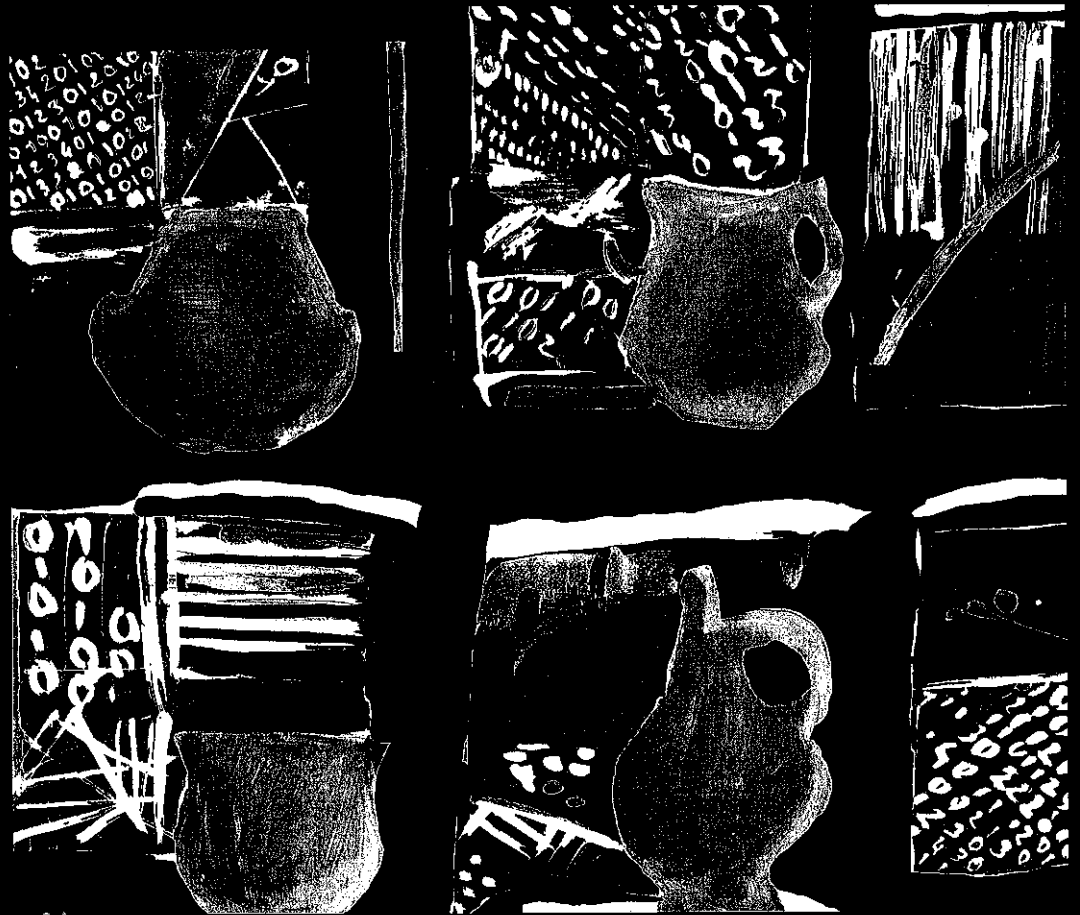


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Ceramics and Ethnic Identity : Ethnoarchaeological observations on the distribution of pottery styles and the relationship between the social contexts of production and consumption

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RÉSUMÉ

Cet exposé constitue un avertissement contre la tendance actuelle à identifier des groupes ethniques ou d'autres groupes sociaux dans les données archéologiques à partir des aspects du style céramique. Les recherches ethnoarchéologiques effectuées chez les Luo du Kenya démontrent que les « microstyles » céramiques distincts y résultent en grande partie de relations et processus sociaux agissant au sein de réseaux d'interaction personnelle dans différentes communautés de potières. Or, les aires finales de répartition spatiale de ces microstyles, dues à la dissémination des céramiques sur les lieux de consommation, traversent plusieurs frontières de groupes ou sous-groupes ethniques. De plus, les marges de ces répartitions de microstyles se situent le plus souvent dans des lieux sans importance sociale ou culturelle. Le style céramique n'a guère de signification symbolique apparente comme marqueur d'identité ethnique pour les utilisateurs, malgré la persistance d'une certaine hostilité et de concurrence entre ces groupes. Une appréhension de la distinction analytique cruciale entre les contextes sociaux de production et de consommation, et des moyens variés d'articuler ces deux domaines, est d'importance capitale pour l'intelligence des relations entre céramique et identité culturelle.

ABSTRACT

Ethnoarchaeological research among the Luo of Kenya reveals local ceramic micro-styles that result from social relations and processes operating within networks of personal interaction in different communities of potters. However, ceramic style has little symbolic importance for pottery

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users in distinguishing ethnic identity. The eventual spatial distributions of these micro-styles cut across major ethnic and ethnic sub-group boundaries, and the borders of style zones fall in areas of no social or cultural significance. An appreciation of the analytical distinction between the social contexts of production and consumption, and of the variable means of articulating these two spheres, is crucial for understanding the relationship between ceramics and cultural identity.

The concept of archaeological « cultures » as markers of ancient ethnic groups has a long and checkered history in the discipline of archaeology, and ceramic style has played a central role in the definition of such entities. Initially, as in the works of Gordon Childe (e.g. 1956), the association between material culture style and ethnic groups was a more or less implicit assumption resulting from an absorption of ideas from nineteenth century Romantic nationalism, the German *Kulturkreis* concept (cf. Shennan, 1989 ; Trigger, 1989), and the organic model of culture derived from the functionalist tradition in social anthropology. During the 1960s, the overly simplistic aspects of this perspective were subjected to a withering attack by archaeologists such as Lewis Binford (1965) and David Clarke (1968), and it appeared that the coup de grâce had been delivered putting an end to the idea of a straightforward and predictable relationship between archaeological cultures and ethnic groups of the past. Recently, however, this concept has been reemerging in the archaeological literature, this time with a more explicit theoretical justification.

There are, in fact, several recent approaches to the analysis of the relationship between material culture style and ethnic identity, among which those initiated by Martin Wobst (1978) and Ian Hodder (1978, 1979a, 1979b) have been undoubtedly the most influential in the Anglo-American archaeological community. We have already discussed some of the fundamental weaknesses of these and other approaches elsewhere (especially difficulties related to the production of material style and its definition and meaning : cf. Dietler, Herbich, 1989, 1994), and it is not our intention to rehearse these arguments again in detail here. Suffice it to say that the « information exchange » hypothesis of Wobst is built upon an implicit neoclassical economic premise according to which material style is a cost-effective communication device for maintaining social boundaries (especially at the inter-ethnic level). This perspective proposes that one can recognize the stylistic message that the creator of an object intended to send, as well as the intended target of the message, by means of a rational cost-benefit analysis of energy expended in the production of style. Hodder's theoretical positions have been characterized by, to say the least, a rather protean fluidity. However, among his ethnoarchaeologically derived hypotheses repeated with the greatest consistency and, more importantly, that which has exercised the greatest influence in Anglophone archaeo-ceramic circles is the proposition that frontiers are most strongly marked by means of material culture between ethnic groups in a state of « economic or social stress » (cf. Hodder, 1978, 1979a, 1979b ; this idea is now presumably abandoned by him, but still cited very frequently by others). Unfortunately, this phenomenon was never very clearly defined or measured, nor was a convincing demonstration made of the dynamics of such a relationship (see Dietler, Herbich, 1994, for a more detailed discussion of this issue as well as a critique of his more recent position equating material culture with text).

There are two fundamental problems with approaches such as these that regard style essentially as a means of communicating cultural identity. In the first place, they tend to employ an overly restrictive definition of material style which (especially in the case of ceramics) equates it with decoration while excluding consideration of technical aspects. Such a perspective poses severe difficulties for a social understanding of material culture, and it is for this reason that we have argued elsewhere for a more integrated vision of ceramic style which encompasses decorative, formal, and technical aspects and which is founded upon an analysis of series of choices in the *chaîne opératoire* of production (cf. Dietler, Herbich, 1989, 1994 ; Lemonnier, 1976, 1986 ; Gosselain, 1992).

The present paper is primarily directed toward the second major problem with the approaches noted above : that is that, in addressing the phenomenon of material style, insufficient attention has been paid to the distinction between the social context of production and the social context of consumption and the fact that these are variably articulated. As will be shown, this distinction is crucial for a social understanding of ceramics⁽¹⁾. Otherwise, one risks committing the logical fallacy of « affirming the consequent » through a tautological conflation of a *possible* eventual role of style (*i.e.* the signalling of social or ethnic identity) with a constitutive function (hence a necessary factor in its creation). In the case of ethnoarchaeological research and ethnographic analogy, we would maintain that an exploration of the importance of this contextual distinction exposes the impossibility of proposing a theory which purports to explain the creation of ceramic or other material culture style solely on the basis of observations made in the context of consumption (a fault that characterizes the approaches of both Hodder and Wobst, among others). Equally clear, however, is the fact that one cannot obtain a full understanding of the social significance of ceramics only by studying the context of production : the problem of distinguishing ideal and real functions (see Herbich, Dietler, 1991) offers one example, among many, of the limitations this would impose. What is essential for the development of a body of theory which may lead to a realistic understanding of ceramics as a social phenomenon is ethnoarchaeological research that explores the complex relationship between the social contexts of production and consumption. The rest of this paper is intended as a caveat and as a brief contribution toward that goal.

The discussion is based upon approximately three years of ethnoarchaeological research among the Luo people of western Kenya⁽²⁾. The Nilotic-speaking Luo live around the Winam Gulf, in the northeast corner of Lake Victoria ; and they are surrounded by peoples of different linguistic groups (mostly Bantu). They occupy a territory of about 10 000 square km, with homesteads dotted over the landscape. These

(1) Although the importance of this distinction was pointed out as long ago as 1965 by Binford (cf. Herbich, 1988), it has been surprisingly neglected in the archaeological literature on style and ethnicity, and even in a good deal of ethnoarchaeological research.

(2) The research was conducted from April 1980 to January 1983 (with brief preliminary studies in 1978 and 1979). We are grateful to the National Science Foundation (USA), the Wenner-Gren Foundation, the LSB Leakey Foundation, and the Boise Fund of Oxford University for funding. Our thanks also to the National Museums of Kenya, the Office of the President of Kenya, the British Institute in Eastern Africa, our field assistants (Rhoda Onyango, Monica Oyier, and the late Elijah Oduor Ogutu), and especially the Luo people.

homesteads are separated by patchworks of small garden plots and connected by networks of footpaths. The typical homestead is characterized by a cluster of houses enclosed by a euphorbia hedge and occupied by a polygynous extended family composed according to the principles of patrilineal descent and patrilocal post-marital residence (Southall, 1952 ; Herbich, Dietler, 1994). Each wife in a homestead has her own house, where she lives with her children. The economy is based upon small-scale agriculture, fishing, and animal husbandry ; and there is also a network of periodic markets. Although there now exists a system of government-appointed « chiefs » who serve the national administration, the « traditional » political system was without central authority and was based upon fluid alliances among lineages grouped into several « tribes » or « sub-tribes » (*cf.* Evans-Pritchard, 1949 ; Southall, 1952 ; Whisson, 1964 ; Ogot, 1967)⁽³⁾. These exogamous lineages are the traditional land-holding units, and they have strong territorial affiliations.

Luo pottery is a thriving traditional craft. It is an essential feature of daily life with a wide variety of utilitarian and ritual rôles. Only a schematic summary of the production system is offered here, as this has already been described elsewhere (see Herbich, 1987 ; Herbich, Dietler, 1989, 1991 ; Dietler, Herbich, 1989). Luo potters, all of whom are women, are specialists in the sense that all of the pottery used in the society is produced by a tiny proportion of the female population (less than one percent). However, these women are not specialists in the sense of being dependent upon this craft for their livelihood. They have all the agricultural and domestic responsibilities of other Luo women, and potting supplies only a small subsidiary income. Moreover, there are no workshops or other specialized facilities. Potting among the Luo is thus typical of what is called a « household industry » in the terminology of van der Leeuw (1984) and Peacock (1982).

Potters generally live in homesteads clustered around a clay source, with several potters *per* homestead. We call these clusters « potter communities » because of the networks of interaction ; but this in no way implies that potters are in some sense segregated from non-potters or that one will find potters in all the homesteads in the neighborhood of a clay source. In the region of approximately 3 000 square km which formed the core area of our research (essentially Siaya district and environs), there were 27 major clay sources, each associated with one or more potter communities (see fig. 1).

Overall, the Luo make and use an extremely varied ceramic repertoire. For Luo territory as a whole, the range of shapes produced can be divided for analytical purposes into a polythetic set of 13 different abstract form categories (fig. 2) (excluding two special forms produced exclusively for a neighboring people in South Nyanza, and a recently developed series of vessels based upon imported European forms produced in a few communities). However, each region within Luo territory employs a more

(3) For the sake of convenience, we use the term « sub-tribe » (recognizing nonetheless all the problems associated with this term, and the historical contingency of their current composition) to designate these maximal alliances of lineages existing below the level of the Luo as a whole. These sub-tribe units serve as a very clear focus of identity for Luo people, and they are associated with a definite territory (*e.g.* Alego is the territory of the JoAlego people).

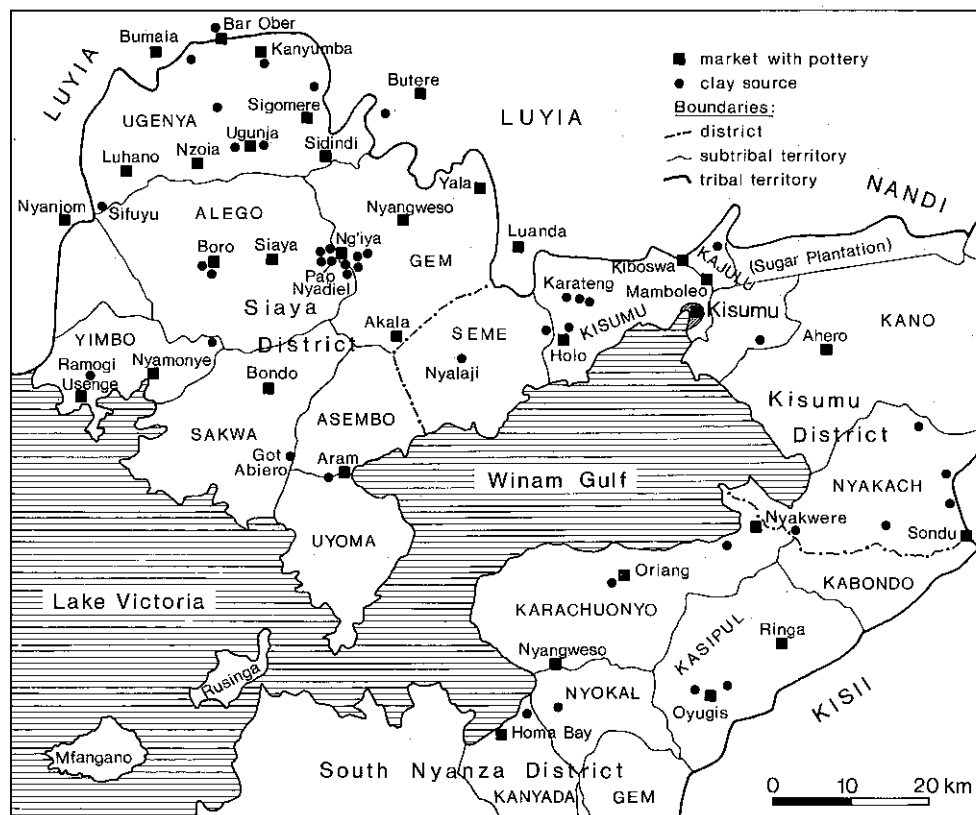


Fig. 1. Map of Luo region (excluding some portions of South Nyanza) showing major active clay sources, markets with significant amounts of pottery, and boundaries of tribal and sub-tribal territories. Kisumu is the sole urban center in the area.

limited, and slightly different, range of 9 to 11 of these form categories to meet a roughly identical set of functions ; and each potter community produces somewhat different versions of what we group together to describe as abstract general form categories. That is to say that one never finds examples of all 13 form categories in use in any single region. Moreover, it should be pointed out that the characteristically different versions of a common form category produced by different communities are not simply variations of a common ideal form, but rather the result of different local conceptual traditions. In other words, there is no global Luo « emic » classification that corresponds to our analytical set of 13 form categories, but rather a number of local classification schemes which we have chosen to aggregate this way (see Herbich, Dietler, 1991, for a more detailed discussion of this complex issue and of the relationship among form, function, and taxonomy). There are actually only two form categories which are represented throughout the Luo area, and these forms are not unique to the Luo.

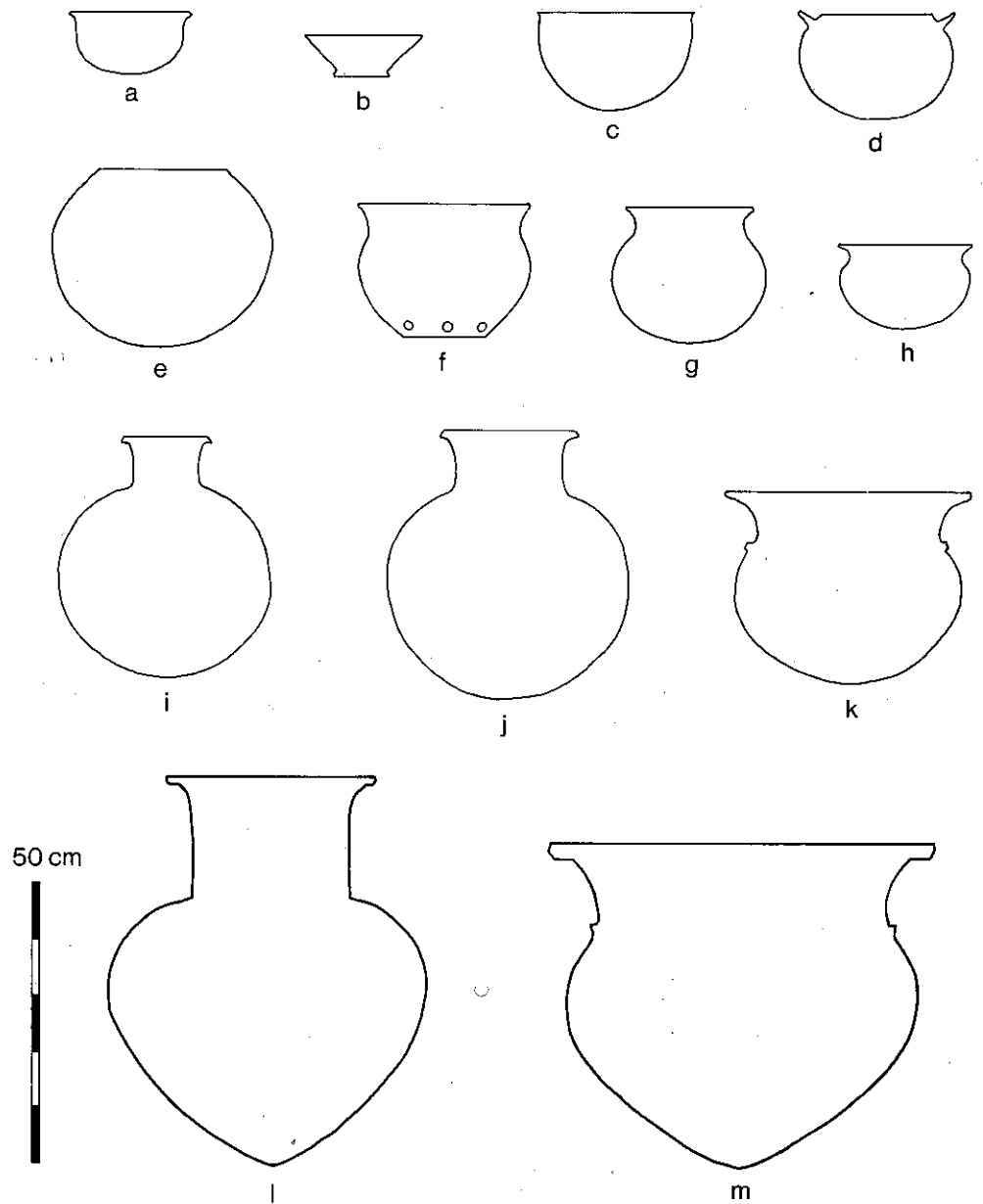


Fig. 2. Schematic presentation of « global » range of Luo pot form categories. Each of these abstract analytical categories is represented by an arbitrarily selected local example. Examples of the same form category from other areas will vary in size, proportions, rim profiles, etc. Size variations within form categories (which also occur in the products of the same potter community) are often significant in terms of utilitarian function.

Despite certain superficial resemblances, one can clearly distinguish the products of the different potter communities on the basis of different characteristic combinations of decorative, formal, and technical traits which we call « micro-styles ». These micro-styles are the result of traditions of production within potter communities : that is socially acquired dispositions (Bourdieu's *habitus* ; 1977) which limit in subtle fashion the perception of the possible in decorative, formal, and technical choices made at each stage of the *chaîne opératoire* of production (see Dietler, Herbich, 1994). Although it may appear counter-intuitive, these distinctive traditions of production are perpetuated by women who come originally from outside the potter community and who learn the craft after marriage, usually at a very young age, from their mothers-in-law or other senior women in the husband's homestead. It is not possible to explain in detail here the social processes responsible for this feature (see Herbich, 1987 ; Dietler, Herbich, 1994), but in very schematic fashion one can say that this learning pattern and a process of resocialization of young women after marriage assure that the dispositions governing the choices which generate these traditions of production are assimilated and reproduced by new members of the community.

The diachronic development of micro-styles is also influenced by complicated processes of daily personal interaction among potters. In fact, insofar as ceramic style may be said to have an intended symbolic meaning related to identity, it is generally limited to this level of face-to-face relationships among potters. The « messages », such as they are, are rarely understood outside the personal networks of potters. It is particularly clear, for example, that there are no messages encoded in these styles which serve as symbols of ethnic, sub-tribal, or other group identity in the context of consumption. As will be shown, ceramics have no role in the maintenance of group boundaries (with one interesting exception) once they leave the context of production.

Luo ceramics are distributed largely through the system of periodic markets, with potters serving also as the principal sellers of their wares. Before the development of regular periodic markets earlier this century (see Hay, 1972 ; Dietler, 1986), consumers would obtain pots directly from the houses of potters just after firing. The plume of smoke rising from the firing place was a signal for those who needed pots. This practice is still carried on to varying extents in many areas of Luo territory ; but most potters prefer to sell in the market because they feel less of a social obligation to the consumer in this more morally neutral context where exchange is not confused with the duties and etiquette of hospitality. Most of the major clay sources and their associated potter communities have remained in place since before the development of markets ; and it appears that the market system has not greatly altered the regional spatial distribution of the ceramic micro-styles⁽⁴⁾. What has changed, as noted above, is the personal relationship between potters and purchasers of their wares.

(4) It is obviously important to critically evaluate the influence of markets on the stylistic distribution patterns we found in assessing the relevance of this research to prehistoric societies, and a considerable amount of time was spent in the field researching historical questions of this kind. Luo society was certainly not « destructured » (as one commentator at the colloquium suggested) by its gradual incorporation into the modern world system. Rather, the effects have been subtle and complicated (a subject for another paper).

Most of the potters from a given community sell their pots at the same market, usually one which is less than about 5 km from their home. In a few cases, different potters from the same community may sell at different markets or the same potter may alternate her market choice. The normal means of transport for both potters going to market and consumers returning home is on foot, with the pots carried on the head⁽⁵⁾.

It is unusual for pots at most markets to be transported very far from the point of sale. The figures vary somewhat according to the individual market, but for the majority of cases over 40 percent of the pots sold to primary consumers will be carried less than 5 km from the market ; over 65 percent will travel less than 10 km ; and over 90 percent will remain within a radius of 15 km. By way of example, figure 3 shows the distribution of over 1 000 pots emanating from the market of Ng'iyia. (These are aggregate data collected from multiple weekly market days over the course of several months)⁽⁶⁾. The distribution range of some markets is extended by groups of traders who buy pots at markets where there are potters selling their wares and resell them at other markets, or from homestead to homestead, in areas where there are no nearby potter communities. For example, at the market of Aram (in the sub-tribal territory of Asembo) over 40 percent of the pots sold are purchased by traders and resold in the adjacent sub-tribal territory of Uyoma (where there is no active clay source). In this way, the distribution area of the potters selling at Aram is effectively doubled.

What is interesting about this process from an archaeological perspective is that it results in a spatial configuration of ceramic micro-styles such that very many cut directly across important ethnic and/or sub-tribal boundaries. The distribution zones of pots emanating from markets are normally fairly uniform in all directions, no matter what social or cultural boundaries they run across. This is as true for those which traverse the border between the Luo and their Bantu-speaking Luyia neighbors to the north as it is for those which extend across the borders between the various Luo sub-tribes. Even at a market such as Luanda, on the Luo/Luyia border, where potters of both ethnic groups sell wares of quite distinctive styles, there is no preference demonstrated by consumers for the pots produced by potters of their own group⁽⁷⁾. The result in the context of consumption is a homogeneous style zone centered on the market of Luanda, composed of a mixture of the two micro-styles and having no relation to any social or cultural entity other than habitual users of Luanda market : in other words, it represents a market

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- (5) Foot transport is certainly the rule in Siaya District. Motor transport of pots occurs with regularity only at a few very large markets in Kisumu and South Nyanza Districts (e.g. Oyugis and Sondu).
- (6) Distribution data were obtained by conducting interviews with purchasers of pots at markets and then plotting the locations of the homesteads to which they said they were taking the pots (information on types, sizes, intended functions, etc., of purchased pots was also recorded). A stratified sample of home visits (with domestic ceramic inventories) was also made subsequently to check the distribution patterns emerging from the market data. Among other things, this led to the discovery of a number of isolated potters who operate outside the major potter communities, sometimes using a small local clay source.
- (7) This fact is recognized by potters at Luanda to the extent that they have accommodated to a kind of implicit specialization by size, such that Luo potters concentrate on the smaller size range of the pot repertoire, and Luyia potters concentrate on the larger end of the spectrum, despite the fact that both groups make pots of other sizes in their communities of origin.

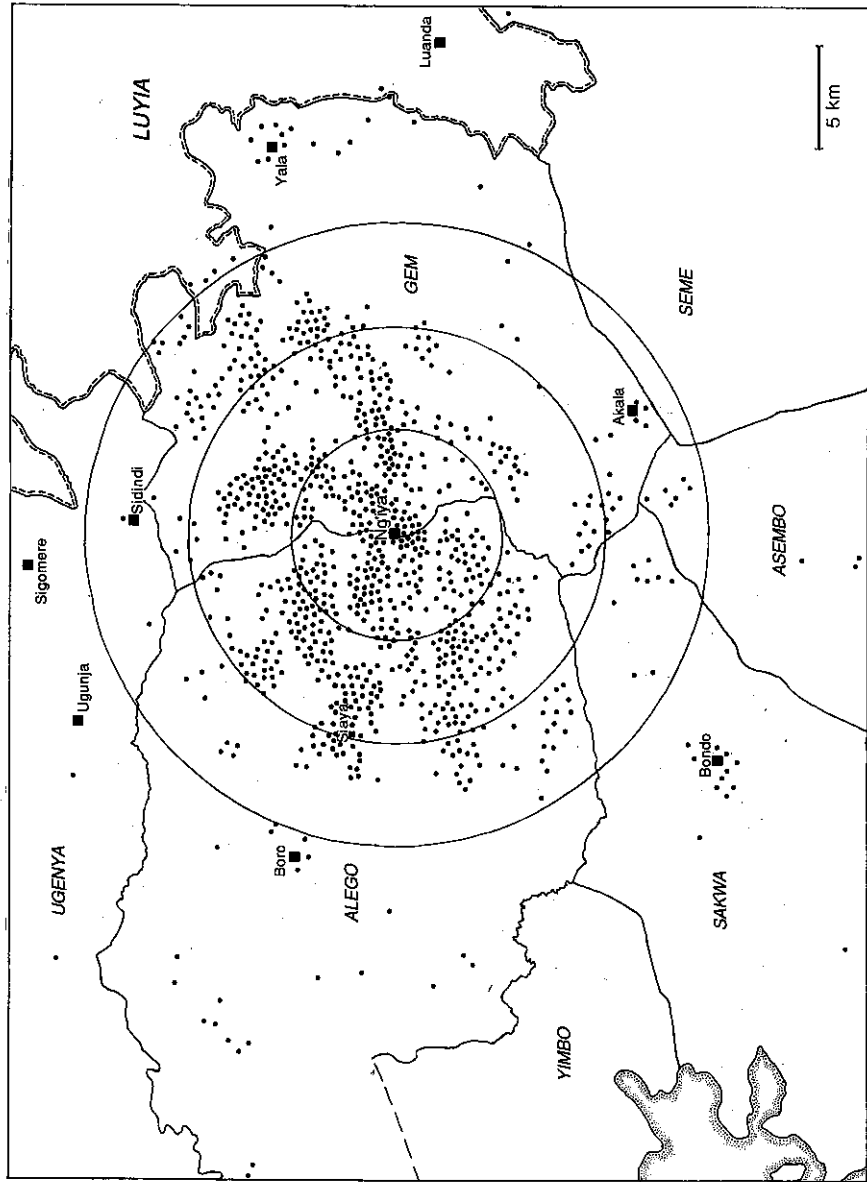


Fig. 3. Map showing the distribution by primary consumers of 1,104 pots emanating from Ng'iya Market (location precision is within 1 km). The pattern represents aggregate data collected from multiple weekly market days over the course of several months. The rings represent radii of 5, 10 and 15 km distance from the market. Approximately 94 % of the pots fall within a radius of 15 km.

catchment area. Moreover, this conglomerate style zone is extended further to the west by traders who transport a mixed assemblage of Luo and Luyia pots to homesteads in the northeast quarter of Gem (a Luo sub-tribal territory), where the people who purchase them do not generally recognize the two ethnically distinct styles. The same phenomenon is repeated at the level of Luo sub-tribes: for example, in the case of Ng'iya market, which straddles the border between the Alego and Gem sub-tribal territories, and in the case of Akala market, where the micro-style produced by a community of potters of the Seme sub-tribe is diffused over a region which covers parts of the territories of four different Luo sub-tribes (Seme, Sakwa, Gem, and Asembo).

It is evident that ceramic stylistic differences have no importance in the symbolization of group identity for consumers despite the fact that a given style is often clearly recognized to be the production of a potter community of a particular ethnic group or sub-group. In the one ironic exception to this pattern which proves the rule, the distinctive pots in question are not even produced by the ethnic group which uses them. Rather, to meet the tastes of their Bantu-speaking Kisii (or Gusii) neighbors, Luo potters in South Nyanza produce two pot forms especially for sale to them, in addition to their regular repertoire for sale to Luo consumers⁽⁸⁾.

It must be emphasized that this generalized lack of association of ceramic style with group identity symbolism in the context of consumption does not mean that sentiments of identity are weak or blurred. On the contrary, each of the ethnic groups and sub-groups has a strong sense of identity and of territorial boundaries. In fact, relations among the Luo sub-tribes and between the Luo and Luyia have a fairly hostile history (see Ogot, 1967; Were, 1967). The past few centuries, during which the Luo gradually moved into the Winam Gulf region from Uganda, have witnessed a process of regular armed conflict and of invasion and defense of territory which was halted with difficulty by the colonial government at the beginning of the century; whereupon arguments about territorial boundaries were quickly carried over into the courts. Moreover, both the Luo and Luyia recognize certain ethnic diacritica (e.g. the Luo do not practice circumcision), and each has a rich stock of ethnic stereotypes which they apply to the other (see Amolo, 1972). However, it is clear that ceramic style has little importance in the symbolization of these relations. The borders of territories and groups which are clearly important to people are not reflected in the distribution of ceramic styles; and the boundaries of the style zones fall in areas which are of no cultural or social significance.

This lack of ethnic significance is manifest not only at the level of the distribution of the micro-styles among consumers. It is also evident if one focuses upon a single aspect of the polythetic ceramic system, such as regional patterns in the choice of forms by potters and pot users from within the global repertoire of form categories described earlier. When one considers the distribution of pot forms across the different regions,

(8) Unlike the situation for Siaya District markets, at present we do not have sufficient real distribution pattern data from this area to verify that this ethnic distinction is maintained in practice (*i.e.* that only Kisii, and not Luo, buy and use these pots). We are reporting the perceptions of potters and sporadic observations at markets. We do know that some of these pots are also carried further east by traders and appear for sale in the Maasai area.

it becomes clear that there are no forms which are made both by all Luo potter communities and exclusively by Luo communities. The only two forms (fig. 2 d, g) which are made by all Luo communities are also made by Luyia communities. Moreover, some Luo and Luyia sub-tribes share more in terms of the forms produced by their potter communities than do Luo sub-tribes as a whole.

In summary, the Luo case presents us with two distinct and important phenomena. The initial production of ceramic style and the historical development of changes in this domain are the result of traditions of production (shared dispositions guiding choices in the *chaîne opératoire* of production) characteristic of the different potter communities. These traditions are reproduced by women recruited from outside the potter community (through a system of patrilocal post-marital residence) by means of processes of craft learning in a domestic context and a more general resocialization after marriage. Insofar as considerations of the expression of identity (group or individual) play a role in the creation of ceramic style, this is largely confined to the context of production and little understood outside these networks of personal interaction. Processes of distribution linking producers and consumers necessitate a change of context and of meaning ; and the eventual spatial distributions of ceramic styles, which are so important to archaeologists, tend to override and obscure the meaning of style within the context of production.

Consequently, it must be admitted that for archaeologists neither the spatial distribution of ceramic styles nor regional resemblances in pot forms are necessarily very good indicators of ethnic identity. Homogeneous style zones may pass across traditionally hostile borders, and the boundaries of these style zones may bisect groups with a strong sense of mutual identity. And this is not only the case with obvious large-scale trade wares. The caveat applies even when, as with the Luo, such style zones are less than 30 km in diameter : a fairly typical pattern for pre- and protohistorians. A critical lesson from this ethnoarchaeological case is the importance for interpretation of ceramic data of understanding the distinction between the social contexts of production and consumption, especially when there is the least possibility of even minimal specialization of the « household industry » type : that is, from the Neolithic onward in many cases. The petrographic work of Peacock on the pottery of Iron Age Britain demonstrates how prevalent this kind of specialization may have been in Prehistory, even for coarse wares originally assumed to have been produced on a household basis (*cf.* Bradley, 1971). As soon as the consumption group is larger than the production group, pottery becomes a product made for exchange ; and exchange implies a change of context and meaning.

This observation is far from banal in its implications, because many archaeological interpretations rest upon assumptions of this type. For example, the stability of a ceramic tradition is often interpreted as an indicator of the stability of an ethnic population in a region, especially in the case of a small region on the scale of the Luo micro-styles. However, it is evident that the only thing which is really indicated is the stability of the community of production, while the population of consumers may have changed dramatically (as well as the cultural significance and even function of the pots). In many cases, as with the Luo, style zones may simply represent market or potter-community catchment zones which have no significance in terms of the identity of consumers. Very close attention to differences in the context and association of the

ceramics found at consumption sites within distribution zones is necessary to sort out such possibilities.

Unfortunately, there is no easy solution to this problem immediately at hand. At present, the social understanding of ceramics is still insufficiently developed, and we archaeologists are well advised to be aware of the complexity of the situation. Understanding ethnic identity as a phenomenon is already a challenging issue (e.g. see Bentley, 1987), and, as Barth pointed out quite explicitly in his seminal article on ethnic boundary signalling, « one cannot predict from first principles which (cultural) features will be emphasized and made organizationally relevant by the actors » (1969 : 14). Basing archaeological interpretations of ceramics on hypotheses such as those discussed at the beginning of the paper is clearly a dubious endeavor. What is urgently needed for the future in order to develop a more realistic understanding of the social significance of pottery is both a more critical approach to the studies which provide the « source-side » basis of our analogical interpretations (see Stahl, 1993) and a good deal more ethnoarchaeological research that improves the sophistication of theory on this end of the interpretive process. Fortunately, this colloquium has been an encouraging indication of solid progress.

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