Kayuko Naj Tunich  
Staging area – Looter’s pit salvage  
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Introduction  
Villagers from Santa Cruz village, Toledo, southern Belize, reported looting activity at the foot of the cliff face that incorporates the ancient cave site, Kayuko Naj Tunich, excavated by Dr Holley Moyes in 2007 (Figure 1). A small mound group, named Kayuko Mound Group, is located close by in a naturally levelled area in the steep hillside leading up to the cliff face. The mound group was excavated in 2009 - 2010 by Dr Moyes. The reports alluded to a small looted pit in a level area at the foot of the cliff face, which included a large concentration of ceramics. The looting event occurred sometime between August 2011 and May 2012.

Figure 1 – Regional map

From 13-15 May 2012 Moyes returned to Kayuko Mound Group to complete site mapping. The looted area was visited during the mapping project to assess the reports and to decide on possible salvage operations. A large volume of ceramic sherds were discovered and a salvage operation undertaken to recover cultural material and contextual data (Figure 2).
Site Description

The cave complex is located in an east-west running karstic ridge, 2.3km south of the site core of Uxbenka (Figure 1), an ancient Maya urban center with occupation dating from the Late Preclassic through the Terminal Classic. The looted area is located in a level area at the foot of a vertical limestone cliff face known locally as Suk Witz “white mountain”, which is a prominent landmark on the local landscape (Figure 3). Kayuko Naj Tunich, a dry cave located in the cliff face, is reached by a difficult ascent 20m above the foot of the cliff face. At the foot of the cliff face is an area that functions as a pathway 2-3m wide which follows the base of the cliff (Figure 4). The path generally follows a slope of between 20-29° rising from east to west, with the looted area the only level section along the rock face. The slope away from the cliff face to the north drops dramatically with a single pathway providing a more gradual slope downhill. Radiocarbon dating of the cave and ceramic analysis documents use of the cave from the Late Preclassic to the end of the Early Classic. Down slope, a naturally levelled area in the hillside is the location of Kayuko Mound Group, a small group of mounds that are contemporaneous with utilization of the cave.

Figure 3 – Suk Witz, the location of Kayuko Naj Tunich
During the 2007 excavation of the cave, the looted area was discussed as a potential staging area for ancient cave activities as it provided the only flat area in close proximity to the cave. The archaeological project actually utilised the area as a staging area for research in the cave; however, no artifacts were encountered in the area during excavation of the cave.

**Figure 4 – Plan of the base of the cliff face, showing the location of the looter’s pit**

Methods

The looted area was salvaged to recover artifacts and gain any possible information on the deposition context. The pit was cleaned and mapped to define the extent of the looted area and locate the origin of the re-deposited artifacts. All artifacts were recovered from disturbed context and as such were bagged by material class with no further spatial or contextual separation. Dr Laura Kosakowsky performed the analysis of the recovered ceramic sherds.

Results

The looter’s pit extends 1.36m from the cliff face, terminating in a cut bank boundary to the northwest (Figure 5). The west end of the pit is naturally bounded by a large limestone boulder and stretches 2.3m to the east. The pit slopes back to ground level to the east where it extends 1.70m from the cliff face. The pit is focused in the southwest where it reaches a depth of 58cm. What is interpreted as a small exploratory hole with a 15cm diameter is dug to 83cm in the south of the pit (Figure 6). The surrounding matrix of the exploratory hole appears to be sterile, which would explain why the exploration was abandoned.
The looter’s separated artifacts from the excavated matrix, depositing the artifacts primarily on the north bank, with a scatter placed on the rock to the west (Figure 2). The back dirt was heaped to the east. Disturbed matrix and artifacts were also present in the pit. Hand sorting through the back dirt found very few artifacts. The back dirt and disturbed matrix in the pit contained a range of pebbles, cobbles and small boulders. Below a thin humic layer the subsurface matrix consists of loosely packed soil with a few pebble inclusions. The undisturbed soil can easily be dug with hand alone. No artifacts can be seen in the profile or in the undisturbed floor. The looters appear to have disturbed the entire archaeological deposit, extending into the surrounding sterile matrix.
Ceramics dominate the artifact assemblage. A single chert core and a sample of shells complete the artifact assemblage. The shells are primarily from land snails, with a few jute shells also present. A total of 1735 sherds (see Table 1), weighing 33050 gms was recovered from the looters pit. The material includes a small number (n=3 or <1%) of Terminal Preclassic sherds dating to between AD100/150 to 250 and Early Classic sherds (n=22 or 1%) dating to between AD 250 and 600/650. While some material is of unknown date (n=22 or 1%), the vast majority of the pottery (n=1688 or 97%) is Late Classic through Terminal Classic (AD 600/650-900/1000), though much of it appears to represent early to late Late Classic (AD 600/650-830/850). The absence of very large jar rims of the Cambio Unslipped Group (Cambio Unslipped and Encanto Striated) and the presence of relatively numerous polychrome sherds (n=101, or 6%) would confirm a Tepeu 2 date for this deposit, rather than fully into the Terminal Classic (Tepeu 3).

The Late Classic ceramics are typical of peripheral Tepeu Sphere material, first defined at the site of Uaxactún (Smith and Gifford 1966) and evidenced by the presence of ceramics of the Saxche and Palmar Orange Polychrome Groups, Infierno and Achote Black Groups, Tinaja (and Subin)/Nanzal Red Groups, and numerous unslipped sherds of the Cambio Unslipped and Encanto Striated types. In fact 58% (n=1011) of the pottery is from unslipped and unslipped/striated jars. There are also a large number of Pedregal Modeled Incensarios (n=161 or 9%). There is no evidence of types typical of the Belize Valley in this sample (i.e. Belize Red, Mt. Maloney Black, etc.) (See Gifford 1976.) There is also no unit stamped pottery (Remate Red at Lubaantun) linking this material directly to the south. (See Hammond 1975.)

Discussion

Despite the disturbances a number of inferences can be made to refine the archaeological context of the deposit. The original location of the artifacts can be delimited to an area approximately 1.3 x 2.3 and to a depth of 0.54m. The actual boundary of the cluster would be smaller than this as the looters explored into sterile soil to ensure all artifacts were found. The deposit is also confirmed as subsurface in the modern landscape as no sherds were encountered on the surface during previous excavations at Kayuko Naj Tunich cave, further delimiting the boundaries of the deposit. The volume of ceramics in the delimited area provides a high density deposit. The deepest portion of the pit, including the exploratory hole, is in the south west, close to the cliff face, suggesting that this was the locus for the concentration of artifacts. The lack of complete vessels confirms that broken sherds were deposited at the location and possibly stacked against the cliff wall.

The location and nature of the deposit, with a high density of ceramic sherds at the foot of a cave, in the only level area in the immediate landscape implies that the location was an area for ritual offering to cave dwelling forces. Broken ceramic sherds are frequently found stacked close to cave walls in the interior of caves. The looted deposit outside Kayuko Naj Tunich is an offering associated with mountains and caves and therefore may follow similar ceremonial practices as cave ritual.

Ceramic analysis places the bulk of the deposit in the Late Classic (Tepeu 2). The low frequency of Preclassic or Early Classic sherds implies the area was not utilised for offerings until the Late Classic. The lack of distinctive Terminal Classic markers indicates the area was no longer utilised by this time period. There is some disagreement about both the description and chronological placement of the aforementioned ceramic groups in the Late Classic. While Saxche Orange Polychrome was originally placed in Tepeu 1 by Smith and Gifford (1966) and Palmar Orange Polychrome in Tepeu 2, Sabloff (1975) felt that he could not differentiate between the two and combined them as one. At Tikal (Culbert 1993) followed Smith and Gifford (1966) in placing the Saxche Group in Tepeu 1 and the Palmar Group, including Zacatel Cream Polychrome (differentiated on the basis of a surface preparation of cream below the orange and finer line decorations) in Tepeu 2.

Similarly, Forsyth (1989) outlines the disagreement over the identification of Subin Red (as a type based on vessel form by Adams (1971) at Altar de Sacrificios), Nanzal Red (established as a Tepeu 2 type by Smith and Gifford (1966) at Uaxactún), and Tinaja Red (established as a Tepeu 3
type by Smith and Gifford (1966) at Uaxactún). In fact Forsyth (1989) feels that the Late Classic Reds are difficult to separate and instead utilizes Tinaja Red: Nanzal Variety for the Late Classic monochrome red material in the El Mirador region that lacks the higher polish that characterizes the original description of the Tinaja Group.

Similarly, the original identification of Infierno Black was as a Tepeu 2 Group at Uaxactún and Achote Black as a Tepeu 3 marker (Smith and Gifford 1966). Forsyth has chosen to group them together as Infierno at El Mirador, and while there are some vessel form and decoration differences between the two groups, in the absence of numerous rims or decorated body pottery it is difficult to separate them based only body sherds.

There is a relatively high frequency of Pedregal Modeled Incensarios (9%), a type identified at Uaxactún by Smith and Gifford (1966) as beginning in Tepeu 1 and 2 and continuing into the Terminal Classic (Tepeu 3). Unslipped appliqué modeled effigy censers of the Pedregal Modeled type have been identified throughout Maya lowland sites of the Petén for example at Uaxactún (Smith 1955; Smith and Gifford 1966), the Pasión River drainage (Adams 1971: Figure 106; Sabloff 1975: Figures 217-225) and also throughout Belize in both the north and the south and the Belize Valley (Ball and Taschek 2007: 461-3). Although this sample is from a looter’s pit its composition appears to be representative of fairly typical household use and activities, as well as ritual paraphernalia evidenced by the presence of appliquéd modeled incensarios.

When considered in context, especially in respect of chronology, the deposit is intriguing. Radiocarbon and ceramic dates from Kayuko Naj Tunich cave and Kayuko Mound Group place their use between the Late Terminal Classic and the end of the Early Classic. As such, the use of the staging area for offerings began after the abandonment of the formal structures and space of the cave and mound group. Although there is no evidence of re-entry to the cave, the Late Classic deposit at the foot of the cliff implies the cave was an important aspect of the ritual landscape that required offerings to appease cave dwelling forces and the mountains that house them.

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