

Iron Age ceramic studies in Great Lakes eastern Africa: a critical and historiographical review

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Abstract

The influence of Merrick Posnansky's work on the development of Iron Age Great Lakes ceramic studies is traced and an historiographical analysis of the published material of associated African, American, Belgian and British Iron Age Africanist archaeologists is offered. The article examines the methodologies and concepts employed by archaeologists from the 1950s to the present, as they defined the chronological, classificatory, regional and stylistic boundaries of Urewe and rouletted pottery. Particular attention is paid to the influence of American, British and Belgian worldviews on Iron Age research priorities and consequent disparities between Early Iron Age and Later Iron Age studies. Also examined are conclusions about the ethnic identities of the makers of the ceramic material and the significance of the shift from Urewe to rouletted pottery. The paper concludes with some alternative explanations about the relative scarcity of Early Iron Age ceramics and the swift but widely dispersed introduction of rouletted pottery.

Résumé

Cet article retrace l'influence du travail de Merrick Posnansky sur le développement des études sur la céramique de l'âge de fer dans la région des grands lacs et présente une analyse historiographique des documents publiés par des archéologues africains, américains, belges et britanniques spécialisés dans l'âge de fer en Afrique. Cet article examine les méthodologies et les concepts utilisés par ces archéologues, des années 50 à maintenant, pour leur définition des limites chronologiques, classificatoires, régionales et stylistiques de la céramique d'Urewe et de la céramique décorée à la roulette. Il accorde une attention spéciale à l'influence des points de vue américains, britanniques et belges sur les priorités de la recherche sur l'âge de fer et les différences qui en découlent entre les études sur le début et sur la fin de cette période. Cet article examine également des conclusions sur les identités ethniques des fabricants de céramique et la signification du passage de la poterie d'Urewe à la poterie décorée à la roulette. Il conclut en donnant de nouvelles explications possibles sur la relative pénurie du début de l'âge de fer et l'introduction rapide mais largement disséminée de la poterie décorée à la roulette.

Introduction

Merrick Posnansky's 1961 article, 'Pottery types from archaeological sites in East Africa', was the first and remains one of the most important syntheses of Early Iron Age (EIA) and Later Iron Age (LIA) ceramic typologies for the Great Lakes region; since then no similarly broadly-based piece has appeared. Three decades ago Posnansky recognized the relationship between social complexity, sedentary and pastoral economies and pottery variability, thereby advocating the correlation of ceramic groupings with ecological niches and regional economics (1961:178–80). Today this approach continues to maintain its currency in the production of Great Lakes history, especially as a central methodological feature of recent archaeological research on LIA state societies in southern and western Uganda (Sutton 1987; Reid 1990; Connah 1991; Robertshaw 1992b). However, Posnansky's silence on an explicitly critical or even theoretical framework, while not surprising for 1961, unfortunately still characterizes much of the current archaeological analysis of Great Lakes ceramic data. Despite the pivotal role assigned to ceramic typologies in broader discussions of EIA and LIA Great Lakes chronology (Wandibba 1990), technology (Soper 1985) and migration (Desmedt 1991), no systematic critical assessment of three decades of pottery analysis exists in the literature.

This article traces the influence of Posnansky's work on the development of Great Lakes ceramic studies and critically discusses the associated published materials of other African, American, Belgian and British Iron Age archaeologists (see also Robertshaw 1990). The primary divisions of this paper approximate those of the literature: periodization of EIA and LIA, American, British and Belgian approaches to fieldwork and, most importantly, the typological analysis of Urewe and rouletted pottery. Although these intellectual categories are embedded in almost all of the archaeological analyses which engage the last two millennium of Great Lakes history, the specific context of their development as academic tools is largely unexplored and their attendant influence on the shape of archaeology in the Great Lakes region remains, for the most part, unchallenged.

The very concept of an African Iron Age demands examination. 'Africa' itself is a socially constructed concept, clearly revealed in the arguments for or against including Egypt in the definition of Africa. The paucity of synthetic scholarly statements about 'African archaeology' is further testimony to that artificiality which Chenorkian (1987:215) has argued is merely a conglomerate of very individual elements which defy totalizing conclusions. As most recently argued by Willoughby (1991:73), the different scholarly treatments of the African Stone and Iron Ages are self-evident indicators of significantly diverse ideological orientations. Hall (1987) has challenged the Iron Age 'package' arguing that physical anthropological, linguistic, faunal and iron data are all independent variables which cannot be collapsed into a single formula of culture change.

As a more specific example, both British (Leakey, Posnansky, Soper) and Belgian (Van Grunderbeek, Hiernaux, Maquet, Nenquin, Van Noten) archaeologists, with and without the aid of radiocarbon dating, devised the Urewe and rouletted ceramic classifications primarily from aggregate shifts in decorative motifs. As a consequence, they paid limited attention to internal chronologies or seriation: Robertshaw (1992a) is now attempting attribute analysis. This loose assessment of ceramic change served nonetheless as the basis for periodizing iron working in the Great Lakes region. Furthermore, the East African EIA

is defined, both spatially and temporally, more by the presence or absence of Urewe pottery than by actual evidence of iron working. Likewise, the East African LIA is defined by a dramatic shift in pottery form and style from Urewe to rouletted ceramics and not by any large scale intensification of or shift in iron technologies, or for that matter, changes in ceramic technology or social organization. These inconsistencies in classification and periodizations have wide ranging implications in the Great Lakes region for archaeology and history – past, present and future.

What follows is an examination of the methodologies, concepts and conclusions invoked by Iron Age archaeologists as they define the chronological, regional and stylistic parameters of ceramics in the Great Lakes region. In addition, as contemporary Iron Age archaeologists strive to move beyond the descriptive culture history of the 1950s and 1960s, a critical analysis of the various approaches to the often intractable issues of the transition from Urewe to rouletted pottery and the complex relationship of material culture to social history reveals the stubborn presence of colonial paradigms about ethnicity, migrations and state formation. It also exposes the adverse effects of the division of academic research based on colonial boundaries. This paper advocates a return to the geographic scope of Posnansky's 1961 article and a more concerted effort, especially in Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi, to follow his examples in Ghana and Togo where he included both western-trained African archaeologists and locally resident Africans in the preparation, implementation and interpretation of archaeological research (1971, 1975, 1980, 1985).

The description and classification of Urewe pottery

The typological identification of the body of ceramics now referred to as Urewe has a long tradition of re-classification. An examination of the various stages and classificatory schemes presented in the literature reveals parallel shifts in the orientation of archaeological research itself. First described by Leakey, Owen and Leakey (1948), Urewe was originally named 'dimple-based' pottery after the prevalent but not ubiquitous thumb-sized depression on the bottoms of pots. Following the generally accepted archaeological practice of naming a 'tradition' after the most important site, dimple-based pottery was later re-named Urewe by Posnansky (1961), from one of the major sites noted in the 1948 report (Fig. 1). Posnansky later discussed the wider geographical and morphological variations of dimple-based wares (1968b).

Despite this name shift, the Leakey *et al.* description today remains the authoritative source for diagnostic Urewe motifs. Distinguished by its thick, bevelled rims which are often incised or grooved, the assemblage usually consists of necked pots and shallow, hemispheric bowls with the characteristic dimple base. Beakers appear in western Kenya but rarely in the western regions of the Great Lakes. While design does not cover the entire vessel body, Urewe ware is nevertheless heavily decorated. The basic motif is parallel grooved or incised lines in horizontal bands around the shoulder and body that often incorporates circles, loops and triangles. Hatching and dots are often found on or just below the rim (Leakey *et al.* 1948, Posnansky 1961). Appearing as early as the sixth century BC in Rwanda and Buhaya (Schmidt 1975; Van Grunderbeek 1983), Urewe as defined above is noted for its striking decorative consistency until it was replaced, all over the Great Lakes region, by rouletted pottery beginning around AD 1000.

The regional distribution of Urewe (Fig. 1) spans the Kivu region in the west (Van Grunderbeek 1981; Van Noten 1983), up through Lakes Rutanzige and Mobutu Sese Seko to the Chobi site near Kabalega Falls (Soper 1971c), to western Kenya (Leakey *et al.* 1948; Soper 1969) and Lolui Island (Posnansky 1967), to north-western Tanzania (Soper and Golden 1969; Schmidt 1978). Urewe is usually found in better watered regions with at least the 1000 mm of rainfall per year needed to sustain an agricultural base of root and tuber crops (Ehret 1984:481). In addition to describing Urewe's decorative motifs, Leakey *et al.* noted that it was almost always found in association with iron working and never in association with lithics. This is the original basis of Urewe as an archaeological diagnostic

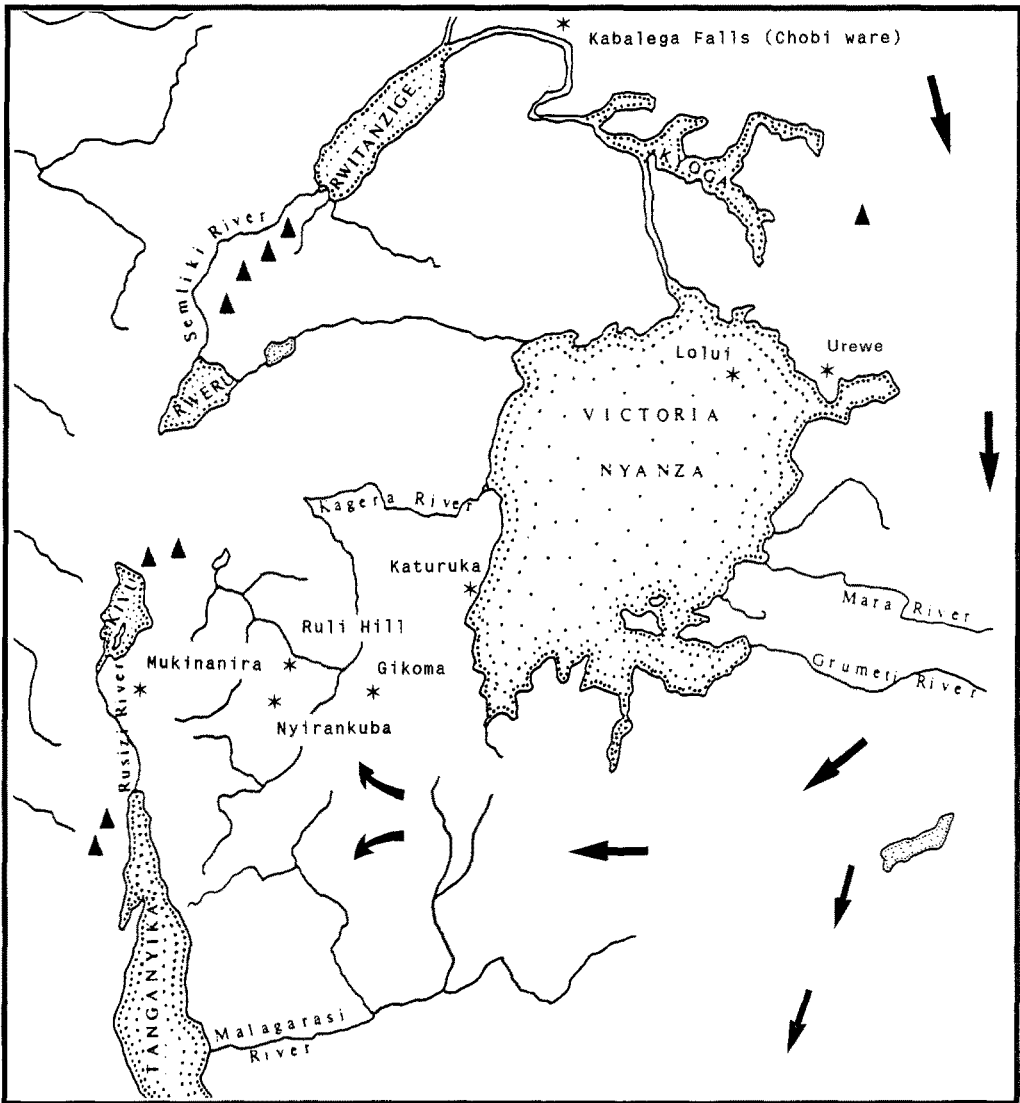


Figure 1 The Great Lakes region of Eastern Africa. Stars indicate selected sites yielding Urewe or rouletted ceramics. Arrows indicate Desmedt's (1991) proposed movements of her Group W.

of the presence of EIA culture. While the 1948 report was only able to offer a relative date for Urewe as contemporaneous with Arkell's AD 300–700 estimate for similar pottery in the Sudan (1948:43), later radiocarbon dates unequivocally confirmed Leakey *et al.*'s observation linking the appearance of Urewe with the early intensification of iron technology. It should be noted, however, that most of the original Urewe sherds were recovered from scatters on the lower slopes of eroded gullies (1948:13).

Today, all scholars agree that Urewe was established much earlier in western Lake Victoria than it was at the eastern sites around the Winam Gulf in Kenya. Indeed, there has been little disagreement with Phillipson's confident statement that the origin of Urewe ware was to the west of Lake Victoria (1977:216; for a similar position see Clist 1987:58). Phillipson drew his conclusions from data which Hiernaux and Maquet had gathered in western Zaïre, Rwanda and Burundi when they were scholars attached to the Belgian research institute, I.N.R.S., in Butare in the 1950s and 1960s. Leakey *et al.*'s work on Urewe in western Kenya was purely descriptive, driven by the goal to accumulate scientific knowledge and dwarfed by their primary concerns with human origins. In contrast, the research of Hiernaux and Maquet was partly motivated by the colonial Belgian focus on ethnicity. Indeed, Hiernaux's expertise as a physical anthropologist oriented him towards identifying 'races' in the archaeological record; his 1960 article with Maquet was replete with allusions to the lost Renge population and its assimilation with the modern Hutu. As argued below, this orientation still informs the current research of a few Belgian archaeologists.

In addition, Hiernaux and Maquet's work reflected the beginnings of a distinction between Belgian and British archaeology. Hiernaux's collaborator, Maquet, was a social anthropologist whose work emphasized the interdisciplinary approach which is often missing, even today, in British fieldwork in the Great Lakes region. It also reflected an increasingly scientific and systematic approach to fieldwork and the professionalization of archaeology on a wider scale. Although hindered by a lack of radiocarbon dating, their published research described techniques of surface collection, methods of excavation and sampling and even mineralogical analysis of iron slag (1956:1132). Their work anticipated the direction of archaeologists and linguists in the 1970s and 1980s, by concluding that Urewe first appeared in the western Great Lakes region (1956:1142).

By 1960, Hiernaux and Maquet had enough ceramic data to propose the first comprehensive re-examination of Urewe since the 1948 publication of Leakey *et al.* They proposed a stratified seriation of pottery from the Nyirankuba site north of Butare, Rwanda (Fig. 1), based on an uncommonly deep *in situ* sequence of Urewe (1960:71–4). In the nearby Mukinanira rock shelter and an open-air site outside Bukavu (Fig. 1), Urewe was found in close association with Late Stone Age (Wilton) lithics as well as with other (*boudiné*) and more recent (rouletted) ceramics (1960:87). A decade later, at the Chobi site in central Uganda, Soper described a similar situation of Urewe in association with 'Chobi' (*boudiné*) ware (1971c:60–3). While both of these cases clearly demanded a re-evaluation of the criteria set out by Leakey *et al.* for Urewe, the anomaly was not followed up and the opportunity for examining variability of Urewe site locations within this 'consistent' (Soper 1971c) tradition was ignored.

The success of Hiernaux and Maquet's classification owed much to the good fortune of deep stratigraphy at Nyirankuba. Soper's classification by type-site name of ceramics in

Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania within the EIA complex suffered from a lack of stratigraphic integrity. It was also driven by a need to clarify Phillipson's (1968) definition of an Urewe-related facies in south-central Africa (Soper 1971b:6, 30). Because most of Soper's data came from surface collections or disturbed sites, he adapted his research strategy from one which sought chronological comparisons to one which established only the 'general relationships between local ceramic traditions' (1971b:15).

This revised approach directly conflicted with the explicit research goals of the Bantu Studies Project which he directed for the British Institute in Eastern Africa (BIEA); that is, the search for the origins of Great Lakes Bantu-speakers of the EIA (Soper 1971a). The contradiction between the search for origins and the chronological weakness of the ceramic data was never resolved. Nor did the project examine the contradictory assumption which linked the complex history of iron technology with the wide geographical spread of various Bantu languages but restricted the model for understanding the development of Urewe ceramics to only local Bantu speech. In place of resolution, Soper proposed an elaborate (for 1971) comparative analysis that sought to establish a range of decorative ceramic traits from which the interrelationship of regional traditions could be inferred (1971b:15). This strategy was weakened, however, by its tautological nature: the range of regional traditions was established and then their possible interrelations were traced according to the parameters of that range. Nevertheless, the foundation was then established for Soper's classification of Lelesu and Kwale, related pottery styles, whose purpose was to confirm the cultural unity of the study area within which the Bantu Studies Project operated. Huffman challenged this methodology on the grounds of insufficient data and an overemphasis on decorative motifs (1970). Despite these questions, Phillipson and Soper set into motion the next trend in eastern African Iron Age ceramic studies – defining regional traditions – and their lead was taken up by the Belgian archaeologist Van Noten.

Van Noten critiqued other aspects of Soper's classification. Soper had regrouped EIA archaeological entities into the all-encompassing 'EIA Industrial Complex' (1971b:6) and subdivided it into three related ceramic complexes: North-eastern, Southern and Central (1971b:25). Van Noten was not satisfied with this classification because he saw much more ceramic diversity than was implied by Soper's term 'Industrial Complex' (1979:75–6). Consequently, he fashioned his own term, 'Interlacustrine EIA Industrial Complex', and divided it into western and eastern regions – Kivu and Urewe – based on 'simple' and 'elaborate' decorative techniques (1979:76). In addition to the regional variants of Urewe previously identified by Hiernaux and Maquet, he went on to propose six new pottery types (*ibid.*: pp. 72–3). Further, he cited a tendency in the literature to group too many distinct wares together under the simple designation 'dimple-based ware'. To address this problem, Van Noten followed Huffman's 1970 ceramic typological techniques for classifying EIA pottery by the presence or absence of dimples (1979:75). It must be noted, however, that while this division may seem to be 'common-sense' at the level of pottery morphology, it did not account for the great majority of sherds from the EIA of the Great Lakes region which preserved no indication of the presence or absence of the dimple feature. Instead of clarifying the situation, Van Noten's re-classification further confused extant terminologies and was itself weakened by evidence of ceramic variation drawn from a limited database. Van Grunderbeek *et al.* (1983) and Huffman (1980) drew attention to Van Noten's reclassification on the intellectual principle that too many types were inherently

misleading; but the challenge to the presence/absence technique is more a central criticism.

An additional shortcoming of Van Noten's classification was his almost total reliance on the published secondary literature to provide systematic evidence of Urewe's complexity (1979:67). Ignoring the lessons that might have been learned from Soper's (1971a, 1971b) attempt at classifying Urewe's variability, Van Noten reissued the culture trait approach of the 1950s and 1960s. He simply presented a site-by-site description of iron working and Urewe evidence, without critical or synthetic evaluation of the comparability of the data. Beginning with his discussion of the links between Meroitic furnace bricks and Schmidt's (1975) evidence from Katuruka (Fig. 1), Van Noten correlated the more simple ceramic motifs of Kivu and western Rwanda and Burundi with the larger migration to the southern regions of Africa and the eastern, more complex iron evidence and ceramic motifs with a proposed southerly migration from the Sudan. Although he was more broadly discussing the spread of early food producing technology from the west, it was a refashioning, of sorts, of a Hamitic myth of technological diffusion. We are therefore left with an argument whose goal seems little removed from the diffusionist arguments of two decades earlier.

Van Grunderbeek *et al.* (1983) hinted at some of the first technological discussions of ceramic manufacture (see also Childs 1986). Following an ethnoarchaeological research design, they discussed the differences and similarities between present day pottery manufacture east of Butare, Rwanda and EIA pottery of the same region (1983:32-3). They compared the vegetable matter in both ancient and modern pots and through petrographic analysis suggested that both pastes were mined under similar local conditions, thereby identifying variability in manufacture and firing (1983:32-3). They also proposed a brief but highly important and innovative reconstruction of EIA social organization in Rwanda and Burundi based on an ethnographic assessment of the requirements and limitations of communicating across the hilly landscape (1983:43). While these statements were quite obviously speculations, they indicated a transformation in the research orientation of EIA ceramic studies in the Great Lakes region. These shifts, in large part, were related to the detailed excavations and analysis of iron smelting sites in both western Tanzania and Rwanda and Burundi set in an emerging ecological framework for the analysis of archaeological data (see especially Schmidt 1978). Despite these new directions, EIA archaeological research continued to focus on the development of iron technology, and when discussed, ceramic data served mainly as a chronological tool.

The shift to rouletted pottery

Many of the questions and debates which surrounded Urewe pottery in the Great Lakes also applied to rouletted pottery. Analysis of both focused on decorative and morphological description and on typological classification and re-classification. The critical framework employed above revealed some of the worldviews of American, British and Belgian archaeologists and illustrated how their cultural orientations influenced conclusions about pottery in Africa. Applying a similar approach to the data on rouletted pottery confirms the usefulness of that critical analysis and demonstrates the continued presence of those worldviews in even the most recently published literature.

The major works on rouletted pottery have been written by many, but not all, of the same archaeologists who published on Urewe. Among the British scholars were Connah

(1989, 1990, 1991), Posnansky (1961, 1967a, 1968a, 1969), Robertshaw (1988, 1991), Soper (1971c, 1979, 1985), Soper and Golden (1969) and Sutton (1964, 1973, 1987). The Belgian material now includes important work by Desmedt (1991), but mainly consisted of work by Hiernaux (1956), Hiernaux and Maquet (1954, 1956, 1960, 1968) and Maquet and Hiernaux (1968).

The same descriptive goals these authors held for Urewe were also held for rouletted pottery. Yet, until very recently, scholars did not invest the same effort in detailed excavation and survey of the LIA as they did for the EIA. Unlike the major work on Urewe by Leakey *et al.* (1948), no clear and definitive statement about rouletted pottery has been published. Soper's 1985 article, though a necessary first step, is more a general description of rouletting from an ethnoarchaeological perspective than a description of a coherent body of archaeological material.

Why did a disparity of research exist between the study of the Early and Later Iron Ages in Great Lakes eastern Africa? Why has the treatment of the same data by British and Belgian scholars been so different? The following section of this paper examines two necessarily separate explanations. That Belgian and British archaeological circles followed different intellectual traditions has been well established from the general perspective (Audouze and Leroi-Gourhan 1981); explanations more specific to the Great Lakes are suggested below.

Intellectual developments in systems analysis and regional settlement approaches undertaken by European and American archaeological theorists in the 1960s and 1970s had a more profound effect on the Anglophone literature than on the Belgian. This challenged the BIEA to reconsider its research focus on the EIA and the origins and diffusion of Bantu speech communities. After nearly two decades of research, the resolution of the original research problem remained elusive. Civil war in Uganda made fieldwork difficult and sometimes impossible while conflict over academic terrain weakened the possibilities for a co-operative alliance of resources between BIEA, the University of Nairobi and the Kenya Museums. As the goals of processual archaeology transformed British and American research, so did it affect the original BIEA objectives. The search for cultural origins and the earliest dates for ironworking was no longer seen as a tenable and valid goal by itself. As a consequence, all these developments conspired to slow down the emphasis on the EIA and helped to redirect research by the mid 1980s.

It is not easy to explain renewed and invigorated attention to research on the LIA, particularly in the absence of a proclaimed plan of action such as that published in *Azania* 1971. The very recent surge in LIA archaeological fieldwork conducted by the BIEA in Uganda, however, was directly related to the recent turn towards relative political and economic stability. Yet, where themes of origins and diffusion were no longer the overt goals, they were replaced by a familiar and traditional theme of colonial Great Lakes history – state formation (see especially Connah 1991). In a similar fashion, some BIEA scholars have pursued alternative ideas and research goals designed for regional analysis (see, for example, Reid and Robertshaw), but have maintained familiar methodological orientations, such as a focus on highly statistical yet contested procedures of ceramic attribute analysis (e.g. Robertshaw 1992a).

A more opaque explanation, however, following for example Trigger (1989) or Shanks and Tilley (1987), might have suggested a critical social or political perspective on this shift

in research emphasis. This argument would draw attention to the severe challenges which ethnic conflicts posed to many independent African states. It would also take into consideration attempts by Africanist historians and political scientists (D. Newbury 1987; C. Newbury 1978), archaeologists (David, Sterner and Gavua 1988) and anthropologists (Kenny 1981) to construct more sophisticated models of defining ethnicity. This work highlighted the importance of a revisionist understanding of the truly fluid nature of ethnic identity. The implication for LIA research in eastern Africa was that the BIEA could contribute to the search for a more complete historical understanding of the ethnic tensions which plagued newly independent African nations. The LIA, a great majority of which can be linked to oral traditions, had direct relevance to ethnic groups visible today and in the colonial ethnographic record. A related explanation of the shift in research direction would suggest that, as Africans themselves began to set the academic agenda, the LIA had more political and cultural significance than the EIA (cf. Andah 1979; Ministère de la Jeunesse 1981; Mapunda 1991). The recent switch in the American and British literature to the study of the LIA from a previous preoccupation with the EIA can thus be partly attributed to the incomplete results of the Bantu Studies Project, the twenty year research hiatus and current change in the political climate in Uganda, a general shift in European and American archaeological research design and goals, an emerging awareness of the complexity of ethnicity, and the need to justify research beyond Western academic goals and to integrate emerging African perspectives.

The parallel situation in the Belgian literature was not so clearly defined. This was because the Belgians, more than the British, had been more consistently interested in the LIA in the Great Lakes region beginning with the work of Hiernaux and Maquet in Rwanda, Kivu and Uganda from the late 1950s onwards. Van Grunderbeek (1981, 1983, 1988, forthcoming) and Van Noten (1979, 1983) continued to focus on the EIA, while Desmedt (1991), in keeping with Van Noten's example of reclassification, recently published an important and extensive discussion of the rouletted material as well as her own suggestions for a classification.

This paper examines Desmedt's complex work from several perspectives. First, she continued where Hiernaux and Maquet left off, especially in the discussion of the 'lost' population of the Abarengé. Desmedt also expanded Soper's classificatory work on rouletting. But more importantly, she was the first scholar to attempt to bridge the academic monopolies the British held in Kenya and Uganda with the Belgian focus on Rwanda, Burundi and eastern Zaïre. Her work, however, drew mainly on the secondary archaeological and anthropological literature on Kenya and Uganda and not on original fieldwork. The fourth and most significant aspect of Desmedt's work for the following discussion is that it demanded a serious reconsideration of the persistence of colonial paradigms and metaphors in current historical, anthropological and archaeological work by Europeans in Africa. Her 1991 article suggests that the basic worldview which directed the early Belgian researchers – a telescoped understanding of ethnic relations in Rwanda and Burundi and uncritical attitudes about the cultural interdependence of herders and farmers – lingered into the 1990s. That Belgian assumptions about the nature of social interactions in the Great Lakes region should have gone largely unexamined for several decades, while ignoring the findings of British and American colleagues (particularly Ehret 1971), was testimony to the continuously deleterious effects of the academic division of labour.

The discussion by both Hiernaux and Maquet in the 1950s and 1960s and Desmedt in the 1990s of a group remembered in the oral traditions as Abarengé is an excellent example of the tenacity of the Belgian colonial worldview. Briefly, the Abarengé were a group of powerful farmers and ironworkers who 'disappeared' from the Great Lakes region sometime before the sixteenth century. Their status as royals differed according to the individual source of the oral tradition. In Rwanda they were remembered as royalty (for an historical discussion of the oral tradition see Vansina 1961), but elsewhere – in Burundi, the Kivu region in Zaïre and in Kigezi in southern Uganda – they were not always associated with royalty, nor with the original introduction of ironworking. Oral traditions collected from this area discussed the appearance and disappearance of the most powerful ruling clan in place before the 'arrival' of the Tutsi. Not surprisingly, this region corresponded with the eastern boundaries of the Belgian Congo. The central points in the following argument are to examine by what manner Hiernaux and Maquet transformed the arrival of the Tutsi into a correspondingly dramatic break in the material record and to demonstrate that the cultural models they employed were similar to those used 30 years later by Desmedt.

The archaeological treatment of the Abarengé story began with Hiernaux in the Belgian Congo in the late 1950s. Hiernaux, a physical anthropologist, consistently correlated historical skeletal remains with ethnic identities which were created, or at least formalized, in the late nineteenth century (for a fuller discussion see Vidal 1969, 1974; Rwabukumba and Mudandagizi 1974; D. Newbury 1980 and C. Newbury 1988 for revisions of Maquet 1961). Hiernaux (1954, 1968) then uncritically projected these identities back into the archaeological record. Much of his work focussed on comparing cranial measurements of modern groups – the Hutu and Tutsi – with excavated skeletal material. Hiernaux's first discussion in print of the association of the Abarengé with iron and ceramic archaeological materials was in his interview with Kavijuka, a powerful provincial leader and a descendent of the Abanyiginya dynasty (1956:356–7). Hiernaux did not examine the inherent interests of his royal informant in revealing knowledge about the Abarengé to a colonial researcher, and posed leading questions regarding 'the physical makeup' of the people and nature of an Abarengé 'caste system' (1956:354–5).

The next step in finding the material remains of the so-called lost population of Abarengé was Hiernaux's 1956 and 1960 publications in collaboration with Maquet. They excavated a 1.5-m-deep trench at Gikoma, Rwanda (Fig. 1) and found rouletted pottery which they classified as Type B, because it used a style of rouletting very different from the contemporary one (1960:6–10). At a similar Type B site in central Rwanda, on Ruli Hill (Fig. 1), the physical evidence was especially rich (1960:12–16); Hiernaux's analysis showed that the Ruli skeletons were quite similar to those of modern Hutu. The Type B pottery at Ruli was characterized as being of inferior quality to that of the modern rouletted pottery which was thought to have arrived with the Tutsi. Hiernaux and Maquet concluded that the modern farming population of Hutu, in contrast to the taller modern Tutsi, had many physical similarities to the Abarengé. Their argument was constructed to link the disappearance of the Abarengé, in other words the ancestors of modern Hutu, with the influx of the more successful political structure of the Tutsi pastoral culture. This archaeological construction identified an historical precedent for the nature of modern Hutu/Tutsi relations and implicitly echoed existing Belgian methods of colonial administration and exploitation.

Not until a full three decades later did another archaeologist tackle the association of the Abarengé, rouletting and migration/diffusion models of culture change; and once again it was a Belgian scholar. Desmedt's (1991) work admirably handled the disparate literature on rouletting; and Schoenbrun (this volume) evaluates her attempt to elaborate on Soper's 1985 classification and the proposed categories of rouletted types for Great Lakes ceramic studies. What is relevant to the present argument, however, is the correlation of the Abarengé oral tradition not simply with models of culture or ceramic change, but with a specific linguistic tradition. Desmedt associated her Group W (Fig. 1), the first evidence of rouletting in the Great Lakes region, with the migration of pastoral Southern Nilotic speakers into the western highland regions of Rwanda from the eastern and southern shores of Lake Victoria. Drawing on Ambrose's (1982) position about the covariance between material culture and language, Desmedt posited a link between modern Tutsi and historical southern Nilotes based on archaeological evidence from sites with rouletted ware but without iron. It can be argued that this construction closely followed Hiernaux and Maquet's colonial myth of the successful conquering of the Bantu-speaking Abarengé farmers and ironworkers by immigrant pastoralists.

Desmedt's explicit goal was to use oral traditions about the Abarengé in Rwanda to clarify the EIA/LIA transition (1991:181), a question which continues to elude Great Lakes archaeologists (see Sutton 1993 for the most recent discussion). She also sought to link the roots of modern Tutsi and Hima groups with Southern Nilotes and to determine the geographical origin of the Tutsi (1991:184). No less central was how to explain the association of Group W (cf. Hiernaux and Maquet's Type B) rouletting, a Nilotic culture trait, with Bantu-speaking, iron-working, farmers. Desmedt attempted to demonstrate that, although Abarengé farmers used rouletting on their pottery, they initially borrowed the trait from Nilotic pastoralists (1991:183). Although this argument echoed that proposed by Hiernaux and Maquet, the actual correlation of the two pottery types, Type B and Group W, is unclear. Desmedt drew on a much larger body of archaeological data and other evidence to construct Group W than did Hiernaux and Maquet. Yet, it is argued here, the culture historical goals were the same – to sort out associations of royalty, iron, ceramics, pastoralism and agriculture, elsewhere designated by Hall as the 'Iron-Age package' (1987).

The dilemma for Desmedt was that Group W rouletting was found in rock shelters of eastern Rwanda in association with LSA material. This contrasted with EIA sites from central Rwanda where Group W was found in association with iron (1991:183). Desmedt therefore constructed two separate culture groups: first, pastoralists, rouletting, rock shelters and LSA assemblages, and second, Bantu speakers, farming and iron working. Desmedt suggested that southern Nilotic-speaking pastoralists migrated, with the rouletting technique, south from the Sudan through western Kenya, around the southern edges of Lake Victoria through the Kagera Depression and into eastern Rwanda, where they tended to use rock shelters. The pastoralists traded cattle for Abarengé-produced iron and drew the Abarengé into patron–client relationships. Desmedt argued that the new demand for iron and the superior political culture of the Nilotes would have prompted the Bantu potters to change their ceramic style from Urewe to rouletting yet, at the same time, the Nilotic speakers were absorbed into the Bantu language (1991:183). No explanation of this apparent contradiction was offered.

The argument can be challenged on many levels, but the most serious problem is the uncritical use of oral traditions and a selective reading of the data on Nilotic languages in the Great Lakes region. Concerning the use of oral traditions, her method focused on a highly specific royal court tradition from central Rwanda that discussed the Abarenge as powerful ironworkers. The links of Abarenge with iron were very restricted to central Rwandan court traditions and were not applicable to the wider distribution of her Group W pottery. The absence of linguistic evidence for Southern Nilotes (Ehret 1971) migrating along the path proposed by Desmedt further throws into question the assumption that iron in this region equals Bantu. More recently, Schoenbrun (1991 and this volume) has presented data that indicate that Bantu terms for pastoralism proliferated in precisely the areas where Desmedt claimed the Nilotes migrated. He further demonstrated that the vast majority of the cattle terminology has Bantu, not southern Nilotic origins (1991:56).

A much simpler and more coherent explanation can be suggested for the seemingly confusing associations of iron, rouletting, pastoralism and farming. Pottery styles can and do cross linguistic boundaries, just as economic specialization can spread without wholesale migration, although this is a more complex transformation than a shift in ceramic motifs. Desmedt's main goal was to provide specificity to Soper's classification (which, indeed, she achieved admirably), but the strength of the associated arguments employed to reach that goal require close scrutiny. Unfortunately, a lack of linguistic evidence, inappropriate models of migration and diffusion, problematic correlations of different data sets such as oral tradition, linguistics and material culture and uncritical interpretation of royal court traditions contributed to methodological inconsistencies. This reflected on the integrity of the conceptualization of the research problem which was further indicted by a lack of theoretical framework in which to situate the analysis of the ceramic data. While Desmedt's search for the royal origins of ethnic stratification in the Great Lakes region most closely echoed the earlier work of Hiernaux and Maquet, to be critically understood, it must be situated within the interests of the wider context of Belgian, British and American archaeological research in Great Lakes Africa.

Conclusion

The preceding analysis of the archaeological literature on Urewe and rouletted pottery in EIA and LIA Great Lakes Africa engaged a critical historiographical approach to chart the progression of academic genealogies and interpret its influence on research priorities, methodologies and interpretations. Posnansky's concern in 1961 remains true today – that the classification and typological analysis of Great Lakes ceramic material, despite their specifically demanding limitations, retain significant weight in the building of Great Lakes chronologies and social histories. Yet, as demonstrated above, many researchers continue to commit serious methodological inconsistencies and much confusion over typology is directly linked to this problem. Beyond methodology, questions about the epistemology and production of the classifications themselves were certainly lacking, as was an evaluation of even the most obvious implications of centering the research primarily on typologies.

There is evidence that current researchers are trying to place the pottery data inside larger questions of social process. Following Posnansky's initial speculations on the broader social and economic aspects of specialized black graphited wares, Sutton has recently

briefly considered the implications of rare 'exquisite' rouletted pottery at Mubende Hill (1993:15) and the evidence from Ntusi for a 'mid-Iron-Age revolution'. Applying Sutton's comments to Urewe, certainly the relative scarcity of EIA pottery might suggest a precedent 'prestige' ware to the specialized rouletted ware. To date, almost all excavated examples of Urewe pottery have been found in association with evidence of iron production. Urewe ware has not yet been found in significant amounts at any habitation site in the Great Lakes region. Clearly there is a need to test this apparently firm association of non-habitation iron sites with Urewe. If this proves true, questions emerge about how pottery production and consumption were controlled, especially in the context of the quickly and widely dispersed rouletted ware. Sutton is correct to see the message of the Urewe-rouletted shift as one of change, although his reference to Meredith's suggestion of significant continuity in form between Urewe and rouletted pottery might suggest otherwise (1993:28).

To complicate the analysis, the similar placement of decoration on rouletted and Urewe pottery demands a more complex explanation of the shift than simply change and continuity in morphology. For example, from the nineteenth and twentieth-century ethnographic record we know that rouletting in Rwanda was the work of highly specialized potters, while those who used the technique in Buganda were not ceramic specialists. This holds significance not only for the technological aspects of ceramic production, but also for the social expression of regional variability within the Great Lakes region (Stewart 1992). At a different scale, an analysis of the ethnographic record concerning the relationships between farmers and herders would lead the archaeologist to search the material record for evidence of the conflict and contradictions which undoubtedly resulted from the mixing of these two economic strategies. As an example, Miller's work on pottery in India advocates a search for meaning not only in highly specialized and ritualized material culture, but in the more 'mundane' domain of ceramics (1985). He argues that pottery is a social field which appears natural and therefore less open to explicit refutation or confrontation. The logic behind this assertion is that 'deeper' or more widely shared social meanings will be embedded not in explicitly ritualized objects, but in those objects used on a daily basis by all members of society. We might then envision pottery as an integrative aspect of culture which has the capacity to reach across many environmental and social divisions. This approach holds significant opportunities for balancing the study of Great Lakes material culture, which has previously concentrated on royal regalia and the powerful and highly specialized domain of iron working, to the exclusion of ceramic studies.

Despite these new directions, the thirty years since Posnansky's 1961 article have not been especially fruitful ones for ceramic studies in Great Lakes Africa. Radiocarbon dates have pushed back Soper's initial 1966 dates of AD 400 to 600 BC, while Van Grunderbeek's exceptionally early dates (1983, 1988) continue to find little consensus. The tendency to concentrate on burial and royal sites is lessening, but much archaeological work nevertheless continues to focus on single phase sites of significance to oral traditions. Connah's (1989) work at Kibiro is an important exception. Posnansky's general suggestions for the future of African archaeology – the training of more indigenous Africanist archaeologists and problem-oriented, theoretically rigorous research – also apply to the Great Lakes area (1982:353–4). While those pleas are certainly being addressed, notably at the University of Dar es Salaam, necessarily more complex questions about the very nature of material

culture demand reflection. If ceramic and iron data are conceptualized merely as an indicator of ethnicity or economic specialization, then they risk becoming simply culture traits, enumerated alongside other such similarly disembodied constructs as religion, marriage and economy, or invoked as evidence of wholesale migration. A more critical understanding of pottery in the Great Lakes region – both archaeologically and ethnographically – will lead away from classifications towards the construction of a dynamic concept of ceramics. We might then understand the ‘dilemma’ of the shift from Urewe to rouletted ceramics not as the disappearance of an entire group of people or an invasion of herders, but as a reflection of one of the region’s mechanisms for absorbing new communities of people and cultural and economic integration.

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