginal penetration. The cross-cultural literature, especially from Melanesia and Amazonia, is used here to argue that the relationship between sex and reproduction has been variably defined, with many acts—including anal and oral sex—sometimes perceived as reproductive. It contrasts notions of time found in Western ideas of procreation and in pornography to the expanded reproductive time frame of kin- and lineage-based societies and argues that Moche ceramics, with their emphasis on the movement of fluids between bodies, do in fact portray a reproductive process. In the stratified context of Moche society, where these pots were produced for elite consumers who often placed them in tombs, these representations solidified the power of ancestors, elders, and elites. [Keywords: Moche, sex, reproduction]

**S**EX IS THE SUBJECT of hundreds of clay pots produced on the North Coast of Peru during the first millennium A.D. These ceramics, made by a people we know today as the Moche, are among the finest of the ancient Americas, striking for their naturalistic style and consummate craftsmanship. Their wide-ranging subject matter encompasses much more than sex: On Moche pots, people, animals, and gods go hunting and to war; make music; visit their rulers; bury the dead; and cure the sick. Collectors have long prized this art; it is estimated that 80,000 to 100,000 Moche vessels have made their way to museums and private collections worldwide, almost all of them from looters' pits.

To my knowledge, no one has attempted to quantify the percentage of Moche ceramics that display explicit sexual imagery; at least 500 are known to exist. A large percentage of other Moche works have related imagery, such as war captives with exposed genitalia, dancing skeletons with erect penises, and vessels with highly suggestive motifs and forms.

Like other Moche ceramics, the sex-themed vessels are both functional clay pots, with hollow chambers for holding liquid and stirrup-shaped spouts for pouring, and works of three-dimensional sculpture. As sculpture, they typically depict lively little figures engaged in a startling variety of acts involving the hands, nipples, genitals, anus, mouth, and tongue.

These sex-themed effigies have long been known to scholars but have rarely been the object of sustained study.

There are a scattering of articles, and passing mention in more general texts, but only one major monograph—Larco Hoyle's *Checan*, published in Peru in 1965.<sup>1</sup> In the decades since, interest seems to have waned; sex makes only an occasional appearance in Christopher Donnan's otherwise compendious publications on ceramics (Donnan 1978, 1992, 2001, 2003; Donnan and McClelland 1999). Noteworthy published studies include Joan Gero (in press) and Susan Bergh (1993).

This neglect corresponds oddly with the explosion of scholarly interest in the subject of sex, which has produced a wealth of new research on societies ancient and modern. Moche scholars appear largely uninterested in this body of work;<sup>2</sup> and, for their part, students of sexuality have shown little interest in Moche art, although the latter constitute a major corpus of non-Western, premodern representations of sexual acts. The time seems ripe, then, to revisit the Moche sex pots and bring these two disconnected scholarly literatures together.

These artifacts offer a daunting interpretive challenge. They come to us without context, stripped of archaeological data, and absent any written records. Their meaning is quite enigmatic; but this very opacity, and their utter disconnection from more familiar historical traditions, offers the possibility that their study might move our thinking about sexuality beyond contemporary categories of thought.

The first surprise is what is and is not represented. While sodomy, masturbation, and fellatio are frequently depicted,

penile penetration of the vagina is so rare that some authors mistakenly assume the act was never represented at all. The most common sexual position shown is anal sex, which is reproduced over and over, in a variety of styles, indicating that it was produced in many different workshops over a long period of time. The analysis presented here focuses on this scene, and on connections between it and another frequent image, the male skeleton who masturbates or is masturbated by a woman.

Contemporary viewers regard the sex scenes quite differently from the rest of the Moche corpus, but we should not assume that the Moche grouped these pots together as a specific genre. Indeed, differences in the treatment of the figures suggest instead clusters of thematic groups with potentially quite different meanings (Gero in press). The anal sex scenes typically depict the two figures as similar: identical in size, in the shape of their limbs and torsos, and the design of body paint, adornments, or tattoos. In sharp contrast, in the fellatio scenes analyzed by Gero (in press) the position and costume of the fellated figure indicates greater power than the kneeling, anonymous fellator.

The similarity of the two figures in the anal sex scenes, in addition to the close association in contemporary minds between sodomy and male homosexuality, has led some writers to erroneously assume that these couples are two men, but most pots portray a heterosexual pair. Indeed, the artist often carved the genitalia carefully, despite the small scale, so as to demonstrate beyond a doubt that the penetrated figure is female, and that it is the anus, not the vagina, that is being penetrated.<sup>3</sup>

The man and woman are not always the only actors shown. There is often a third figure, tiny and rather shapeless: an infant, who lies next to the woman's chest to breast-feed while she has sex. Modern viewers may find both the act and presence of the child distasteful, and some iconographers have assumed that ancient audiences felt the same (see, e.g., Hocquenghem 1987; Posnansky 1925). But early explorers repeatedly refer to the prevalence of anal sex—both heterosexual and homosexual—as a preferred sexual practice on the North Coast; in the words of one early observer, the people of the region were “inclined to sodomy.”<sup>4</sup> (Spanish abhorrence of sodomy renders these ethnohistoric documents difficult to interpret, but the observed difference between this and other regions is unmistakable, as is the clerical despair at the difficulty in eradicating the practice.)

As Jeff Masten (1997) demonstrated in his lovely critique of Leo Bersani (1988) on the subject of the anus, absent a historical context it is impossible to assign meaning to this orifice, or to any part of the body or bodily act. In contemporary cultural politics, sodomy and reproduction are positioned as inimical opposites; in the Moche case, I found a quite different relationship between the two, which brought me back to some very old, and very productive, anthropological debates about the relationship between reproduction and sex.

Susan Bergh is not alone in asserting that the ubiquitous “representations of non-reproductive sex . . . constitute

a problem” (1993:80), one she finds impossible to solve: Other Moche scholars have posed the problem in similar terms. But if there is indeed a problem here, its roots may lie less in ancient America than in ourselves.

In other arenas, we are immediately skeptical when a practice is described as anomalous, suspecting that this assertion merely reveals the author's own unexamined biases. Evelyn Blackwood (2004), for instance, criticizes students of kinship who puzzled over matrilineality but who found nothing strange about patriliney or patriarchy. We might similarly question whether studies of the Moche sex corpus reveal unwarranted expectations—of sex itself and of collective representations of it. Few authors besides Gero have been perturbed by the rarity of same-sex scenes, or the absence of cunnilingus, although both are frequently noted. Perhaps pre-Columbian scholars take these lacunae as indications of a society dominated by heterosexuality and masculine privilege, which they believe to be universal features of complex societies. But Blackwood's point is precisely that such unexamined assumptions rob us of the ability to interpret the evidence before our eyes; they can even prevent us, as I will argue here, from asking the right questions in the first place.

Some readers will no doubt protest the comparison between Blackwood's example and that of vaginal sex. Kinship systems vary between cultures, they might argue, whereas the basic facts of sexual reproduction are invariant. Heterosexual vaginal intercourse is not just one kind of sex among many: It is the one essential reproductive act.

But anthropologists need to beware reasoning based on “commonsense” knowledge, such as the “facts of life” that “everyone knows.” The very notion of “common sense” implies a sensibility resulting from common experience—something we and the long-dead Moche do not share. Many of the views on procreation held by members of other cultures—including Europeans of previous centuries—are utterly counterintuitive to the 20th- or 21st-century Western-educated mind. Thus, an a priori assumption about what constitutes a reproductive or a nonreproductive act is neither a reliable nor a neutral point from which to begin analysis.

Let us begin, then, not with an assumption but with a question: “What is a reproductive act?” The search for an answer should start broadly, consulting ethnographic examples from across the globe as a source for general hypotheses. We can then turn to ethnohistoric and ethnographic information from across South America and, finally, narrow our purview to the ethnohistoric and archaeological record from the North Coast itself. Only then can we venture an assessment of what is represented in Moche ceramic art.

#### WHERE BABIES COME FROM

It is only “a happy coincidence,” according to Stephen Beckerman and Paul Valentine (2002), that the scientifically established fact that human conception occurs when one sperm fertilizes one egg dovetails so neatly with

longstanding Western European folk beliefs. But this congruence of science and culture is not so happy for anthropological thinking. It makes it difficult for us to imagine that "other peoples have started from different premises," still less that before the very end of the 19th century, European beliefs about conception had no basis in scientific knowledge (Beckerman and Valentine 2002:1–2).

A 17th-century Spanish theory held that the darker skin color of certain races resulted from paternal moral degeneracy, which caused excessive heating of the sperm (Chaves 2003:7–8). In the 18th century, Europeans worried that a wet nurse's breast milk could alter a baby's race. In early-19th-century England, magistrates held that a pregnant woman could not have been raped, since nonconsensual sex did not lead to conception (Roth 2000:189).

Surprisingly, the acquisition of more scientific information does not put an end to cultural beliefs; if anything, new medical technologies have spurred a proliferation of new ideas about procreation (Franklin 1997; Ragoné 1994; Rapp 2000). According to Marilyn Strathern, the "modernist" notion of the family as "constituted in the procreative act of the conjugal pair" no longer holds (1995:351–352). When families use surrogate mothers, sperm donors, and medical teams to create a child, these biological actors are not defined as parents, and the parents are not biological procreators.

Doing fieldwork in an infertility clinic, Sarah Franklin (1997) heard patients and professionals alike express a loss of certainty about what actually causes procreation. Because it cannot produce conception on demand, the clinic, which presents itself as "a domain of elaborate expertise about 'the facts of life,'" paradoxically became the place where "the inadequacy of the biological model" was revealed (1997:199–200).

The unwavering, obsessive attention to the moment when sperm meets egg that Franklin observed, and the sense of helpless, anxious ignorance that surrounded it, contrast dramatically with the most famous anthropological anecdote about procreation and culture. Seventy-five years earlier, Malinowski asked a Trobriand acquaintance why he was not angry to find that his wife had borne a child during his two-year absence. The man simply could not understand the question, leading the Polish anthropologist to a startling realization: Trobrianders did not recognize a male role in procreation. They did, however, know exactly where babies came from: ancestral spirits floating on ocean waves, who impregnated bathing women of their own matrilineage (Malinowski 1929).

Malinowski's claim provoked much discussion about whether a people could indeed develop a biological theory that flies in the face of observable fact. But this question, posed as an absolute opposition between truth and delusion, is too harsh: Every society recognizes some aspects of biological processes and ignores or downplays others. In Amazonia, Warí women believed that heterosexual relations cause menstruation; so when they noticed flows of blood before first intercourse or during

periods of abstinence, they dismissed them as inconsequential, because they knew that these were not "real" menstrual flows (Conklin 2001:152).<sup>5</sup> And although the circum-Mediterranean conceit that a man "plants his seed" in a woman (see, e.g., Delaney 1986) may sound more closely congruent with physiological fact, this idea is not based in empirical observation either: Semen are invisible to the naked eye, which sees only an opaque fluid.

In 1981, another Melanesianist caused a sensation with his claims about native theories of sex and reproduction. In *Guardians of the Flutes*, Gilbert Herdt (1981) described secret ceremonies in the men's house of a New Guinea tribe, in which young boys were required to fellate older men. Herdt's discovery prompted much interest as an example of "homosexual rites," but as Deborah Elliston (1995) has pointed out, the ritual was not about sexual enjoyment—it was about reproduction. Neither male nor female children, according to Sambia beliefs, would mature into adults capable of reproduction without first orally imbibing semen. The human capacity to reproduce, as Sambia men saw it, was contained in a scarce, precious, and immortal fluid—visible as semen in men and breast milk in women—that must be physically transmitted from one generation to another, indefinitely, if human life is to continue. Older men passed this substance orally to younger men through fellatio, and the young men in turn fed it to their wives through the same method; later, vaginal sex, conception, and birth took place; and then women breast-fed their babies. Each of these stages was necessary—including the transmission of semen into the womb through vaginal penetration—but for the Sambia the key procreative moment was the transference of semen from an older generation of males to the immature youths.

A closer comparison to Moche is the nearby Kaluli, whose elders used anal—rather than oral—sex to accomplish the necessary transfer (Schieffelin 1976:124–126). In sum, then, among the Sambia or Kaluli, the image of a young man and an older one engaged in oral or anal sex would depict a reproductive act; conversely, among the Trobrianders, a picture of a man and woman having vaginal intercourse would not. When it comes to sex, then, it is not so easy for outsiders to name what they see.

### **Reproductive Time**

The Sambia and Trobriand examples are important not only as cases in which Western understandings of procreation do not apply but also because they introduce non-Western concepts of "reproductive time." In neither society does a single, brief transaction result in a pregnancy; making a baby requires a series of separate events, repeating over a long period of time, and involving other relationships beyond the procreating pair. In the Trobriands, before the spirit could inseminate a woman, her human sex partners gradually opened her vagina through multiple acts of penetration: two separate but necessary processes. The Sambians constructed an even more protracted sequence, involving

not only a lengthy series of carefully controlled transactions between the sexes and generations but also special rites between males, trees, and magical forest substances. Other New Guinea societies, too, used same-sex secret rituals to teach and enact theories of reproduction that enlarged the circle of actors who participate, pulling acts of insemination or breastfeeding into long chains of connected events that, by implication, involved both the living and the dead.

For Annette Weiner, this expansion of the reproductive process, with its intersecting sequences of "transgenerational time," is the fundamental distinction between Western and Melanesian procreative theory (Franklin 1997:58–59; Weiner 1976). One might argue that what Weiner is describing is really social, rather than biological, reproduction. However, in their book about reproduction, Faye Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp maintain that the two processes are inseparable, and that an anthropological understanding of reproduction requires "expanded notions of historical time" (1995:2). These insights are even more enlightening when thinking about sex—an activity that can be notoriously quick to commence and end but may be long in its consequences.

The concept of "reproductive time" can be clarified through comparison to the very different construal of time found in Western heterosexual pornography. In this peculiar fantasy world, explicit representations and descriptions of vaginal sex between women and men abound—but, for the most part, this is sex without reproductive consequences. The very visibility of the act marks it as non-procreative, because reproductive sex, which is supposed to take place in the context of the family, is shrouded in secrecy and should not be explicitly represented. Indeed, one could argue that in Western heterosexual pornography, as with the example of the Trobrianders, vaginal penetration is not a reproductive act.

The opposition between the sex that is seen and the sex that is hidden marks a deeply inscribed binary opposition. On one side is the "clean" daytime world of family, social reproduction, and sexual repression: the realm of wives and mothers, whose role is defined by sexual reproduction but who cannot be shown to engage in it; it is to this asexual world that children are restricted—or so we pretend. In contrast, pornography and prostitution are perceived as signifiers of a "dirty" nighttime realm of hedonistic pleasure, which belongs by definition to the male consumer (although it depends on the labor of sex workers, who are usually female). Here, all reference to family, kinship, and social obligation is carefully avoided; in fantasy, whores are not mothers, nor mothers whores. It is the violation of this fundamental opposition that disconcerts us on the Moche pot, where the same woman enacts sex and motherhood simultaneously.

This pornographic pretense succeeds by staging sex in a peculiar kind of time—or, rather, in a *no-time*, a *u-temporia* like the *u-topia* (no-place) of other forms of fantasy. Here, the sexual actors commit only to the present moment, coming together without a shared past or future. In contrast,

while the Moche anal sex pots portray the orifices and members of the body as sexually active and aroused, the scene is set within a temporality that resembles Weiner's "transgenerational time." The different kinds of physical intimacy and bodily exchange—the man's penis within the woman's anus, the baby's mouth on the woman's nipple—imply more than one kind of social and temporal link between the actors. And as in any multigenerational scene, there is an implication of biological maturation. The adults were once babies themselves, and the baby will grow to be a sexually active adult.

While we do not know what the Moche saw as the man's relationship to the child, each of the possibilities enlarge the scene's temporal frame. If he is the child's father, then the child is the visible fruit of previous sexual contacts between this pair. It has been suggested that these pots are didactic in intent, demonstrating a postpartum sex taboo: a child's parents having appropriate, anal intercourse at a time when vaginal sex is forbidden (see, e.g., Jimenez Borja 1985:44). A different historicity emerges if the male is not the father: The nursing baby demonstrates that the woman has had sex with other partners; from her perspective, this act is one among many.

Looking at this Moche threesome within a comparative framework, then, we see that the figure of the baby changes the act of sex and introduces a new temporal dimension. Evidence from South America supports and expands on this thesis.

### SEX AND REPRODUCTION IN SOUTH AMERICA

If Melanesia is one of the richest, best-documented sources of information on attitudes toward sex in a cultural setting relatively uninfluenced by colonization, the Andean region must be among the most impoverished. Andean ethnographers have rarely discussed sexual beliefs and practices, and indigenous cultural traditions have been radically altered by centuries of colonialism, capitalism, and missionizing. In the adjacent Amazonian region, in contrast, despite demographic and other pressures, indigenous peoples maintained many sexual traditions into the 20th century, in defiance of Western and Christian norms. While it lacks the rich theoretical work on sexuality and gender to be found in the Melanesian literature, the extensive ethnographic record from the tropical lowlands is by far the best source of information about sex in indigenous South America.

There are other reasons for North Coast scholars to turn their attention to the Amazon. The ubiquitous presence of trophy head imagery in coastal artistic traditions, and of Amazonian flora and fauna in the iconography of Chavín, demand that we look to the tropical forests.<sup>6</sup> These connections can be overdrawn, but by the same token, we should not be blinded to the specificity of North Coast cultural history by an overly rigid definition of Amazonia and the Andes as discrete "culture areas." This ingrained intellectual habit leads scholars to routinely interpret archaeological evidence from the maritime north using ethnographic material from high-altitude pastoralists far to the

south in highland Bolivia, while largely ignoring coastal Ecuador and Northwest Amazonia, areas that are geographically closer and arguably more relevant but that lie outside the “Andean” sphere as conventionally defined. Without accepting claims that there is no such thing as Andean culture, we can nonetheless recognize that the notion of a single, homogenized Andean region is partly a fiction and can be especially misleading when interpreting phenomena outside the Cuzco heartland. The Andean region is and was large and internally diverse, and everywhere connected to peoples and ecologies beyond its limits; in looking at Moche, it is important to explore connections to and comparisons with the north and west, as well as the south.

Nowhere in Amazonia have anthropologists documented a set of practices that exactly parallel the Moche anal sex scene; but the search for superficial resemblances should not be the goal of ethnographic analogy. Even between contemporaneous Amazonian societies, specific cultural practices vary; commonalities exist only as a diffuse, variably experienced complex of ideas. It is here that we may find themes that can be cautiously brought to bear on the Moche case, if only as a source of hypotheses.

One of the most famous Amazonian institutions is the *couvades*, in which fathers suffer the pains and endure the postpartum restrictions of childbirth (Gow 1991:152–155; Rival and Whitehead 1998). These restrictions vary from group to group but are wide ranging. Parents may have been enjoined against eating long lists of foods, looking at or hearing certain animals or natural phenomena, making abrupt movements, or leaving a small and protected area. Behind these taboos lay the belief that because the child is the product of the father’s and mother’s own bodily fluids, any sensual impression on the adults’ bodies could cause the dissolution or deformation of the fragile newborn, whose body was still soft, almost liquid, and unformed. If the new mother had several lovers, all were enjoined to observe the same demanding taboos (e.g., Crocker 1985:48–49). For according to a widespread belief in “partible paternity,” every man whose semen entered a pregnant woman’s body was believed to have contributed to the growth and formation of the fetus (Beckerman and Valentine 2001; Crocker 1985:6, 43; Fischer 2001:119).

Behind these practices lies what Eduardo Vivieros de Castro calls a generalized theory of “seminal nurture” (Vivieros de Castro 1992:187; also cited in Conklin 2001:149). Rather than insemination—that single moment when the male sperm fertilizes the waiting egg—the key metaphor for conception in Amazonia is “nurture,” or feeding: The fetus grows as it is fed regular infusions of semen from men and blood from its mother. In the Northwest Amazon, the metaphor is especially explicit. For Tukanoan men, feeding defined being a father: First, they fed semen to the fetus through repeated acts of insemination; after birth, they waited anxiously for the newborn infant to become capable of eating solid food, so that they could be-

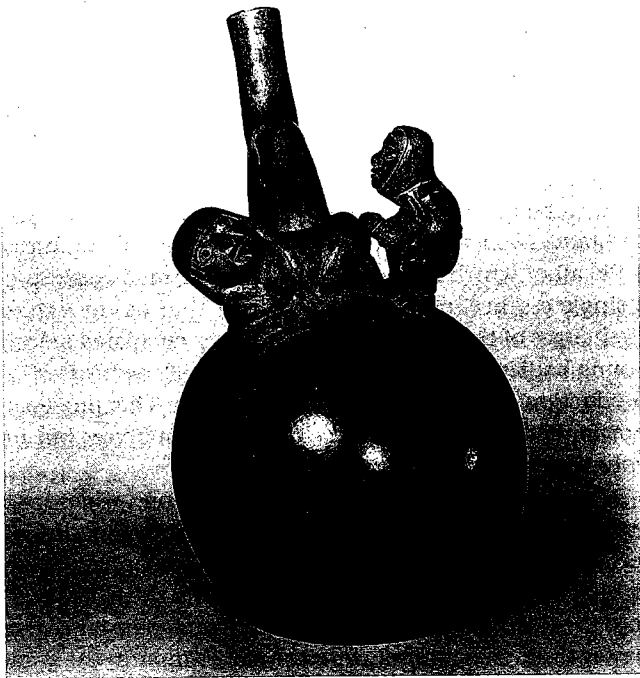
gin feeding the child again, now with cooked manioc and other foods (Conklin 2001:149 and passim; see also Hugh-Jones 2001:257). The Barsana spoke of semen as “a kind of milk,” which men fed to women’s vaginas (Hugh-Jones 2001). Elsewhere, the Warí began the process even earlier: Men were given young, prepubescent girls as wives so that they could grow them into fertile, menstruating women by feeding them semen, just as they would later feed the fetus inside their wombs (Conklin 2001).

Here, as in Melanesia, the focus is on the body’s capacity to generate, store, and transmit life-giving reproductive substances—including semen, menstrual blood, and breast milk, all of which are perceived as transformed versions of a single essence, at once material and spiritual in nature. Exchanges of these nurturant substances, circulated among young bodies and regulated by elders, lie at the heart of reproduction and of social and spiritual life. This process is not limited to specific orifices, members, or actors but involves multiple bodily acts.

This generalized notion of procreation, widespread cross-culturally and well documented in South America, offers a possible reading of the Moche anal sex pots. In this light, the substance that is transmitted from the man’s body into the woman’s as seminal fluid is the same substance that passes through her nipple into the baby’s mouth; the scene depicts the movement of this nurturing fluid between three bodies, to the ultimate benefit of the infant. In this reading, several details become significant: the shapelessness of the child’s body and face, for instance, may be an indication that, as in the *couvade*, the process of fetal development is not yet complete even though the infant is outside of the womb. And it is noteworthy that on one portrayal of anal sex on a pot at the Art Institute of Chicago, the artist carved a tiny nose and a pair of eyes above the anus, transforming the orifice that engulfs the penis into a mouth (see Figure 1). This woman’s anus, like the mouths of Amazonian and Melanesian women, appears capable of imbibing semen as though it were drinking a nurturing food.

The notion that the relationship between parent and child might be built over time through acts of feeding is one that resonates with indigenous cultural traditions in the Andes. In the northern Andes the act of feeding was the central activity through which both social and biological reproduction took place (Weismantel 1995). Shared food gradually created unbreakable ties between bodies and established permanent social identities: Thus, feeding adopted children slowly transformed them into members of the family in a physical, as well as a social, sense. Here, as in Amazonia, one could not become a father through a single, brief act of coitus but only through repeatedly nurturing a mother and child.

Having arrived at a provisional reading of sex, reproduction, and time on the anal sex pots using ethnographic analogy, we are ready to consider the archaeological and ethnohistoric evidence from the North Coast, which immediately introduces two new, powerful themes: inequality and death. If we then turn to iconographic evidence from



**FIGURE 1.** Moche ceramic depicting anal intercourse [AIC 1955.2674]. Incised markings above the woman's anus resemble a nose and eyes, creating a tiny visual pun that turns the anus into a mouth. (photo courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago)

the ceramics, we will find the one figure that brings all these themes together: the ancestor.

### **MOCHE: WEALTH AND POWER**

To describe these ceramics as "Moche" can be misleading if it implies that they are the products of a single homogenous culture. Ownership of these beautifully executed, painstakingly crafted pieces was restricted to a rarified elite; production, too, was likely controlled by a specialized stratum of craft producers, for the Moche were a highly stratified society.

More than a millennium after their reign, the ambitions of Moche leaders are still visible in their monumental architecture, such as the massive edifice known as the Huaca de la Luna, one of the largest man-made constructions in the Americas. The looted valuables sold on the antiquities market and coveted by modern buyers likewise demonstrate the ability of Moche elites to surround themselves with luxury goods and works of fine art. Controlled excavations in the last decade provide even greater evidence of the degree of economic inequality and the concentration of political power that characterized the Moche period.

Not too long ago, archaeologists pictured the Moche as a simpler, smaller predecessor for mighty Chimú, the rich and powerful polity thriving under nominal Inca control, which Pizarro and his men would encounter on the North

Coast 700 years later. In a radical revision, today scholars argue that the Moche period was a time when the political economy of the region rapidly coalesced into something qualitatively unlike its predecessors and far more unequal. This conclusion is supported by the available data about ceramic workshops, which demonstrate that craft production in Moche times was deeply stratified.<sup>7</sup> Evidence about who used and owned particular kinds of vessels, on the other hand, is still fragmentary. Some nonelites, especially those who produced the finest wares, or served elite households, may have enjoyed access to some luxuries and shared aspects of the elite world view.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, production of the very finest ware was presumably oriented toward a small group within Moche society, whose tastes and beliefs may not have been shared across classes or ethnic groups or by residents of rural areas.

One indication of these differences can be found in the refuse heaps at the large ceramics production site of Cerro Mayal in the Chicama River Valley, which produced ceramics of high quality but not the very finest wares. While representations of men dominate in museum collections, at Cerro Mayal, female figures—both clothed and unclothed—vastly outnumber males (Russell and Jackson 2001:167). Given the vagaries of collection histories, this comparison is merely suggestive; but it reminds us that the abundant sexual imagery on the very finest ceramics may not signify bodily qualities or acts that their makers believed to be universally human, or even universally Moche.

For the elite consumers of the imagery on these pots, sexual desire and reproductive capacity would be important not only in and of themselves but also as potent forces that could be channeled to serve economic and political ends—and, therefore, that, uncontrolled, could unravel existing relations of power. Ginsburg and Rapp say that children are not simply born; rather, they are "born into complex social arrangements through which legacies of property, position, rights, and values are negotiated over time" (1995:2). The wealthy and powerful, especially, do not simply want to make babies; they need to produce heirs, who will continue to hold onto and manage the political and material resources amassed by their kin. Furthermore, social groups often act to control sexual activity and the bodily experience of sex itself: harnessing powerful desires and emotions to serve ideological purposes or restricting access to sexual partners in order to maintain class, ethnic, or kin-group exclusivity.

Even in the relatively egalitarian, small-scale societies of 20th century Amazonia or Melanesia, the sexual and reproductive powers of the young were rigorously controlled to serve the ends of specific groups: elder males, the clan, or lineage. In managing the flow of vital fluids between bodies, one frequently expressed goal was to ensure the successful growth of fetuses into viable babies, but these practices were also used to maintain—or to blur—boundaries between lineages, generations, and genders. Sambian rites, for example, required males to share semen widely, creating a secret kinship that bound all men together, overriding the kin-based

identities that normally divided them. Other tribal groups used the flow of semen otherwise, directing it strictly along kinship lines to reinscribe the complex rules of consanguinity and affinity even in sexual acts between men. Among the Etoro, for example, boys were assigned an inseminator who was consanguineally related to their future wives (Kelly 1993; see Crocker 1985:106, 345 n. 20; Sorenson 1984 for similar data from Amazonia).

Among the users and makers of the Moche sex pots, reproductive ideologies must have not only reinforced principles of gender, generation, and descent but also differentiated between economic strata. Ethnohistoric accounts of Chimú social and political organization describe a multilayered hierarchy of lineages, with those at the top controlling irrigated agricultural land, as well as the labor of farmers, fisherfolk, and craftspeople (Netherly 1977). Moche society is presumed to have been organized similarly. For members of these powerful lineages, controlling reproduction would have been a game with very high stakes—and one that would surely have influenced what these privileged consumers wished to see represented in works of art.

## SEX AND DEATH

If social inequality is a general context within which the sex pots should be read, the sumptuous tombs of the elite provide a much more specific one. The Moche buried their important dead dressed in intricate costumes, surrounded by ritual paraphernalia, covered in layer upon layer of elaborately worked ornaments in precious metals, stones, and feathers, and accompanied by sacrificial victims, human and animal, as well as by fine ceramic vessels.

Archaeologists presume that almost all fine Moche ceramics, including the sex pots, were found in tombs, a supposition strongly supported by the large numbers of whole pots in museum collections. Most of these artifacts have no provenience, but the number of vessels found in situ has been slowly increasing. In 2001, Claude Chapdelaine published a small jar with bas-relief depictions of ritual sexual activity, one of 22 ceramics associated with an elite female burial (2001:80–81); decades earlier, Rafael Larco Hoyle reported finding pots with sexual imagery in the graves of infants (Larco Hoyle (1946:175; 1965:44, 122).<sup>9</sup>

Such finds are still too rare to allow the systematic correlation of specific kinds of vessels with particular types of burials, but the generalized association of ceramics with graves provides a significant context in which to read their style and iconography. If the imagery on the pots places young children in the same scene as the act of sex, the context of the tomb puts sex into the house of the dead, expanding reproductive time far back into the past—and forward toward the future.

On the North Coast in the 16th century, the cult of the *munaos*, or mummies, was the focus of religious, social, and political life. During Moche times, there is evidence of the ritual reopening of graves; ceramics placed in tombs, then, had not passed out of memory but, rather, into it. Tombs

were central sites of social reproduction for the living, as Rosemary Joyce and Susan Gillespie argue for ancient Maya burial temples (Gillespie 2000; Meskell and Joyce 2003).

If very fine ceramics circulated among a restricted group of the highest elites, this group would presumably have shared membership in a very few closely related kin groups and worshipped at the same ancestral tombs. These tombs and their occupants would have been key symbols through which their living descendants materialized social, political, and economic power; the sex pots would have taken their meaning from, and given meaning to, this fundamental fact. The central role of the tomb, in turn, took its significance from perhaps the most important figure in Andean religious life: the ancestor.

Far from being distant figures, ancestors were the animating force of everyday life, as Meskell and Joyce have written of the Classic Maya (2003:169). In the Andes, Susan Ramirez perceptively comments that living Inca emperors—who when seen in public sat immobile, silent, and expressionless, were carried on litters rather than walking, and were surrounded by objects not unlike grave goods—were actually imitating their already dead, mummified predecessors and thus presenting themselves as the embodiment of perfect power (2004). For it was only after death that a person could achieve the pinnacle of social, political, and cultural influence over others, as an object of worship and the recipient of offerings of goods and labor that, in the case of the Inca, could easily exceed anything given to the living. Fertility was the source of this ancestral power: life, health, and abundance flowed from the dead and could be taken away if their happiness and goodwill were not constantly cultivated through ritual action.

These ideas are visible among the Moche as well, as can be seen if we turn briefly from the anal sex pots to another set of commonly depicted images: the woman masturbating the skeleton. Skeletons often masturbate alone, sometimes while holding a small figure; frequently, however, they are masturbated by a female companion. When, as is often the case, she is as fleshy as he is bony, it is tempting to read this pair as embodying oppositions between life and death and male and female, and so to see the skeleton's erect penis as a trickster element that erupts across these boundaries, undermining the power of death. Thus, the erect penis of the reborn dead in Egyptian tombs symbolizes their rejuvenation (Meskell and Joyce 2003).

If we look at a larger corpus of the Moche masturbation scenes, however, the message is rather one of corporeal continuity between the living and the dead, for both figures are sometimes fleshed, sometimes fully or partially skeletonized. The one constant is the erect penis, a member that in the Andes would only grow in fertilizing power when wielded by a dead man.

The figure of the masturbating skeleton, like that of the couple having anal sex, is not immediately legible to us as a representation of fertility: In Euro-American history, masturbation is often reviled as a wastefully non-reproductive act. But the meaning of masturbation, like



other bodily acts, depends on cultural and historical context (Laqueur 2003). In the mythology of ancient Egypt, for example, the act of masturbating the penis was glorified as a purely masculine form of reproduction, through which male deities and even the ordinary dead could generate new life. The female contribution to the process was limited to arousing the male partner, a role signified by the feminine hand that rubs the cosmic phallus (Meskell and Joyce 2003).

In the Native American languages of the Andes, the concepts of "ancestor," "lineage," and "penis" are linked linguistically and metaphorically (Salomon 1991:20; Zuidema 1977:256); the erect penis of the skeletonized male may unite these three concepts as well and so signify the principle of descent over time. The skeleton's partner, then, may be less significant as a woman than as an affine. For while we do not know the details of Moche kinship, one general principle is clear for all societies that emphasize descent through corporate kin groups: Ancestral fertility, which flows down through lineages, must be activated through living affines. Alone, the masturbating skeleton represents the ancestor's reproductive potential; with one hand on his penis and the other cradling a small body, this power to create new life becomes more visible. When it is a woman's hand, rather than his own, that rubs the penis, we see this ancestral potency being activated by another sexually active being who can capture and convey it to the lineage's living descendants.

Our comparative data remind us that what this woman conveys between generations is not just a generalized and disembodied fertility but also actual fluids that had once been within now-deceased human bodies. Like the sacred Andean mummies, bodily fluids—or even body parts—are visible and tangible links to the ancestors, at once material and sacred. In the Northwest Amazon, patrilineages were imagined as originating in the body of a giant anaconda, and each living male descendant's penis was envisioned as a segment of that original phallic body (Hugh-Jones 1979:38–40; Whitten 1985:66–70). As Joyce says about the Classic Maya, through such "durable essences" ancestors "participate consubstantially in the personhood of descendants" (Joyce 2000:169). The referent in the Maya case is to the circulation of ancestral bones; Amazonians and Melanesians imagined living essences passed directly from body to body through processes of ingestion.

If the baby and the tomb give the anal sex scene a history, the masturbation pots make these connections more meaningful, suggesting that the sexual fluids passing between living actors originate in the bodies of the dead—and that the dead have an active interest in the sex that occurs between their descendants and affines, since the latter in effect become their sex partners, too. The tombs in which these pots were found, lavishly appointed materializations of the wealth and power of the lineage, further shape the meaning of the sex acts portrayed. They remind viewers that the sexual powers of conjoined bodies were to be celebrated but also controlled, so as to restrict the abundant generosity

and awesome fertility of the ancestors to the lineage and its selected heirs.

## CONCLUSION

On Moche ceramics, images of anal sex and male masturbation are often shown together with a baby, posing a puzzle that is best addressed by turning from Western notions of conception to a cross-cultural search for ethnographic analogies. But now that we have finished our wanderings, are we any closer to answering the question, "Why all the anal sex?"

Ultimately, that question may be unanswerable: We may need to be content, as early writers were, to simply note the North Coast's "inclination to sodomy" as a distinctive cultural practice that cannot be reduced to functionalist explanation, like the Japanese pagoda or the Mexican tortilla. Once such a cultural practice exists, it becomes the subject of a rich and intensely meaningful array of symbolic associations; but these do not, in the end, demonstrate that some other practice would not have served the purpose equally well. Indeed, the very existence of other societies who flourished without that particular trait demonstrates that its history must be a contingent rather than a necessary one.

Furthermore, the analysis presented here addresses only a small portion of the entire corpus of Moche representations of sexual activity. The fellatio-on-the-throne scenes embody greater inequality, as Gero observes; the genital mutilation of prisoners speaks of war and politics; there are half-squash, half-human pairs whose open mouths join in a single enormous tongue, perhaps indicating forms of female-to-female reproduction; the effigies of genitalia might pertain to secret cults and adolescence.

While a full accounting of all these scenes is far beyond the scope of this article, our cross-cultural excursions into reproductive theory do make the pattern of what is and is not portrayed in the Moche sex pots more comprehensible, if not explicable in a deterministic sense. In depicting anal sex as reproductive, breast-feeding as a sexual act, and the dead as sexual actors, Moche artists adopted visual strategies to achieve the same effects that Melanesians and Amazonians accomplished through ritual: to expand reproductive time and alter the definition of the reproductive act. The multiple actors, and the display of other acts of bodily intercourse besides vaginal penetration, work to displace the viewer's focus from the single moment of insemination—the key reproductive moment in Western thought—and, thus, to displace the sexually active heterosexual couple from center stage.

This analysis poses some problems, since as can be seen from the European reluctance to portray marital sex, the invisibility of a particular act need not indicate its unimportance; it can signify the opposite. But whatever the closeting of vaginal sex accomplished for the Moche, it does not segregate sexual reproduction from visual representation. The scenes of anal and manual sex are suffused with the symbolism of generation (infants, breast milk, ancestors, tombs).



