Joseph C. Miller Memorial Lecture Series

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Bibliographic information published by
the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists
this publication in the Deutsche
Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic
data are available in the Internet at
http://dnb.d-nb.de

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Gefördert durch die Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) im Rahmen der Exzellenzstrategie des Bundes und der Länder – Exzellenzcluster Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies (BCDSS) EXC 2036/1-2020, Projektnummer: 390683433

Funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) under Germany's Excellence Strategy – Cluster of Excellence Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies (BCDSS) EXC 2036/1-2020, Project No.: 390683433

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(https://doi.org/10.53179/9783868933987).

A print version is available for a fee from the publisher.
The page numbers in the print and in the online version are identical.

© EB-Verlag Dr. Brandt
Berlin, 2021

Coverdesign: © Rainer Kuhl, Berlin

ISBN 978-3-86893-367-3 (Print)
ISBN 978-3-86893-398-7 (Open Access)
DOI 10.53179/9783868933987

# Clay embodiments: Materializing Asymmetrical Relations in Pre-Hispanic Figurines from Ecuador*

> To point out what appears, in history, as being eternal is merely the product of a labour of eternalization performed by interconnected institutions such as the family, the church, the state, the educational system, and also, in another order of things, sport and journalism […] is to reinsert into history, and therefore to restore to historical action, the relationship between the sexes that the naturalistic and essentialist vision removes from them (Bourdieu 2001, viii).

## 1. Introduction

The Ecuadorian coast is the region with the longest history of anthropomorphic figurine production in the Americas. This tradition lasted without interruption for at least 5,000 years, beginning with the famous Valdivia figurines known as Venus around 3500 BC, and possibly ending after AD 1500 with the arrival of Spanish conquistadors.

It is worth noting that, although this tradition produced thousands of anthropomorphic figurines, none of them have been used to analyze certain cultural aspects that are related and reflected in the bodies. The figurines are bodies: human bodies that are shown with or without sexual attributes, naked and clothed, adorned or plain, still or in motion.

The figurine tradition of the Ecuadorian coast provides an opportunity to observe and analyze bodies in a diachronic perspective, compar-

* The ideas and the input to the discussion expressed in this paper were developed thanks to the support of my institution, the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador (PUCE), as well as the Wenner-Gren Foundation (Post-PhD Research Grant 2018). I also thank the University of Bonn and the BCDSS for the kind invitation to present the results of my research at the Cluster Opening Conference "Beyond Slavery and Freedom: Opening New Fields" (Bonn, November 2019). Special thanks go to Eric Dyrdahl and Hugo Benavides, not only for revising and translating this paper, but especially for always being there and supporting me.

ing the different concepts that determined distinct manners of depiction in different styles and temporalities. I suggest that this kind of analysis can bring us closer to body politics in the past. And in fact such an analysis leads to observations about dependency and asymmetrical gender relations that appeared at a specific point in time and became a sort of shared understanding in this visual narrative, which was the mass media in pre-Hispanic times.

Why have these bodies not been studied as representations of social relations and changing politics, for example, in terms of gender and power, or in terms of the representation of self and other? I believe that the answer to this question is historiographic in nature. The asymmetries that I have observed and which will be the subject matter of this paper probably were not noticed before, because they are considered *natural*. The prevailing patriarchal discourse in contemporary Ecuadorian society likely promoted a naturalized assimilation of the patriarchal discourse that can be observed in the iconographic corpus from a certain moment of Ecuadorian prehistory onwards.

In terms of methodology the most useful instrument to approach such a topic is iconographic analysis. The present contribution is based on an exhaustive iconographic study of ceramic figurines from different periods of pre-Hispanic history on the Ecuadorian coast. It analyzes gender relations as power relations. Based on the notion of the role played by institutions such as the family and the church in perpetuating and essentializing patriarchal principles (Bourdieu 2001), I propose a deeper examination of past materialities as powerful representations of ancient ideological discourses (Ugalde 2009). These representations, as I will show, act in a similar way to modern materialities (e.g. toys) and modern mass media (publicity, television, cinema, social networks) in normalizing and controlling the way people perceive and perform their identities.

A key component of this essay is the recognition, previously developed by other scholars (e.g. Hays 1998; Gimeno 2017; Vivas 2019), of the changing concepts associated with maternity, and their ideological charge as an efficient tool for ensuring a *status quo* of dependency, as well as its manifestations in ancient, non-western societies. While one

group of the figurines seems to convey a specific concept of motherhood, which seems to focus on the role of females as mothers and limits a previously existing leading role in public spheres, another group by their functionality as musical instruments reinforces the objectification of females and justifies their manipulation. In this manner, materiality seems to be working as an effective tool of domination.[1]

## 2. Dress code and gender relations – From naked Venuses to Desperate Housewives

Around 3500 BC, an art tradition started on the coast of Ecuador. It was the tradition of making anthropomorphic clay figurines. It lasted without interruption for at least 5,000 years. Over time, an interesting evolution can be observed. The tradition starts with a repertoire of almost exclusively naked females, but around 600 BC, morphs into a complex iconographic corpus consisting of people (of various genders), animals, and a myriad of fabulous beings.[2]

Judith Butler (1993, 2) asserted that materiality is "power's most productive effect." I regard anthropomorphic figurines from pre-Hispanic coastal Ecuador as the materialization of body politics in time and space. It is stunning how rarely these materialized body politics have been seen as such and studied from the point of view of gender

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1 Since I employ materiality as one of the key concepts here, it is important to point out how I understand this concept in the context of this paper. In contrast to concepts like "artifacts" or just "materials," materiality has a relational nature; it encompasses the dynamic of human-artifactual relations (Knappett 2014). The most relevant aspects of this relation for the present contribution have been synthesized by Daniel Miller, by stating that "the stance to materiality also remains the driving force behind humanity's attempts to transform the world in order to make it accord with beliefs as to how the world should be" (Miller 2005, 2), and by highlighting the "capacity of objects to fade out of focus and remain peripheral to our vision and yet determinant of our behavior and identity" (2005, 5). The prehispanic figurines that are central to my investigation can be understood as such objects, intersecting with power relations and political interests, and as such, played a crucial role in identity issues.

2 This long period is known as the Formative Period for coastal Ecuadorian archaeology, and it is composed of three sub-periods, each one of them represented by a culture: Early Formative (Valdivia Culture), Middle Formative (Machalilla Culture) and Late Formative (Chorrera Culture).

relations (for a few, but important, exceptions, see the works of Gero 1999 and Scattolin 2004, 2006). It is true that we cannot "see" gender in the archaeological record, as gender is not a "thing"; but it is possible to perceive traces of its changing characteristics, as gender is constantly negotiated and reconstituted (Gero 2001, 16). Traces of these negotiations were performed and materialized in the bodies and their associated elements.

The beginnings of figurative art are associated with the Valdivia culture[3], one of the most ancient agricultural societies with ceramics on the American continent, which, in many ways, was "a hearth of innovation in the prehistoric world" (Pearsall et al. 2020, 123). The people of the Valdivia society, in fact, produced thousands upon thousands of figurines, all of them similar to one another and schematic in character. The earliest figurines were made of stone (Meggers, Evans, and Estrada 1965; Di Capua 1994; Valdez and Veintimilla 1992; Staller 2000; García 2006, 2016). They are representations of human beings, the great majority displaying over-dimensioned feminine attributes (fig. 1). Mostly stand upright, are small in scale, and not dressed nor adorned with jewelry. Their breasts are large, and frequently the pubic hair in the pelvic area is highlighted. These features stand in stark contrast to the limited attention dedicated to the facial features, which are very schematic and uniform. There are no clear signals of individuality. The figurines do not appear to portray the personages as individuals, but rather their shared feminine symbolism. These figurines are widely known as *Venuses*. Becerra has recently argued for the inappropriateness of the term (Becerra 2020, 465), which had already been questioned previously, but still remains the main designation used to refer to these objects.

The best studied Valdivia settlement is Real Alto (Lathrap, Marcos, and Zeidler 1977; Marcos 1988), which might arguably also be the most

[3] Although the earliest dates for Valdivia occupation are placed around 4400 BC in the current bibliography (Zeidler 2003, 2008; Marcos and Michczynski 1996), the manufacture of anthropomorphic figurines probably began somewhat later, around 3500 BC. The most recent research by James Zeidler, Richard Lunniss and Juan José Ortiz on Valdivia chronology argues that the beginning of the phase should be corrected to 3800 cal BC, as the earlier dates do not come from trustworthy contexts (Zeidler, personal communication, September 2020; publications forthcoming).

Fig. 1. Clay figurine, Valdivia Culture. Museo Weilbauer, PUCE, Quito (MW-516-98). Foto: Mauricio Velasteguí.

studied ancient settlement in Ecuador. With eight well-defined phases and a transition from town to village during the third phase (Clark, Gibson, and Zeidler 2010), some diachronic shifts have been observed in the development of Real Alto over time, but social differentiation in terms of rank does not appear to be one of them. For example, there is no evidence for unequal accumulation of wealth or prestige goods, as there would be later in prehistory.

Two characteristics of the evidence from Real Alto are especially relevant to the present study. First, the settlement contains collective spaces that likely were associated with ceremonial, public activities, alongside domestic spaces that contain little evidence of differentiation. Recent archaeobotanical studies have shown that there was no difference between public, ceremonial, and domestic spaces in the way that agricultural products were processed and consumed (Pearsall et al. 2020). This finding points to a sort of *democratized* ceremoniality where all members had similar access to resources in all spaces of the settlement.

The second important point is that, although there are no well-defined differences between burial offerings in terms of wealth (a variable often used to signal rank in a society), there is one remarkable female burial located in a ceremonial mound (the so-called Charnel Mound). The remains had been placed in a stone-lined tomb surrounded by grinding stones and querns. Secondary burials of seven males were documented near this grave, and interpreted by the excavators as sacrifices to the high-status female in the stone-lined tomb (Lathrap, Marcos, and Zeidler 1977).

Additionally, archaeological evidence from the late Valdivia settlement San Lorenzo del Mate lead Staller (2000) to propose a close association of women in this society with shamanic practices and long-distance trade, suggesting a prominent role in public spheres of social interaction.

The tradition of producing mainly anthropomorphic figurines is maintained in the two styles that follow Valdivia in the Formative Period: Machalilla and Chorrera (Estrada 1957a; Meggers, Evans, and Estrada 1965; Lathrap, Collier, and Chandra 1975; Valdez and Veintimilla 1992; Staller 2000). The figurines produced by these groups are stylistically and technologically different, but they continue to reproduce the same thematic and representative canon. In Machalilla (fig. 2) some figurines have localized ornaments and body paint, but these are still relatively limited in number. The figurines are naked and generally have large, exposed breasts. Frequently, the vagina is clearly represented.

The subsequent Chorrera culture largely continues this tradition. It is, however, notable that in the Chorrera canon explicitly masculine figures appear for the first time. They are much less frequent than the feminine figurines, which continue to represent the largest part of the corpus. Zoomorphic depictions in clay also appear for the first time. All of these zoomorphic figurines are naturalistic and represent depictions of local fauna (Lathrap, Collier, and Chandra 1975). Unfortunately, our knowledge of the Machalilla and Chorrera sites is very limited. That is why the archaeological record cannot contribute much to this discussion, in contrast to the Valdivia dates.

Around 600 BC, a series of notable changes begin to take place in the iconography of coastal Ecuador. Many scholars have noted that the

Fig. 2. Clay figurine, Machalilla Culture. Museo Weilbauer, PUCE, Quito (MW-2183-08). Foto: Mauricio Velasteguí.

archaeological evidence indicates a transformation process at this time that resulted in greater social complexity (Meggers 1966; Estrada 1957b; Valdez and Veintimilla 1992; Bouchard 1995; Bouchard and Usselmann 2003; Masucci 2008). Part of this new complexity included the emergence of specialized artisans (Cummins 1992, 1994; Valdez 1992; Ugalde 2009; Dumont et al. 2010; Patiño 2017). The societies of the time were clearly stratified, with evidence of intensification in agricultural production and specialization in various spaces and economic spheres. Emerging elites appear to be associated with metallurgical production and the use of metal adornments.

The most important archaeological finds pertain to the two northernmost settlements on the Ecuadorian coast at this time. The central site for the Tolita/Tumaco culture was La Tolita (Uhle 1927; Valdez 1987, 1992). This site, located on an island at the mouth of the Cayapa River, probably was a pilgrimage center and regional necropolis with elite and commoner burials for the region that now comprises Esmeral-

das in Ecuador and Tumaco in Colombia (Valdez 1992; Bouchard 1995; Bouchard and Usselmann 2003; Patiño 2017; Dumont et al. 2010). The data from La Tolita attest to the existence of intensive cult activities associated, probably, with an emerging institutionalized religiosity.

Directly to the south of the Tolita/Tumaco area, the settlement pattern for the society of Jama Coaque is dominated by three mound sites: San Isidro, Santa Rosa, and Zapallo (Zeidler and Pearsall 1994; Zeidler 2015). These sites, located in the lower, middle, and upper Jama Valley, respectively, speak in favor of the existence of three autonomous polities. The knowledge and strategies of these polities enabled the people of Jama Coaque to display greater resilience in the face of volcanic disasters than earlier Valdivia and Chorrera occupations in the area (Zeidler 2016).

What has not been noted, or at least not very thoroughly discussed, is that alongside these sociopolitical developments, the iconography also becomes more complex and, as part of this complexity, allows us to see many aspects of relationships between people. While hieratic women in the fashion of the Formative style are still represented, there is a very notable turn in the iconographic corpus towards the depiction of men. Men are represented in all shapes and sizes, loaded with an empowering display of ornaments. It is evident that institutions have been established, and with them, the rise of a new social structure, which includes clearly asymmetrical relationships between people.

If this type of relationship existed in earlier periods, it left no clear evidence in the archaeological record, while it is difficult not to see it in the figurines from the new epoch. Cummins (1992, 68) pointed out that the change might already have started in Chorrera, where the iconic character of the anthropomorphic figurines might imply the move from a more shamanistic religiosity to one more orientated towards a priesthood, but as the same author notes (Cummins 1992, 67), the iconographic emphasis still primarily lies on female figures with a rigid appearance and a not fully sculptural character. There are only small differences in the depictions of male and female figurines.

In a similar sense, the first materialization of elements from the supernatural world might be depicted via non-figurative elements on

some specific Chorrera vessels (Cummins 1992, 67). But, again, it is in the Regional Development Period where this world, with a myriad of mythical beings, begins to take up a huge part of the iconographic record, in a fully figurative manner, and, maybe most importantly, where these beings meet the beings from the real world, interact with them and influence the everyday life of those societies (Ugalde 2009, 2011, 2018).

I agree with Hernando's (2002) view that more complex socio-economic relations promote more complex forms of identity for both individuals and collectives. These identities are materialized and become messages that are reproduced in the clay sculptures we are dealing with here. As I have indicated in previous publications, the iconography of the Regional Development Period clearly shows elements of both types of identity, with an emphasis on the identification of male actors as members of certain social groups, which in turn are identified with deities, as a form of legitimation of power and access to privileged positions (Ugalde 2009, 2011, 2018). Meanwhile, the identity of female actors seems to be more focused on a space associated with the family, with a strong emphasis on the roles of wife and mother.

As I stated previously, the iconography of several Regional Development coastal styles shows a myriad of actors, with no precedent in terms of form, quantity, and variety. The Tolita/Tumaco, Jama Coaque I, Bahía, and Guangala styles develop, more or less simultaneously, more complex images that strongly contrast with Formative societies. These societies all are considered to be early regional polities with hierarchical organizational structures, especially the two northernmost societies, Tolita/Tumaco and Jama Coaque (Meggers 1966; Masucci 2008; Valdez and Veintimilla 1992; Zeidler 2016).

A notable change takes places in the depictions of people with the development of these styles. The new tendency that all of them demonstrate is the association between certain portions of the body and clothing, which gives the appearance of a gender dress code. Female figurines (fig. 3) always have uncovered breasts and their only piece of clothing is a skirt. They are lightly adorned with necklaces and earrings in forms recur continually. They do not wear elaborate headdresses, and are usually only shown wearing a simple covering.

Fig. 3. Clay figurine, Tolita/Tumaco Culture. Colección Nacional. Museo Antropológico y de Arte Contemporáneo (MAAC), Guayaquil (GA-11-3013-87).
Foto: María Fernanda Ugalde.

By contrast, there is a great deal of variation in the male figurines (fig. 4); not only in aspects related to their dress and ornamentation, but also in their size, paraphernalia, and activity. Occasionally they are naked; when dressed they typically wear a loincloth. They are frequently heavily adorned; among these adornments their headdresses are especially elaborate and more varied. Finely crafted metal jewelry is among the adornments worn by many of the people of this culture, especially the elites in these stratified societies. The known archaeological metal objects correspond perfectly with the representations of adornments of elite personages in these styles.

In fact, it is also important to state that the depictions of people in this period diverges from the Formative Period iconography in two additional ways. First, in these new styles we probably have depictions of actual people (or individual statuettes representing groups of people).

Fig. 4. Clay figurine, Jama Coaque Culture. Colección Nacional. Museo Antropológico y de Arte Contemporáneo (MAAC), Guayaquil (GA-1-2267-82). Foto: María Fernanda Ugalde.

Second, most of the people depicted in the iconography canon probably formed part of an upper class of their society. To be clear, I am not saying that I believe the entire iconographic canon of the Regional Development societies is limited to portraits of rich people. In fact, I have explained in great detail in previous works (primarily Ugalde 2009) my opinion that, especially in the case of the Tolita/Tumaco iconography, a diverse set of contexts and themes are treated. I argue that the iconography of this society – like its counterparts, the Bahía and Jama Coaque styles – produced a complex worldview composed of two primary spheres. On the one hand, there are representations of personages from the religious world that give us an idea about the beings that populated the mythical and ritual spaces in the imaginations of individuals in these societies. The other sphere consists primarily of real members of these societies – or ideal versions of how they wished to be perceived.

The most interesting space according to my interpretation is to be found at the nexus between these two spheres. One of my main hypotheses is that the emerging elites in Regional Development societies used and abused religion and the supernatural sphere of their society's worldview to legitimize their power. I argue that this was achieved by postulating a line of descendants from mythical ancestors and male actors within certain groups. The symbol of this ancestral connection was the headdress (Ugalde 2009, 2011, 2018).

In this context, it is significant to mention that one author concerned with Valdivia figurines from the Formative Period postulates a connection between powerful female shamans and jaguars (Staller 2000, 120). Even if this connection is not absolutely clear from the iconographic perspective, this reading stands in sharp contrast to the association of jaguars and the male in the Regional Development, about which there exists a broad consensus.[4]

Returning to the gendered depictions, it is important to emphasize that the most significant gender attributes are not sexual organs, but rather elements of dress and paraphernalia. There does not seem to be a binary gender identification in these cultures (Ugalde 2017, 2019b; Ugalde and Benavides 2018). Instead, it is noteworthy that starting with this period and moving forward, specific gender roles appear, at least for women and men (and maybe for other genders that we cannot identify properly yet because of our own bias). Specific activities and attitudes appear to have been important parts of these roles.

Cummins noted for the case of Jama Coaque, for example:

> Apart from primary sexual characteristics, anatomical features are so standardized, created by a limited stock of shapes, lines and contours, that they are interchangeably used for male and female figurines. This is especially true for facial features (Cummins 1992, 76).

In both the Tolita/Tumaco and Bahía styles, we can observe very specific representative canons with notable differences between the depictions of male and female actors. Women are shown in a static pose and are not elaborately dressed or adorned. The great majority of these figurines were made in molds. The use of molds constitutes one of the important technological advances that, while first appearing in Late Formative Chorrera, becomes the norm in the Regional Development period (Cum-

[4] Interpretations in the works of Sánchez Montañés (1981), Gutiérrez Usillos (2002), Bouchard and Usselmann (2003), Ugalde (2009, 2011, 2018), among others, suggest this association for the Tolita/Tumaco culture. The only author who associates jaguars with the female in the Tolita/Tumaco repertoire is Uhle (1927).

mins 1994). If we believe that the images that are being produced represent a form of communication, the molds enable a much more efficient transmission of the messages thanks to mass production.

In Bahía, women are occasionally shown in a seated pose, sometimes holding a jar in one hand. However, as with Tolita and Jama Coaque, they are presented as static beings, lacking movement. In Tolita/Tumaco as well as in Bahía and Guangala (and, less frequently, in Jama Coaque), there are depictions of pregnant women as well as women carrying children of different ages, especially nursing babies. Women are shown in a larger format and are finely dressed and adorned only in instances where they are accompanied by their children or alongside their partner.

The *woman-wife* and *woman-mother* themes become central issues in the iconographical corpuses of the Regional Development period, especially in Tolita/Tumaco and Bahía. This is a topic that merits deeper examination and will be the focus of much of the remainder of the present work.

Although the Jama Coaque iconography does not completely match this pattern of associating women almost exclusively with motherhood (although there are some examples of women with one or two children, see e.g. Gutiérrez Usillos 2011, 267, fig. 116a), it still shows many of the aspects I stated before with regard to gender asymmetries. In Jama Coaque there is more variability in depictions of women, but it still pales in comparison with the range of male depictions. Women in the Jama Coaque style are depicted motionless as in the other styles, and similarly largely devoid of paraphernalia. And although some authors suggest that some depictions of women may be associated with priestly activities, they are described as taking part in domestic and family-related aspects of religiosity rather than in the public sphere. Male priests, on the other hand, are assumed to have developed the ritual activities related to subsistence, agriculture, etc. (Gutiérrez Usillos 2011).

## 3. The path towards the legitimation of asymmetries: depicting intensive motherhood and symbolically penetrating female figurines

Why and how did this radical change, that probably brought about the establishment of a patriarchal structure with males dominating public spaces and females limited to private spaces, occur in the social structure of these groups that occupied the Ecuadorian coast? The observations presented above about the iconographical corpus pushed me to consider the works of Friedrich Engels and his ideas about the family, private property, and the state, which I developed in a previous work (Ugalde 2019a). In brief, Engels (1884) associates the beginning of patriarchal structures and female oppression with an undefined moment in prehistory when the accumulation of wealth led to the establishment of monogamous couples and the nuclear family as pillars of society. One consequence, according to his theory, was that women became dependent on and subordinate to men, serving as instruments of social reproduction.

It is clear and well-known that gender relations and gender asymmetries do not operate alone but are merely two elements in the wider social network which intersects with other factors, as intersectional approaches have clearly demonstrated (Crenshaw 1993). And this is how, in my view, the development of asymmetrical gender relations should be understood; many factors intersecting, first and foremost – according to Engels – the economic one, must have prepared the framework for the change in gender relations in Ecuador's prehistory. There must have been an initial impulse, economic in nature, which led to the emergence of a social hierarchy. As will be suggested later, I believe this first impulse might be the development of metallurgy, especially the working of platinum. The emerging dominance and control over resources and services probably led to the wish also to control the people of one's own group. How this process happened is something we may never find out, but it seems possible that the figurative representation of these new ideas was one of the tools used to turn them to the *establishment*.

Anthropologists such as Eleanor Leacock (1972), Karen Sacks (1975), and Christine Gailey (1987) took up Engels' thoughts more than a century later, bolstering them with abundant ethnographic data. In the Andean region, the work of Silverblatt (1987) on the Incas is paradigmatic and based on ethnohistorical data. However, I am not aware of any archaeological studies that have examined this issue, much less so with prehistoric iconography. This is especially curious given that, in many instances, iconography is one of our main lines of evidence for understanding relations between the members of a society. It has the added advantage of being something that we can observe diachronically. This allows us to detect changes over time in these relations that are relevant to every approximation of cultural processes that are of interest to archaeologists.

Gailey (1987) observed that women's authority and status necessarily decline with the development of class and state. I will not agree that this is *necessarily* the case, but I will present here a concrete example from my own research that appears to confirm the idea, in order to demonstrate the importance of re-reading traditional interpretations and ideologically charged historiographies. There is little doubt about the fact that gender was a category used to structure relations between people in the past (Ardren 2008). But it is also important to bear in mind, as Gero (2001) reminds us, that gender variables are cultural artifacts, which is why the contexts in which they are constructed are absolutely relevant, especially for societies of the past.

On the other hand, as Scattolin has pointed out,

> Beyond questioning the distributions of material culture related to the existence of a particular stage of more or less stratified development (band, tribe, lordship or state) or finding out if a certain figure represents the hierarchical status of a certain population, it seems appropriate to ask under what conditions and on what foundations would hierarchical distinctions have been put into operation (Scattolin 2006, 58).[5]

[5] All translations from the Spanish, unless otherwise noted, are the author's.

In methodological terms, Gero (2001, 15) rightly argued more important than identifying objects and their associations is "locating gender in social and political developments, examining how gender 'works' – and is reworked – under different historical conditions, both functionally (as a way to coordinate cultural activities) and symbolically (as a system of meaning and social identity)."

My observations about the social context in coastal Ecuadorian societies – outlined above – opened my eyes to a new field that had never been questioned before in Ecuadorian archaeology. That is where the relevance of this research lies. Previous gender-focused work, instead of advancing, reinforced patriarchal views, as Becerra (2020) recently stated. A binary, patriarchal past is taken for granted, and, in my opinion, acts as a blindfold over the eyes of many scholars. As Hernando (2015, 19) pointed out, "the patriarchal order operates in such a way as to shape our subjectivity from the beginning of our lives, given that it is the logical order that governs the social system." What seems obvious to me now, but has never been obvious in previous discussions, makes it worthwhile to deepen our understanding of this case study and its possible ramifications.

In addition to the previously noted differences in activity, movement, and individuality between female and male depictions (for a deeper analysis of this topic, see Ugalde 2019a), there is a notable amount of emphasis on representations of pregnancy and motherhood in the Regional Development period. In the Bahía and Tolita/Tumaco corpuses, there are many depictions of pregnant women as well as women with children of various sizes (fig. 5). A common artifact in Tolita/Tumaco is a mold-made figurine that presents a nursing scene (fig. 6). In both cultures, there are also numerous figurines that appear to represent what we consider couples or nuclear families. For these "family portraits," women step outside their normal manner of depiction and are well-adorned, displaying their best clothes and ornaments. The women frequently hold babies in their arms, while the men are depicted carrying paraphernalia related to coca consumption.

Although we cannot be certain about the exact nature of the relationship between mothers and their children in these societies, it seems

Fig. 5. Clay figurine, Bahía Culture. Colección Nacional. Museo Antropológico y de Arte Contemporáneo (MAAC), Guayaquil (B-1-11-66). Foto: María Fernanda Ugalde.

Fig. 6. Clay figurine, Tolita/Tumaco Culture. Colección Nacional. Museo Nacional del Ecuador (MUNA), Quito (LT-21-82-70). Foto: María Fernanda Ugalde.

clear that the shift in iconography from the Formative to the Regional Development periods gives greater weight to this connection. Motherhood is presented as the main, if not the only, value attributed to female

characters. Previous imagery from the Formative Period seems to associate femininity with some sort of power that was probably magic-religious in nature, judging from the similarity of the figurines to amulets (portable format and schematic depiction with emphasis on the sexual organs, without individual characteristics). In the Regional Development images, on the other hand, women are restricted to the roles of wife and mother and the activities related to these roles. The imagery of the period naturalizes female subordination and dependency on husbands and children.

This asymmetry is further accentuated in the next period of Ecuadorian prehistory (the Integration period). Women and children disappear almost entirely from the iconographic repertoire, leaving all the space for males and their insignia of power, such as in the portraits of leaders of the Manteño culture. The only occasional depiction of women is on stone stelae where they are shown naked with their legs open, exposing their vulva. These stelae probably were on display in ceremonial spaces. The depictions on them never vary, and there can be little doubt that they do not allude to specific members of the society (as the molded clay figurines of men do), but symbolize religious principles.

It is worth delving deeper into the role of children and the dedication of women to nurturing as an exclusive characteristic of Regional Development imagery. What does this emphasis on pregnancy, nursing, and mothering imply, especially in contrast to the diversity of activities associated with males? How should we understand the dramatic change in imagery between the Formative and Regional Development periods? In particular, what are we to make of this shift to an ideal of almost complete dedication to these tasks in the historical context of understanding motherhood?

In this context, it is important to mention the "motherhood" concept still is part of ceremonial spaces at the time of the Spanish arrival, but it is by now absent from the clay sculpture repertoire. The Sámano-Jerez chronicle (probably written in 1527 or 1528), which is well-known for its description of the merchant ship that the conquistadors encountered off the Pacific coast, also includes a description of a temple with imagery relevant to our subject matter. When describing the Chiefdom of Salan-

gome, the chronicle speaks of an island (Isla de la Plata) with a "prayer house" that contained the image of a women with a child in her arms. The practitioners of this religion offered silver or gold to the image in exchange for healing favors (Porras Berrenchea 1967).

Moving beyond the evidence of pre-Hispanic iconography, the concept of *intensive mothering* proposed by sociologist Sharon Hays (1998) is relevant to this discussion, as are her reflections about motherhood as a historical construct with ideological overtones, and the usefulness of such an ideology for the patriarchal and capitalist interests of contemporary western societies. It is relevant precisely because of the historical character of the construct, which I propose does not necessarily have to be associated exclusively with capitalism, but may have much older roots in different forms of cultural expression.

As Hays (1998, 45) rightly argued, a society's shared ideas about children, upbringing, and motherhood are socially constructed and have a systematic and intangible connection with the culture and organization of the society in which they operate. She also points out how this construct becomes a trap for mothers in capitalist societies because the emphasis on childcare activities stands in direct contrast to the type of productivity that characterizes successful people in this type of society (1998, 44).

More than 20 years later, Hay's model still stands. An analysis published in 2014 puts several Spanish magazines dedicated to the topics of pregnancy, childbirth, and upbringing under the magnifying glass (Medina Bravo, Figueras Mas, and Gómez Puertas 2014). The study demonstrates how this type of media exemplify Hay's model of intensive mothering. The authors speak of a resurgence of the supposed value of the private sphere through the idealization of intense, devoted motherhood. As a corollary, this emphasis produces a feeling of inevitable guilt in light of the other demands in modern society that are impossible to fulfill (Medina Bravo, Figueras Mas, and Gómez Puertas 2014, 19–20). In this way, the modern world becomes a type of obstacle course that requires mothers to attempt to achieve multiple, impossible goals, all in the service of the traditional patriarchal culture.

## 4. Discussion: Materiality and visual media as strategies of patriarchal imposition in past and present

The most obvious problem generated by the imposition of asymmetrical relationships is that the non-privileged individuals will not want to conform to the new order. Much thought has been given in recent decades on the implications of this understanding for archaeology, and on how to take it into account when interpreting evidence from prehistoric societies (Miller and Tilley 1984). In this context, ideology plays a major role. As other authors have postulated, ideology takes concrete form in different manners that are visible in the archaeological record. Effectively, in archaeology, "we can study differential access to the material expressions of the ideological system, and how this access affected the dynamics of social power" (Castillo, DeMarais, and Earle 1996, 3).

Many effective mechanisms can successfully implement ideological strategies, and though they differ across time, similar strategies can be identified. One is mass communication through imagery. For many decades, advertising has been a form of manipulation that generates desires and presumed necessities, but also influences the ideals and ideologies of the period. Advertising, television, movies, and other media impose beauty ideals that subject women to continual stress about their appearance. As Wolf (1991) pointed out, as women became increasingly empowered via feminist movements, increasingly inflexible and demanding depictions and popular ideas of beauty undermined this trend.[6]

Products such as toys also contain ideological baggage. One of the most successful toys, thanks to its world-wide diffusion and its staunch resistance to change, is the Barbie doll, which some scholars have convincingly characterized as a toxic stereotype (Barbosa 2008). The toxicity of this stereotype is not limited to Barbie's appearance (which is of course impossible to achieve for real women), but also her lifestyle with all of its implied elements (Pearson and Mullins 1999). Barbie is problematic also because of the reductive and essentialist notion of identity

[6] For an encouraging insight into progress on this issue, from the perspective of female self-assessment itself, see Wolf 2011.

that it promotes (Magee 2005). In a major study, Pearson and Mullins (1999) review the history and evolution of Barbie from her beginning to the present day. Their investigation demonstrates that, far from supporting female emancipation, as one might assume based on superficial examination, Barbie's characteristics and changes over time serve as graphic evidence for the options of female "domestication" at different moments in time. Barbie dolls also foment asymmetrical gender relations, and impose double standards on women in both domestic and professional spaces. The evolution of Barbie from housewife in the 1970s to professional Barbie is a reflection of the prevailing ideology of the 1990s that celebrated women's multitasking capacity without removing any of their previous responsibilities.

The successful modern woman works and contributes to the finances of her household, but is not freed from her various domestic duties (Hays 1998; Gimeno 2017; Vivas 2019). She continues to be the primary caregiver for children and for elderly and sick family members. She also must maintain an overview of each household member's needs, and ensure that they are fed. She may work, but that work should not imply a great deal of mobility and be as domestic in nature as possible, with a schedule that allows her to carry out all of her other responsibilities.

A good modern example is the Netflix series "Workin' Moms." On a superficial level, the series appears to be completely liberal (for example, in the manner that it presents the openness of the protagonists towards sexual matters) and pretends to present, objectively, the problems faced by modern women who do not want to devote themselves just to motherhood, but also to continue their professional goals. But this supposed objectivity is superficial: if we look just a little deeper, we find moral baggage and severe value judgements that seek to naturalize asymmetrical gender relations related to the responsibilities of motherhood. The only "correct" option is *intensive motherhood*. This ideological burden is especially evident in one episode where the protagonist, Kate, begins a new phase of work in another city, while her husband and small child remain at home. These three months in a new city are the biggest professional opportunity of Kate's career and an important achievement to which she has long aspired. On her very first day, in the middle of an

important meeting, Kate gets a call from her husband to tell her that their child is sick but he does not yet know the diagnosis. Overcome with guilt, Kate immediately leaves the meeting and as result loses her professional opportunity. The child receives the necessary medical treatment and recovers.

Even so, Kate regrets her desire to spend time away, telling her child: "I know that I do many things for myself. I hope that you can forgive me. And I hope that *I can forgive me*." There are many implicit elements in the characters' actions and words in this episode that are representative of the show's general vision: (1) it is assumed that it is unforgivable for a woman to temporarily leave her child in her husband's care in order to pursue personal fulfillment; (2) a woman who is also a mother should not do things for herself, ever; (3) the father's actions are not questioned at all. While he is responsible for looking after his son, he calls the mother rather than himself resolving the situation, even though he knows that she is in the middle of the most important meeting of her career. Without knowing the diagnosis, he insists that she returns immediately, abandoning whatever she is doing. He is incapable of handling the situation himself, on the only occasion he is asked to, and this is considered natural.

These implicit assumptions are part of an old ideological toolkit of patriarchal manipulation and imposition. Motherhood is consistently associated with sentiments of sacrifice and self-renunciation that become tools of domestication for women. In the culture of the idealized mother (Molina 2006), there is an implicit identification of "woman" and "mother" that makes motherhood the central objective in women's lives.

As Gimeno (2017) proposed:

> The good mother is the one who is patriarchal, does not pose a danger or generate anxiety, but on the contrary, offers unconditional love. The bad mother is the anti-patriarchal, she does not submit to the rules, she does not adapt, she does not assume those characteristics that each society prescribes and her worst sin is always not loving her offspring enough or, what is the same, loving herself equally or even more (n/p).

Creating these sentiments and reinforcing them with visual resources seems to be an efficient strategy of the patriarchy. Both modern audiovisual mediums and material culture like dolls or, in the past, ceramic figurines, appear to attest to this. Another example comes from the last three decades of the past century: soap operas on television were the medium by which patriarchal stereotypes about the looks and behavior of women were disseminated. Today the same repressive power is being exercised by television series, movies, and social media.[7] Research such as Aguilar's has shown how through the cinema, principles of the prevailing patriarchal system can become naturalized, or, in her words, how "the audiovisual story powerfully shapes us, channels our dreams, shapes our feelings, feeds our emotional, symbolic, and imaginary network. It constitutes a powerful personal and social archive to draw upon to write the script of your own life" (Aguilar 2015, 27).

In this way, it is evident that, as Segato (2016, 92) said, "[…] the first lesson in power and subordination is the family theater of gender relations, but, as a structure, the relationship between their positions is replicated *ad infinitum*, and it is revisited and rehearsed in the most diverse scenes in which a differential of power and value are present." Advertising, cinema, television, toys, clay figurines, etc.; all these elements that transport messages constitute the semiotics of this theater, in which a variety of ideological impositions, including those of gender, are orchestrated and structured at all levels.

Going forward, and understanding ancient figurines as mass media loaded with ideological content and political intent, it is worth broadening the reflection towards the particularities of the iconographic repertoires that we are reviewing here. The iconography of pre-Hispanic Ecuador reveals, I suggest, a long history of objectified bodies. Not only feminine ones, but all the bodies modeled in clay, materialized in objects are, as such, subject to instrumentalization. What varies over time are the purposes of this instrumentalization.

7 See, for example, the analysis presented by Bernárdez and Moreno (2017) of the movie *Lo Imposible*, which illustrates how the female character is depicted in a way that naturalizes the suffering associated with femininity and motherhood, through a mechanism they label "the hyperbolic mother."

Weismantel and Meskell (2014) drew attention to the dangerous process of seduction that would involve understanding figurative objects in ways similar to our bodies, i.e. as images only, forgetting to analyze them as artifacts and to take into account other aspects beyond representation. In an approach they call "following the material," they make an interesting suggestion about substances (clay, liquids) related to the making and use of ancient figurines and effigies, and the contexts in which they were produced and used. In their contribution, they raise the importance of taking into account as a unit of analysis, not only materiality in terms of the production of objects (raw material), but also other materialities (which may be ephemeral) such as substances thought to be part of the functionality of objects. In the Weismantel case study (see also 2004), the reflection revolves around the liquids that probably flowed through certain types of vessels from the central Andean culture of Moche, and their possible relationship with the symbolism of the images sculpted in them about sex and reproduction, but also about the power of the ancestors.

In this same line of thought, it is interesting to question the functionality of the figurines from the pre-Hispanic era of the Ecuadorian coast as well as the relationship of this functionality to the graphic representation captured in them. For most of the figurines we are addressing in this article, their functionality is not obvious. In the case of the Valdivia figurines, this lack of clear association (from our western vision) between their materiality and a specific function has led to numerous speculations about their past use.[8] Some of the interpretations are that these artifacts could be linked to curing practices (Meggers, Evans, and Estrada 1965, 43), be cultic objects related to fertility rituals (Cummins 1994) or rites of passage in the stages of female life (Di Capua 1994), be shamanic utensils (Stahl 1986; Cummins 1992; Staller 2000), represent changing symbolic representations associated with the understanding of the feminine and the masculine (Marcos and García 1988) and their relationship with village production and social life, or served various

[8] It is worth mentioning a recent work that, without focusing on the functionality of the Valdivia figurines, reveals elements of the patriarchal bias that has marked the interpretations around them (Becerra 2020).

functions depending on the time and the characteristics of the figurine, among which the fertility symbolism and its use as a tool in healing rituals have been emphasized (García 2006, 40–46; García 2016). The alleged practice of destroying and discarding Valdivia figurines after use has been highlighted in several works, in some cases even assuming a single use prior to their disposal (Meggers, Evans, and Estrada 1965, 108; Staller 2000; see other references in García 2006, 43).

In the case of the Regional Development figurines, studies have focused primarily on the interpretation of certain aspects of the iconographic representation (Valdez 1992; Di Capua 2002; Ugalde 2011; Gutiérrez Usillos 2011, 2013; Patiño 2017), while the possible uses of the figurines, as well as their contexts of production and circulation, have not been examined in detail. This is because, in most cases, no functionality can be assumed with certainty; most of the figurines of this period are simply sculptures with no apparent additional function. Additionally, because most of the known figurines are found in museums and collections, we know little regarding their contexts of origin, which in turn limits our understanding of production, circulation, and disposal.

However, there is one important exception with regard to functionality and use: a set of musical instruments that also are figurines (Gudemos and Catalano 2009; Pinzón 2013; Zambrano 2013; Pérez de Arce 2015; Toro 2018). These artifacts have been frequently studied from a technological perspective, but the symbolic association between image and function has not been considered. Although many are zoomorphic, there is a remarkably large number of figurines in both the Tolita/Tumaco and Bahía repertoires, that are not only wind instruments (flutes, whistles, ocarinas)[9] but, curiously, also representations of females (fig. 7). In fact, many of the molded female figurines that we are discussing throughout this article also are wind instruments. They contain resonance boxes and holes in their interior that make evident their musical function and

[9] Wind instruments are very popular in the Andes, and they constitute part of the repertoire of many ensembles of ancient material culture in this region. Bone and ceramics are the preferred materials for their manufacture. Their use is mostly associated with male musicians, although a few exceptions are known. One of these exceptions is a traverse flute in contemporary northern Peru, which is played only by women (Rivera Andía 2012).

Fig. 7. Clay figurine, Bahía Culture. Colección Nacional. Museo Antropológico y de Arte Contemporáneo (MAAC), Guayaquil (GA-1-137-76). Foto: María Fernanda Ugalde.

constitute "true technical evidence of an interesting search for combinations of sounds and sound quality" (Gudemos and Catalano 2009, 196) (fig. 8). It is pertinent to ask, beyond this technological aspect, what is being signified by the fact that these societies decided to fabricate figurines that are at the same time both flutes and women? In what contexts were these female flutes/effigies manipulated for the emission of sound? What does it imply, as Weismantel and Meskell (2014) put it, that the interior of these "women" is manipulated and penetrated by substances such as air and saliva?

These feminine images are clearly being instrumentalized in the most literal sense of the word. Someone who intends to make sounds with these instruments must necessarily come into physical contact with the figurine, blow into her head and touch her belly and lower back/buttocks, as these are the locations of the holes that allow the production of

Fig. 8. Clay figurine, Bahía Culture. Colección Nacional. Museo Antropológico y de Arte Contemporáneo (MAAC), Guayaquil (B-5-9-65). Foto: María Fernanda Ugalde.

sound through the controlled passage of air. Thus, in addition to constituting "a complex organological system that, in turn, responds to a particular aesthetic conception of sound and a long technological tradition" (Gudemos 2009, 212), these figurines represent an ideology of manipulated bodies; and they carry coded information related to dependency and the desire for *power over* (*sensu* Miller and Tilley 1984, 5).

At the same time that men's heads are shown as being adorned with the most ornate headdresses, women's heads are pierced and used to introduce air. This act graphically shows how women are conceived as objects, ready to be penetrated with something (air, semen etc.) and produce what men[10] want (sounds, children etc.) from a perspective that does not consider their own will and wishes. This type of image might symbolically represent penetration as appropriation, as a show of power (*sensu* Bourdieu 2001, 19) via a form of symbolic violence. Gudemos (2009, 214) noted the association with the sound box and the stomach of the figurines, possibly alluding to female fertility.

[10] The depictions of musicians are mainly associated with male attributes. This fact speaks for the idea of a symbolization of male manipulating female and, at the same time, associates male with ceremonies and public events.

I believe that this literal manipulation might symbolize part of the political discourse of the period that tended to present a vision of women as objects. These figurines materialize this discourse with a sense of submission and dependency. Although the figurines are not real women, they are women of clay that represent the ideas, desires, and also probably the contradictions in the minds of those who conceived of them as objects, or manufactured them. As Weismantel and Meskell (2014, 239) pointed out, "whenever people made figurines and effigies and put them into play within circuits of use, exchange, destruction or deposition, they created substantive agents with the potential to act upon the world in both intentional and unpredictable ways." Someone decided to *make* passive, static, manipulable, penetrable women, apparently free of a will of their own, with a social life basically limited to motherhood. This intentionality must be associated with a political agenda, even more so if these images were mass produced with molds (see above). Although we do not know the exact contexts in which these figurines were used, it is at least somewhat probable that they were part of community activities related to music and dance. In this way, the message of manipulation was transmitted, according to my proposed reading, in public spaces ripe for mass diffusion.

It becomes obvious that the solutions for maintaining the status quo of the patriarchal structure are more or less similar over time, although they vary in the means of propagation, which are dependent on the technology of the moment. But the background is, in all cases, the same: ideological manipulation. Ceramic figurines, toys, television, advertising, cinema, Netflix series: they all have as their common denominator the objective of naturalizing, through its materialization, an ideal about women: a patriarchal ideal. Just as not all women submit to this ideal today, we also do not know if they did in the past (for a discussion of this, and its possible evidence in the material culture, see Ugalde 2019a). The way in which women have reacted to oppression at different historical moments, and how they have resisted to dependency on men has varied. But the patriarchal strategy, even with changing realities depending on times and contexts, probably always had a central axis: manipulation through the association of motherhood with the feeling of sacrifice and

self-renunciation as a natural fact. The symbolic trashing (*sensu* Silva 2007) of *bad mothers*[11] (including those who think of themselves in this way) is a constant in patriarchal societies, and efficiently controls any attempt at autonomy. Dependency, through guilt, is guaranteed.

The whole apparatus, in short, tends to establish as true, universal and timeless, an order that responds to the interests of only part of society. It is supported by mass media, in various forms over time but always effective as a medium of transmission. The audiovisual narrative, which is the most prevalent in our own era, disguises itself as reality, although it, too, is merely another reworking of the patriarchal ideal. It recreates the world from a specific point of view and selects which aspects to highlight and which to leave out (Aguilar 2015, 29–30), manufacturing a neutral and naturalized vision, with the contradiction that this implies. In the entire history of cinematography, the great protagonists have been and are male characters, leaving females in supporting roles, thus enlarging the masculine universe (Aguilar 2015, 37, 43) and making it the center and axis of the action and interest. In this way, the narrative contributes, once more, to reinforcing the idea of the patriarchal order as the natural ordering principle of the world and relationships, while women continue to be "objectified and dismembered by the eye of the media lens" (Segato 2016, 9). As Bourdieu has clearly stated,

> The strength of the masculine order is seen in the fact that it dispenses with justification: the androcentric vision imposes itself as neutral and has no need to spell itself out in discourses aimed at legitimizing it. The social order functions as an immense symbolic machine tending to ratify the masculine domination on which it is founded (Bourdieu 2001, 9).

11 Silva develops the concept around different forms of discrimination and isolation, which, for different reasons, degrade the perception of certain women and closes their options for social participation. In speaking of symbolic trashing in relation to motherhood, Silva (2007, 82–87) refers to the frequent cases of young female rape victims, who, in addition to the aggression suffered, also suffer sanctions (social and legal) if they attempt to abort fetuses that are a product of rape. I propose to extend the concept to a subtler, but at the same time more general, sanction, one which, even though it does not necessarily have legal consequences, threatens the well-being of non-normative mothers who do not conform to intensive mothering as expected.

## 5. Conclusion: Towards a de-colonial non-essentialist reading of the past(s)

As I have demonstrated in this paper, the iconography of pre-Hispanic coastal Ecuador is very useful for approaching many concepts about people in ancient times and the relationships between them. The specific ways of representing human beings that the figures – in their different styles from different periods – document probably reflects the culturally contingent embodiment concepts of each culture.

Viewing and comparing the iconographic material in a diachronic sense shows dramatic changes in the principles of embodiment that guided the production of the figurines. These changes occur between the end of the Formative and the beginning of the Regional Development Period and primarily involve the dress and adornment of female figurines, as well as the absence or presence of male figurines.

In summary, the transformations (from a corpus of naked, unadorned, static females to a myriad of actors, including extremely adorned and active males) in the iconography seem to express the means of imposing a new order, a structural order traversed by a gender hierarchy. Because of our own bias, we can only see the rules that pertain to the binary; but it is perfectly possible that there are more rules and codes that pertain to gender that we are not able to see at the moment. But, as I have attempted to show, a hierarchy between male and female persons is very evident.

The different interpretations of the Formative figurines largely agree that they reflect a religious ideology. The characteristics of the figurines, all so uniform and lacking in individuality, and almost all female, do not suggest that they were conceived with the aim of depicting daily life, but rather to emphasize beliefs. The fact that most of the excavated figurines show traces of having been partially destroyed, possibly in order to neutralize their spiritual power (Stahl 1986; Staller 2000), supports this argument. On the other hand, the ideology embodied in the Regional Development figures seems to be normative and controlling, an ideology of body politics. Clothing and the proliferation of ornaments are elements of this materialized ideology.

What we should inquire into and examine, on the other hand, is the extent to which what we see materialized in the sculpted clay bodies affected the daily lives of people, in their freedoms and their decision-making. To what extent did these materialized ideologies in the figurines change the conceptions of people and their way of relating, their duties and their rights? To what extent are these figurines a reflection of the institutionalization of a repressive power that affected everyday life with the imposition of new norms? More archaeological excavations, interdisciplinary work and reflections are necessary to answer these unknowns.

In any case, the data presented in this article underscores the possibility of gender hierarchy being not an exclusive phenomenon of state-level societies or a colonial imposition. Undoubtedly, colonization made life harder for most people in the Americas, especially for women. But, as others have suggested, women basically passed from one patriarchy to another; even women who, as members of an elite, had privileges – such as access to owning land, for example – that others did not (Mannarelli 2018, 28). It is well worth carrying out further analyses, because those that have been done, even if they were very localized micro-analyses,[12] came up with similar concepts in terms of a hierarchical gender order for pre-Hispanic societies. There also continues to be only a small number of groundbreaking works that discuss traditional readings of ancient iconographies and call attention to the way these have been affected by a patriarchal bias (Scattolin 2006; Mendoza 2010; Ugalde 2017, 2019a; Becerra 2020). This is another research direction that deserves consideration. Finally, it is important to mention the research that proposes a deeper analysis of iconographies and other archaeological elements that show how, in some spaces in the pre-colonial world, women played a more important role than traditionally assumed, and emphasizing the conceptualization of power from a feminist perspective (Brumfiel 1991; Gero 1999).

[12] See, for example, the work of Scattolin (2003, 2006), who, through iconographic analyzes of archaeological objects in the Argentine Northwest, has highlighted the scant interest of archaeologists to examine details about the role of the women in pre-Hispanic societies, such as, and above all, the discussion of the relations of inequality and observable dominance in the archaeological record.

The objective, then, is to contribute to decolonizing the discourses, with better and more informed knowledge gained by internal analysis of pre-colonial culture(s). While I am in full agreement with the decolonizing aims of many other scholars who offered valuable insights about the flaws and pitfalls inherent in essentializing from western perspectives, and in assuming that these are universal and timeless; it is just as important to recognize certain essentializing tendencies in de-colonial and post-colonial studies that, looked at from the other side, can lead us to the very same pitfalls. Without knowing the character and specific characteristics of each past society in detail, we cannot assume that they must naturally have been contrary in all respects to what characterized the colonial societies that were imposed on them. Concepts such as the pre-colonial world-village with a "low-impact patriarchy" (Segato 2016) would be strengthened if an analysis of concrete examples of pre-colonial discourses, based on archaeological evidence, were to show that it is likely to include relations of asymmetry and dominance.

In the specific case of pre-Hispanic societies on the Ecuadorian coast, and probably also the case of other pre-Hispanic groups in the Americas (Scattolin 2014, 2016; Mannarelli 2018), gender hierarchies were probably not unknown. But neither did they constitute a permanent order. The archaeological sources are the only ones that can offer clues about this type of detail; more so if we can compare them in a diachronic perspective.

Modern views of the study of history have understood the potential of seeing every place as an archive (Turkel 2006), and incorporated all kinds of spaces as valid sources of information with possible cultural contents to decipher in their context. In the same way it is necessary to search the archives for information about contexts prior to the colonial period. This can only be understood in the materialities of those contexts. The pre-colonial archives include, among others, the clay figurines produced by the societies of the Ecuadorian coast to transmit their messages. They let us see the priorities in the messages at different times, and the possible causes of their changes over time. If we contrast them with other archaeological archives (architecture, raw materials, skeletal remains, ecofacts of various types, etc.), these archives will become

increasingly decipherable. All these aspects are part of the materialization of ideologies (*sensu* Castillo DeMarais, and Earle 1996); in this case a patriarchal ideology that appears to have sought to establish itself in the imaginations of the people on the cusp between the Formative and the Regional Development on the Ecuadorian coast. Regardless of whether we call this a patriarchal system or not (or whether we criticize the terminology as being of western origin; *sensu* Oyewumi 2000), the materialized human bodies in clay, as we have seen here, seek to establish norms and values, and to influence people's behavior and way of life around a specific ideology that involves asymmetrical gender relations.

What I said in the previous paragraphs does not negate the de-colonial perspective, which is indispensable today for the honest examination of any non-western cultural manifestation. On the contrary, I believe that the archaeological perspective can contribute to reinforcing the de-colonial one by creating a better understanding of the cultures of each space and their temporal peculiarities. This exercise not only allows a more in-depth approach to the past; it also constitutes a challenge for the decolonizing process itself, in the sense that it also invites a decolonization of the idea of media. These are usually understood from a western perspective as written media for "developed" cultures, and usually understood as restricted to oral traditions for pre-colonial spaces. The fact that some non-western cultures did not use writing does not mean that they did not develop, in diverse and sophisticated ways, non-verbal forms of communication and the transmission of messages through material means (see, for example, Tilley 1991). Being open to viewing new materialities as possible carriers of messages at the same time opens up the possibility of a more structural delving into past forms of communication and their impact. Images are mass media, and the political groups on the Ecuadorian coast in pre-Hispanic times knew very well how to use them.

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Jägerstraße 47
13595 Berlin

Tel.: 00 49 30 68 97 72 33
Fax: 00 49 30 91 60 77 74
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The longest tradition of figurine production in the Americas is found on the Ecuadorian coast, beginning with the Valdivia culture around 3500 BC and ending with the arrival of Spanish conquistadors, or possibly even later. In this article, figurines from different cultures and time periods in this tradition are analyzed with an emphasis on body politics, presenting the author's reflections about how these artifacts embody ancient relations between people, especially with regard to gender asymmetries. It also discusses at some length the question of how contemporary perspectives for analyzing ancient materials are often influenced by western, patriarchal, ideology-laden interpretations. Although the corpus of figurines analyzed in this research is well known, prior to this study it has not been considered from the perspective of gender asymmetries, even though it is an excellent source of data for such analyses, especially in a diachronic perspective. The study argues that the figurine traditions of particular cultures implicitly emphasize some ideals, such as naturalizing the idea of females depending on males. The author argues that the frequent representations of female individuals associated with pregnancy and childcare can be seen as a political agenda designed to idealize the roles of mother and wife for women, and to limit the influence of female individuals in public activities connected to power and authority.

## THE AUTHOR

María Fernanda Ugalde (Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador) is an Ecuadorian archaeologist. She holds an M.A. and a PhD from Freie Universität in Berlin, with a specialization on Ancient American Cultures. She has worked on many topics and time periods. In recent years her focus lay, amongst others, on gender archaeology, body politics, and iconographic studies. She is the (co-)author of four books, including her PhD dissertation which was published in Germany in the series Forschungen zur Archäologie Außereuropäischer Kulturen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts. Her papers have been published in several countries.