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Learning patterns, potter interaction and ceramic style among the Luo of Kenya

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Abstract

One aspect of an ethno-archaeological study of the pottery system of the Luo people of Kenya is examined. It was discovered that ceramic 'micro-styles', distinctive combinations of decorative, formal and technological features characteristic of the different potter communities in a 3000 km^2 region of western Kenya, are the product of local traditions of manufacture perpetuated by women potters recruited from outside the communities as a result of a patrilocal post-marital residence system. An analysis of the interplay of a mother-in-law/daughter-in-law learning pattern, strong pressures for post-marital re-socialization, and processes of potter interaction in the generation of ceramic styles is undertaken and some implications for archaeological attempts to use ceramic patterning to uncover prehistoric social organization are discussed.

Résumé

L'article examine un aspect d'une étude ethno-archéologique du système céramique du peuple Luo de Kenya. On a trouvé que des 'micro-styles' céramiques, des combinaisons distinctives de traits décoratifs, formels et technologiques qui caractérisent les différentes communautés de potières dans une région de 3000 kilomètres carrés au Kenya occidental, sont le produit de traditions locales de fabrication. Ces traditions sont perpétuées par des potières recrutées hors des communautés à cause d'un système de résidence patrilocale après le mariage. L'auteur entreprend une analyse de l'interaction entre trois éléments dans la formation des styles céramiques: une tendance d'enseignement des méthodes de fabrication à belle-fille par belle-mère, des pressions intensives vers une 'resocialisation' après le mariage, et des processus d'interaction entre potières. Elle discute quelques implications pour les archéologues qui essaient d'utiliser la structuration de la céramique afin de découvrir l'organisation sociale préhistorique.

Introduction

An understanding of the articulation of material and non-material aspects of culture is of crucial importance to archaeologists because material remains are the foundation for all

archaeological inference about the cultural behaviour of past societies. To an overwhelming extent, the search for patterns of association among the attributes and contexts of artefacts has directed the focus of archaeological analysis. However, despite a continually improving adeptness at recognizing and describing material culture patterning in the archaeological record, the socio-cultural interpretation of such patterns has remained extremely problematic. In the absence, until very recently, of studies designed to investigate systematically the complex relationship of material culture to its social context in living societies, archaeologists have had to rely for their interpretations on untested assumptions about the social processes behind material patterns.

Pottery is a material culture medium which has commanded considerable archaeological attention, due largely to its durability, its nearly ubiquitous presence in the later archaeological record, and its potential for decorative and formal elaboration, rather than to any inherent social or economic importance in the societies which produced it. The traditional archaeological use of pottery, to define 'cultures', place them in chronological sequences and trace interactions between them, was based upon untested (and often unvoiced) assumptions about the relationship of ceramic styles to ethnic identity. During the 1960s, a growing awareness of the importance of intra-cultural variation (Binford 1965) and the polythetic structure of cultures (Clarke 1968) demonstrated that such interpretations were untenable in the absence of some more fundamental understanding of the socio-cultural factors responsible for material culture patterning. This was accompanied by a good deal of optimism about the possibility of using studies of fine-scale variation in artefact assemblages to uncover aspects of social organization and cultural behaviour in prehistoric communities. However, innovative attempts to use ceramics to this end (Deetz 1965; Longacre 1970; Hill 1970; Whallon 1968) were based upon equally untested assumptions suggested by analogies derived from ethnographic reports. A growing discomfort about the validity of such interpretations (e.g. Allen and Richardson 1971) and about our ignorance of this crucial and complex matter in general has fostered a number of recent attempts to study the problem systematically in ethnographic situations where the social context of pottery manufacture and use may inform us about the social and cultural implications of patterns in material culture (see Kramer 1985).

This paper briefly treats one aspect of an ethnoarchaeological study of the pottery system of the Luo people of western Kenya. Specifically, it seeks to demonstrate the importance of post-marital learning patterns and socialization processes, and aspects of potter interaction, in the development of ceramic micro-styles. The research was carried out from April 1980 to December 1982, with two earlier pilot studies of six weeks each in 1978 and 1979. The focus was regional in scope (concentrating on a core area of approximately 3000 km^2 comprising the Siaya District of Nyanza Province and bordering areas), but with locally intensive study of several potter communities. This was augmented by comparative survey studies in South Nyanza and Kisumu Districts. (Herbich 1981 provides a brief description of the methodology.)

The potters

The Luo are a Nilotic speaking people inhabiting the region surrounding the Winam Gulf of Lake Victoria. The settlement pattern is characterized by independent homesteads

dispersed over some 10,000 km^2 of tribal territory, with a relatively high population density. The typical homestead is an enclosed compound occupied by a polygamous, extended family, with each wife and her children composing a separate household.

Land is corporately owned by exogamous, segmentary, patrilineal descent groups with strong territorial correlations which were also the basis of the traditional political structure (Southall 1952). The Luo as a whole had no central authority, but were divided into a number of groups composed of allied lineages sometimes called 'tribes' (Evans-Pritchard 1949) or 'sub-tribes' (Whisson 1964), with varying degrees of political centralization (cf. Ogot 1963, Whisson 1964). Current administrative boundaries are based on the configuration of Luo subgroups as they had evolved at the beginning of colonial rule.

The traditional economy is based on small-scale agriculture, cattle-herding and fishing. Cash-cropping is of minor significance except around Kisumu town and in a few areas of South Nyanza. A network of 'peripheral' periodic markets (Bohannan and Dalton 1962) has developed since the beginning of this century out of sporadic pre-colonial occurrences of famine markets (Dietler 1986). These provide an institution for social congregation, as well as a locus for the exchange of local crafts and foodstuffs, imported clothing and other goods.

Luo pottery is a thriving traditional craft produced for domestic, not tourist, needs. It is a ubiquitous feature of daily life in a Luo homestead, serving a wide variety of household and ceremonial functions.

Only women, and only a small number of women (less than 1% of the population) make pots in Luo society. While in this sense they are specialists, they are not full-time specialists, as none is able to live solely from the earnings derived from her craft. Potters share all of the domestic and agricultural duties of other Luo women. They have no workshops or other specialized facilities. Potting is done as part of the normal domestic routine, usually under the shady verandah of the house which serves as the work space for a variety of other tasks.

Most pottery is distributed through the markets, although buying directly from the homes of potters is also common in some areas (Herbich 1986). Potters are the primary sellers of their wares at markets, although in a few areas a number of inter-market traders purchase pots and transport them for resale to areas outside the normal catchment zone of markets served by potters.

Potters are not evenly distributed throughout Luo territory; they tend to live in homesteads clustered around clay sources. Because of the networks of interaction among the potters in these clusters, I refer to them as 'communities', although this does not in any sense imply that they live in bounded groups separated from non-potters. The composition of these communities does tend to have a rough correlation with lineage affiliation of the husbands, but this is due simply to the strong territorial aspect of Luo patrilineages which ensures that homesteads in a given neighbourhood will tend to be occupied by related families. In the region which formed the core area of my study, there were 27 major clay sources, each with one or more communities of potters centred around it.

Pottery style and micro-styles

The Luo produce and use a varied repertoire of pots. Over the whole tribal area, 13 different pot forms are made (excluding two forms made solely for trade to the neighbouring Kisii and a range of non-traditional forms based on imported European models made in small

quantities by two groups of potters). However, each region within this area uses a slightly different, but overlapping, range of seven to nine of these forms to serve a roughly identical set of functions (Herbich and Dietler in press). In other words, in no one region will all 13 forms be found. In fact, only two forms are universally present in all areas, and these two are not unique to the Luo (Herbich 1986).

Correlations of form, function and local taxonomies are complex, and cannot be discussed in any detail here (see Herbich and Dietler in press). Suffice it to say that there are regional differences in taxonomic concepts and that names of pots derive from variable formal and functional considerations, such that the same form may have different functions, the same function may be served by different forms, and names may vary in respect to all these features.

Despite certain overall similarities, the products of different potter communities can be clearly distinguished on the basis of characteristic combinations of features. These include *decorative aspects* (i.e. both motifs and the organization of the decorative field), *aspects of form* (such as rim profiles, neck heights and height/width proportions), and *technological aspects* (such as clay and temper inclusions, and details of workmanship). These patterns of associated decorative, formal and technological aspects characteristic of the different potter communities constitute what are here called 'micro-styles'.

Generally, although one aspect alone may serve to distinguish between the work of two given communities, no single aspect will be sufficient to differentiate among all the communities; the micro-styles are polythetic sets. Also, the particular configurations of variables which identify the work of a given community vary according to the vessel form category being considered. In other words, one ought not to expect the same design scheme or decorative motifs to be characteristic of all vessel forms from the same community; each form has its own pattern.

These micro-styles have more than an abstract analytical reality and, while the description of the criteria used to define them may sound complex, in fact it merely formalizes a process of differentiation which is intuitively obvious to Luo potters. People make judgements of stylistic discrimination on the basis of a sort of intuitive multi-variate analysis, rather than focussing on isolated attributes, such as decorative motifs, as is common in archaeology. Luo potters are clearly attuned to the combinations of variables which distinguish the work of their community from that of others; and it is not difficult for a sensitive outsider to learn quickly to perceive these stylistic nuances.

This can perhaps most easily be illustrated in a paper of this brevity by examining the range of stylistic variability produced in one of the 13 vessel forms by a few selected potter communities. The vessel form seen in Figures 1 and 2 is used most commonly for water storage and cooling in the home, but in some areas also for brewing beer. It is called *dapi*, *mbiru* or *nyambiru* according to the region. It is, in the areas mentioned here, most commonly decorated with burnished red ochre paint; and was chosen as an example because, although formal and technological differences are important as well, it is usually subject to a considerable amount of decorative elaboration, which makes stylistic differences easier to convey graphically than with some other forms.

Figure 1 and Figure 2:1 are schematic representations of the most commonly employed decorative arrangements from one potter community located near Ng'iya market in Siaya District. The outline form used in the sketches is typical in the sense that it represents a mean

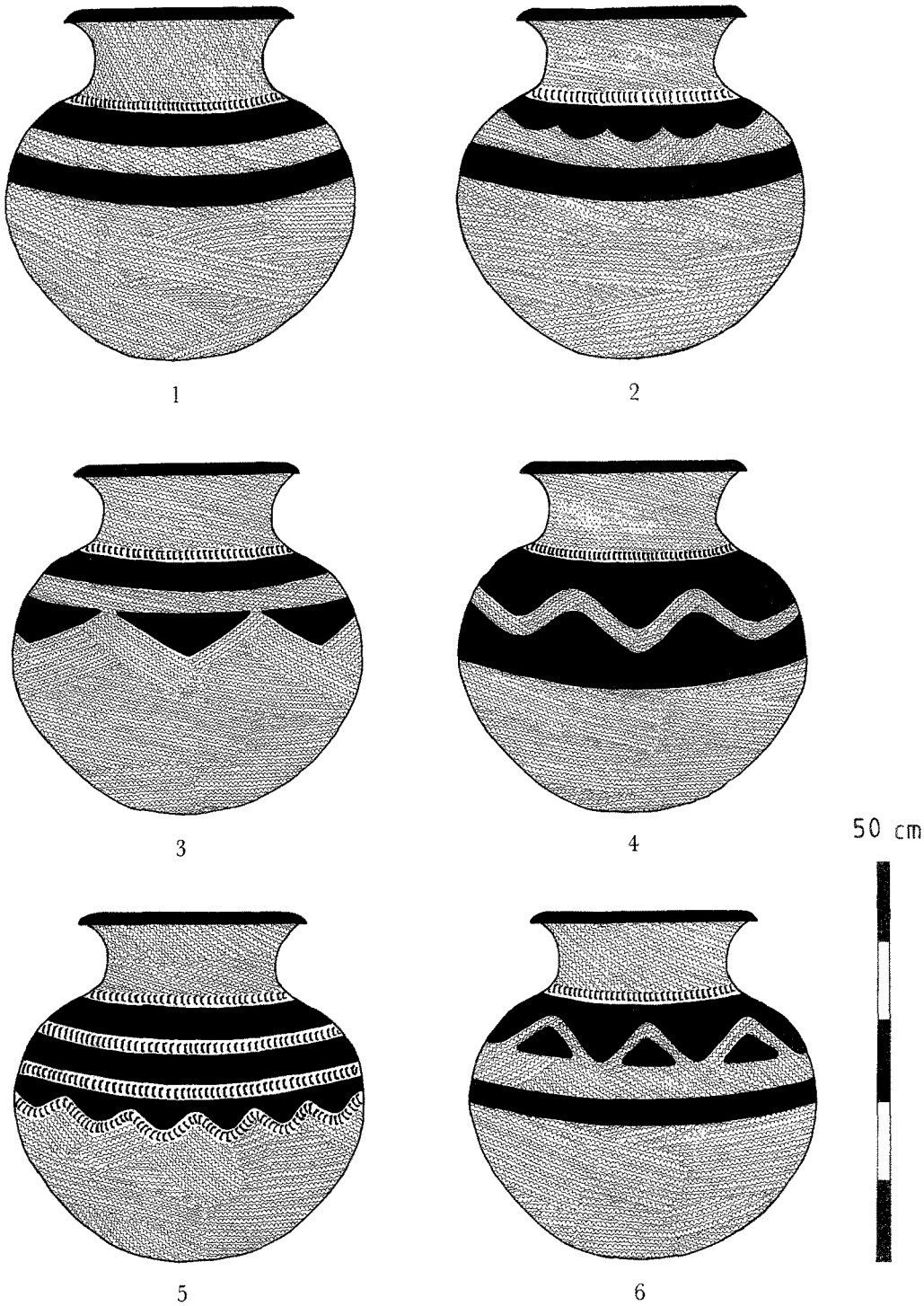

Figure 1 Range of most common decorations on water-storage pots produced by a community of potters near Ng'iya market, Siaya District. (Solid black indicates burnished ochre paint.)

around which there is a small degree of variation. A horizontal band of reed impressions is almost always present at the base of the neck, and the neck and most of the body are covered with a braided grass or nylon cord roulette decoration. Most decorative variation is manifest in the number and form of horizontal bands of burnished ochre paint applied to the body. Two bands is by far the most common pattern, but pots with one or three bands also occur. The first such band is found invariably just below the band of reed impressions at the base of the neck, and the second further down the body, but rarely lower than just below the midpoint. The most frequent arrangement is two simple straight bands. However, a large number of pots have bands composed of scalloped, lobed, or other (sometimes detached) motifs, often in combination with a straight band. What cannot be seen from the drawings is that all of these are made from the same clay, which fires a distinctive bright orange-red colour, and that all have temper made from crushed sherds of old pots—a technique found only around Ng'iya Market.

Figure 2:2–6 shows a sample of form and decoration combinations characteristic of a few other potter communities. It should be remembered that each of these communities has a range of variation comparable with that indicated for the community near Ng'iya; they are represented here by single examples only for the sake of simplifying the comparison (Herbich in prep.). The water storage pots of Masiro (Fig. 2:4) tend to have a large ochre band with reserved 'windows' filled with incised decoration, incised geometric motifs on the neck, and often an appliqué 'ledge' around the base of the neck. Akala pots of this type (Fig. 2:2) have a horizontal band of incised geometric motifs between two horizontal ochre bands on the upper half of the body. Also common are a band of reed impressions at the base of the neck and incised geometric motifs on the smooth (unrouletted), very straight neck. The Aram micro-style (Fig. 2:5) is characterized by water pots with a more smoothly curving profile, without any clear demarcation between the body and neck. Decoration is usually confined to a single wide ochre band on the upper body set just below a horizontal band of incised semi-circular motifs, and rolled-and-twisted cord roulette, either alone or in combination with braided cord roulette (the former on the underside of the pots). Usenge potters (Fig. 2:6) use corn-cob rouletting (employing a stripped, dried cob), often in combination with rolled-and-twisted cord rouletting on the upper body; and their water pots have a high, usually undecorated, neck and a flattened sloping shoulder. Decoration generally consists of a low-slung horizontal ochre band, and frequently horizontal bands of reed impressions at the base of the neck and bordering the ochre band(s). Water pots produced by Tingare potters (Fig. 2:3) have equi-distant horizontal incised lines on a cylindrical neck, a single ochre band beginning just under the neck and a band of incised geometric motifs just under the ochre band. As with most areas except Aram and Usenge, only braided grass or nylon cord roulette is used here. All these examples have in common ochre-decorated rims.

Although obviously sketchy and far from exhaustive, these few descriptions should be sufficient to convey at least a feeling for the nature of the micro-styles. More important than their description, however, is an understanding of the reasons for their existence. They are the product of local traditions of manufacture which are conditioned by patterns of learning and the social context of the potter in Luo society.

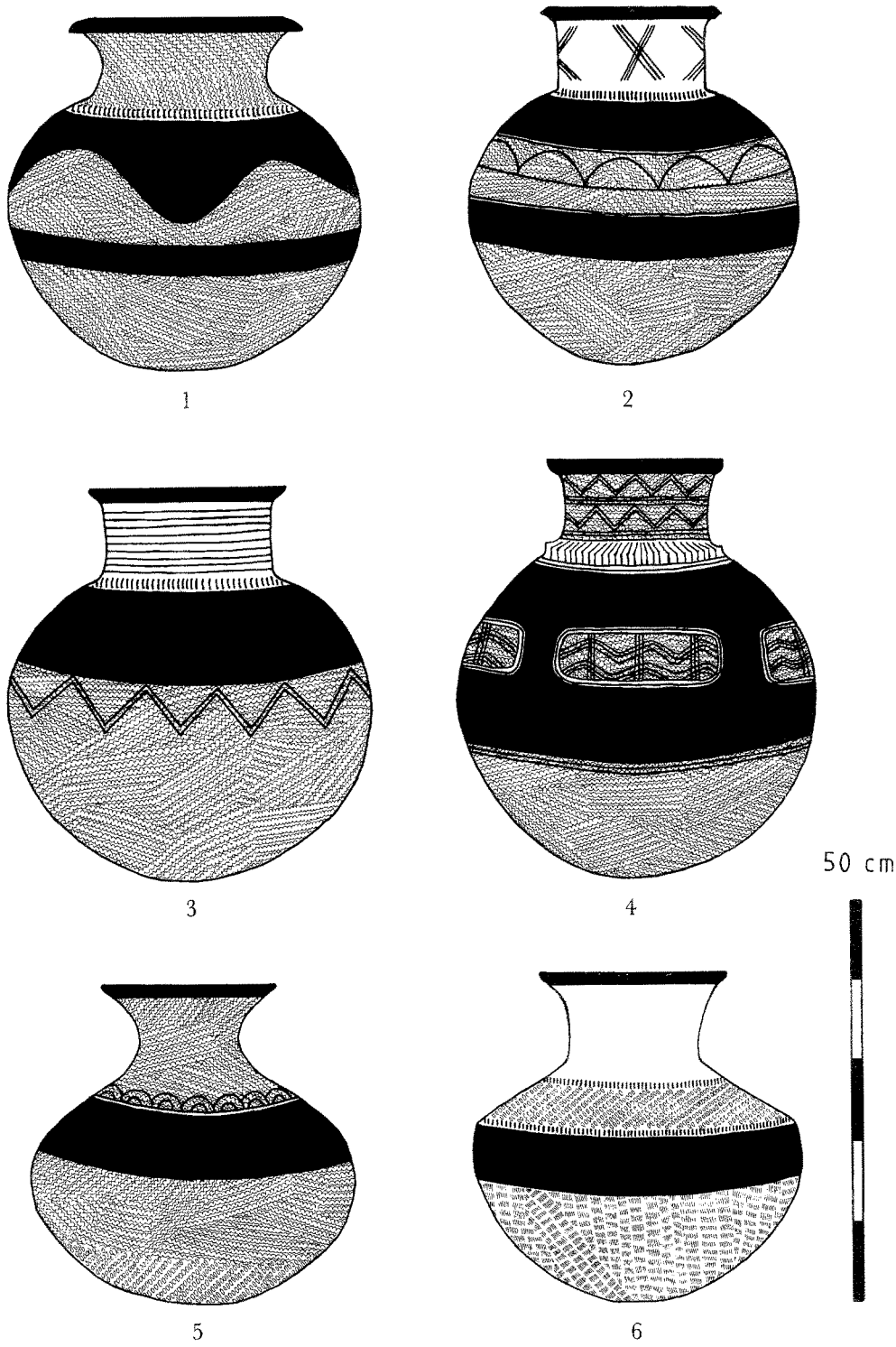

Figure 2 Range of forms and decorations (for water-storage pot) characteristic of micro-styles of several potter communities: 1. near Ng'iya market; 2. near Akala market; 3. Tingare area; 4. Masiro area; 5. near Aram market; 6. Usenge area.

Learning patterns

In contrast to the pattern most often assumed by archaeologists to account for learning the craft of pottery, the vast majority of Luo potters learn to pot after marriage, from the mother-in-law or senior co-wives in the husband's homestead rather than from their mothers. Young children of both sexes often aid their potter mothers to gather and mix clay or to burnish, but they do not really learn to form pots. Teenage daughters of potters, who would have the strength and abilities to learn the craft in earnest, are dissuaded from doing so by social pressures. While potting is not exactly looked down upon, it is considered hard, dirty work and it is decidedly not the sort of activity in which a young girl in the process of trying to attract a husband would wish to be seen engaged. Moreover, potters find it more practical to have their daughters relieve them of taking care of young children and various other domestic tasks which compete for their time, than to teach them to pot. This newly acquired skill would soon be abandoned anyway, unless the girl married into another community of potters with a nearby clay source, which is not a probable eventuality.

The Luo are a strongly patrilineal society in which the ideals of patrilocal post-marital residence and polygamy (Southall 1952) are quite rigorously followed. In the typical homestead, a son and his wives will live with his father until his own children are at least about ten years old, and usually much longer; he must establish his own homestead before his children can marry. A new wife who comes to live with her husband will be under the close supervision of her mother-in-law for a number of years. At first, she will not even cook in her own house or farm in her own fields, but will perform these tasks with the mother-in-law until she is considered ready to assume her role as the proper mistress of her own house in the homestead. During her apprenticeship under the mother-in-law, she will be tested and expected to learn and conform. If she is not the first wife, she will also have to contend with other co-wives who have greater seniority and authority; and she will be in competition with them for the land on which she will depend to support her family. It is the mother-in-law who has the power to allocate this land from her own holdings, although technically it belongs to the men.

Obviously, there are considerable pressures on a new wife to adapt to the expectations of senior women in her husband's home. Despite the tensions which often exist within homesteads (the Luo word for co-wife, *nyeke*, is related to the word for jealousy, *nyego*), respect for the mother-in-law and the ability to get along with co-wives without outward displays of hostility are expected virtues. Luo girls usually marry young (Ominde 1984:46), and are expected to begin quickly bearing children. During this time, they undergo a long process of resocialization, which often involves 'unlearning' things learned in the parental home (see Ominde 1952).

Potting is one of the things a new wife may be expected to learn. If a woman marries into a homestead of potters, she may eventually be expected to join in this activity to demonstrate that she is willing to take up her responsibilities by working hard to provide for her family and to show that she does not consider herself too good to participate in such work. As a Ng'iya potter put it: 'If you are not a potter when you come, you have to become one'. Or, as another woman whose mother was a potter in a distant area stated with resignation: 'I never thought I would do such a thing, but my mother-in-law was a potter, and I knew it was fate'.

Learning to pot in this context, of course, also means learning to pot the local way. Much as

non-potter women will learn to use the local names for pots and 'unlearn' the names they used to employ, potters will learn to reproduce the local forms and apply decorations from a limited repertoire used in the community. They learn the craft under the supervision of a mother-in-law or senior co-wives. They gather clay and temper from the same sources and learn to utilize the same techniques in constructing a range of acceptable forms and decorations. This is not to say that individual creativity or idiosyncrasy are absent; they are often the basis for general stylistic change. Significantly, however, even those whose mothers were potters almost always conform to the local pattern. This is both because they probably did not really learn the craft in earnest from their mothers and because they are profoundly influenced by the women working around them in their husband's home and in neighbouring homesteads in the community.

It may seem curiously counter-intuitive that a group of women, all of whom come originally from outside the community, should be the perpetuators of a distinctive local ceramic tradition, but the mechanism described here does clearly produce this result. The mother-in-law/daughter-in-law learning pattern and the corresponding process of post-marital resocialization ensure the continual transmission of local potting traditions to new members of the community and their conformity to local tastes.

One should not assume from this, however, that these local potting traditions and their resultant micro-styles are static phenomena, repeated without change for generations. Obviously, aspects of style change through time, and several factors are important in determining the diachronic trajectories of these local potting traditions. Inventive adaptation to external introductions is one such factor: for example in some areas, certain round-bottomed eating bowls were provided with a ring-foot following the introduction of tables. Potter interaction is perhaps an even more significant factor in shaping local styles (Herbich in prep.). Both frequency and quality of interaction are important, as these determine the nature of the information exchanged. Actually, both learning and the process of resocialization are manifest through processes of personal interaction, but there are other avenues of interaction which also have an influence on the evolution of design traditions.

Learning potting among the Luo is not a formal process with a clearly marked end; and potters' design concepts are not rigidly frozen in the mould they have learned from the mother-in-law. However, alterations of style always occur within the context of the tradition into which the potter has been indoctrinated. A potter is considered to have learned the craft when she can sell her pots at market, although some potters will continue to need help in various stages of manufacture for some time. Because of the tensions which can exist between co-wives in a homestead, after learning women will often spend considerable time visiting and potting with friends in other homesteads. Interaction of this sort, both in the process of potting and in selling at market, is important in exposing potters to variations in design concepts within the community at large, in facilitating the spread of new design concepts, and in producing a degree of overall intra-community homogeneity or, perhaps more accurately, a consistent range of variation.

The quality of these interactions is extremely important because elements of style can unconsciously reflect or even be actively manipulated to symbolically reflect personal relationships or to emphasize group boundaries or individual identity, and these can precipitate general style changes. Depending upon its nature, interaction can promote similarity or differentiation, although rarely in a predictable or straightforward manner. To

cite but a few examples, the individual decorative innovations of one potter came to be widely adopted by others in her community largely because of the personal popularity of the innovator and her willingness to help others improve their potting. Conversely, another potter expended considerable effort to maintain a personal decorative technique different from that of her co-wife (bands of reed impressions bordering all ochre bands; see Fig. 1:5), but this has not been adopted by other potters and has remained an individual variant because she is considered a 'complainer' and is not a popular figure in the community, and because it requires significant extra work. In one instance, a community of potters who specialize in making one kind of pot split into two groups following a dispute; the two groups now sit apart at the market and, whereas they used to make identical pots, the production of the two groups has become distinguishable by a small but consistent difference in decoration. One group uses a different tool to form the band of impressions at the base of the neck and no longer applies roulette decoration to the neck.

Insofar as ceramic style has any symbolic content, active or passive, among the Luo it is almost entirely on this level of potter interaction, with the 'messages' being largely uncomprehended by those outside the interaction network of the potter community. There does not, for example, seem to be a strong ethnic or ethnic subgroup identity message encoded in the ceramic micro-styles, or indeed any strong group identity associated with users, as the eventual distributions of most of these cross-cut a variety of major boundaries (Herbich 1986). Even though the production of a given style may be recognized by non-potters to be associated with the potters of a particular Luo subgroup, the social context of use makes it clear that style plays no role as an identity marker for users, even on the inter-ethnic level between the Luo and their neighbours. The only exception to this is in South Nyanza, where Luo potters supply distinctive forms for trade to the neighbouring Kisii.

It must be reiterated that the potter communities are in no sense isolated from non-potters, and potters participate in a wide variety of networks of interaction of which potting is only one. However, the referent group for such expression of group or individual identity as occurs in ceramic style is other potters within the networks of interaction which define the potter community; and it is at this base level of potter interaction that explanations of at least the gradual type of stylistic change must converge.

Conclusion

A major focus of this Luo ethno-archaeological study was the investigation of potter interaction and learning networks and their relationship to ceramic design patterns. It was found that ceramic micro-styles exist among the Luo as a result of a pattern of post-marital learning of the craft, strong pressures for resocialization of women after marriage, and the interplay of personal relationships in the course of potter interaction within communities.

Certain negative archaeological implications of the study are most immediately obvious: they severely challenge the basic axioms of several innovative attempts to use ceramic design to uncover the social organization of prehistoric communities (e.g. Deetz 1965; Longacre 1970; Hill 1970). These studies were based upon the widespread assumption that mother/daughter learning of ceramic production is the norm in traditional societies. From this it was logically reasoned that, given a probability of female pottery production, the

existence of localized ceramic micro-styles (rather than regionally undifferentiated styles) ought to indicate a matrilocal post-marital residence pattern. Women who moved after marriage would, it was reasoned, transport their design concepts and only by staying in place could local ceramic traditions be maintained.

The Luo situation indicates that, even if the serious objections to this model stemming from problems of behavioural deviation from idealized cultural rules or analytical concepts (Allen and Richardson 1971) could be allowed for, the same material culture pattern can be produced by a very different social process. Local ceramic traditions and their resultant micro-styles can be perpetuated by a body of women recruited entirely from outside the community, as the result of a patrilocal post-marital residence system and a mother-in-law/daughter-in-law learning pattern.

It is not intended here that the Luo case be proposed as a generalized model in replacement of the matrilocal interpretation of ceramic micro-styles. Clearly, the admonition to be gleaned is that the same pattern can be seen to result from a variety of very different processes. What I would wish to emphasize is that design concepts are not inherently static. The potential importance of post-marital socialization (particularly in view of the young age of marriage for women common in many traditional societies) in the transmission of at least those traditions of ceramic production generated by women, and the passive and active manipulation of design elements in the course of potter interaction must be taken into account when considering ceramic stylistic patterns.

At present, our knowledge of the relationship of material to non-material aspects of culture remains rudimentary; and social interpretations of patterning in the archaeological record must rest on assumptions with dangerously shallow foundations. The Luo case offers some insights into the effects of strong pressures for female conformity and post-marital resocialization on ceramic traditions. However, precisely because these conditions are operative, it cannot tell us to what extent similar stylistic patterns might be expected in societies without such pressures simply as a result of locally preferential networks of interaction among potters. A great number of variables stemming from the social contexts of manufacture and of use act upon each other in complex ways to produce stylistic patterns. While post-marital residence and social organization are important, they are hardly determinant. The nature of craft learning, the age, sex and social status of the learner, the extent and nature of social pressures for conformity, the degree of specialization of the craft, the symbolic content of stylistic elements for makers and users, and a host of other factors may all play equally significant roles in the generation of such patterns. As the body of ethno-archaeological studies focussing upon the social context and role of material culture expands, a synthesis should eventually emerge which will yield some deeper understanding of this point of articulation so crucial to archaeologists.

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