



Ritual Space in Pre-Colonial Farming Societies in Southern Africa

Thomas N. Huffman, School of Geography, Archaeology and
Environmental Studies, University of the Witwatersrand,
Johannesburg (Thomas.huffman@wits.ac.za)

Abstract Ritual behavior in the archaeological past is not self-evident. Understanding pre-historic ritual therefore requires access to the worldview of people at the time. This is at least partially possible for pre-colonial farming societies in Southern Africa through the settlement model known as the Central Cattle Pattern. With this model we can recognize and interpret a wide variety of artifacts, features and spaces. The most important dimensions in the ritual code include a contrast between the 'wild bush' and the social order of human settlements; another contrast between front — public and back — sacred localities within a settlement; and a third contrast between heavenly forces above and the ancestral world below. The roles of ancestors provided the need for ritual spaces.

Many archaeologists are interested in religious aspects of past societies. Most, however, consider religious activity to be more difficult to discern in the archaeological record than, say, technology or economy. Even with burials, it is clearly difficult to interpret ritual from archaeological data alone. In the following case study, I show the value of models derived from descendent communities for understanding ritual in pre-colonial farming societies in Southern Africa. In the process I demonstrate that religious activity was a central focus of Iron Age life.

Background and Theory

Pre-colonial farming societies have dominated Southern Africa for the last 1800 years. Since this time, people have lived in settled communities, cultivating such crops as sorghum, millets, cowpeas and ground beans, and they have herded cattle as well as sheep and goats (Mitchell 2002; Phillipson 1977). Because people were highly reliant upon iron tools, archaeologists call this block of time the Iron Age. For convenience and to mark widespread events, we divide it into three periods (Huffman 2007): the Early Iron Age (AD 200–900), Middle Iron Age (AD 900–1300) and Late Iron Age (AD 1300–1820).

These three time periods cover the unwritten history of various Eastern Bantu-speaking people, including Nguni, Sotho-Tswana, Shona and Tsonga (Figure 1). The worldviews of these closely related people provide the framework for understanding ritual space in Iron Age archaeological sites. In fact, without access to the relevant worldviews, archaeologists would be hard-pressed to interpret ritual objects, features and activity areas. Indigenous settlement organizations, on the other hand, are particularly useful for this purpose.

It is possible to use settlement organizations to identify and interpret ritual spaces because of two well-attested premises of human behavior. First, to create order, human societies divide their physical environment into discrete locations where only limited ranges of activities take place (e.g., Hiller & Hansen 1984; Lawrence & Low 1990). Some of these activities involve ritual. Secondly, these spatial locations have social significance and social consequences because they provide physical backdrops for social behavior and help to shape it (e.g., Kuper 1984). For the purposes of an ideal model, I present relationships between spatial categories in terms of concepts such as status, life forces and security (Huffman 1982). I do not claim that all Eastern Bantu people have, or once had, precisely

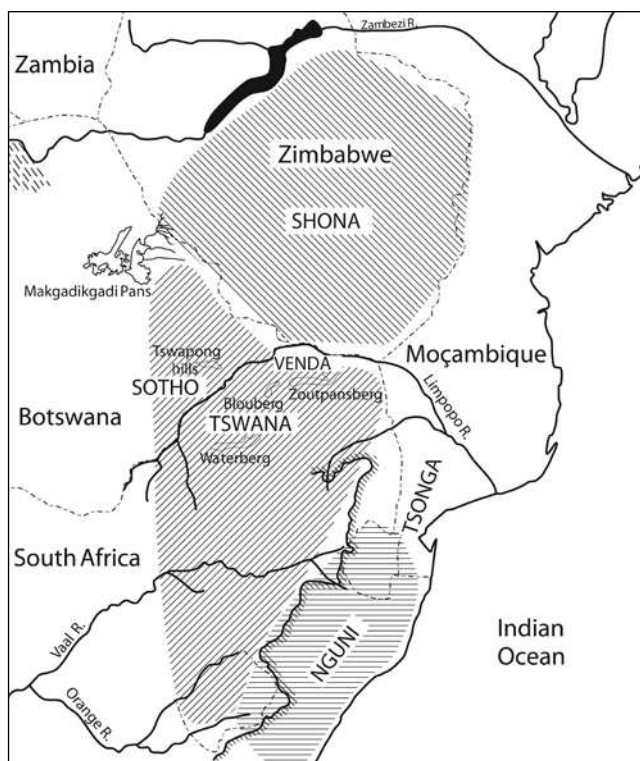


Figure1. Distribution of major language groups in Southern Africa.

the same representations in terms of these concepts: only that they consciously responded to concepts that can be adequately represented this way. They know the spatial elements but not necessarily the blueprints. Further, I do not claim that Iron Age societies were rigidly structured; only that when they were, they followed something like the rules expressed through settlement patterns. I make one other assertion: Eastern Bantu people carried a malleable pattern of inter-related social and spatial relationships in their minds in the same way that all people hold sets of shared beliefs.

In addition to status, life forces, and security, I use binary codes, such as left-junior/right-senior, to summarize inherent social relationships (Huffman 2001). These codes, however, are simply convenient heuristic devices, so a settlement model cannot be reduced to a simple list of binary opposites. Rather, the model comprises clusters of interrelated and interlocked principles. The model may be termed structuralist not because it is founded on binary codes but because it

articulates underlying normative guidelines for behavior. This is not the same as classic Lévi-Straussian structuralism. My approach, like that of Anthony Giddens (1984), maintains that cultural rules are embedded in the social context of daily action and, following Randall McGuire (1996), that human action requires the prior existence of cultural rules. Thus, even daily behavior is culturally meaningful.

John Comaroff and Simon Roberts's (1981: 27–29) study of Tswana courts provides a cogent example. Rolong and Kgatla, the specific subjects of their study, adduce normative rules to resolve court cases. In some cases, the norms are accepted and conflicting facts disputed; while in others the facts are accepted but conflicting norms disputed. Whatever the detail, the people believe cultural norms inform all aspects of their everyday lives. Some of these norms affect the spatial code.

Because norms are so embedded in social life, a specific settlement organization is closely allied to a specific worldview. By 'worldview' I mean a cluster of symbols that give meaning to social organization, rules to govern behavior and values to decide choice. This worldview constitutes a system of beliefs about people, society and the natural world: it is the conceptual basis of social life. At a high-level of abstraction, Eastern Bantu-speaking people shared (among other things) a patrilineal ideology about procreation, a preference for bridewealth in cattle, male hereditary leadership and positive beliefs about the role of ancestors in daily life. Because invisible forces are thought to pervade all life, all rituals involve the supernatural to some degree (Turner 1967: 507). Even though these principles are abstract concepts, they have behavioral consequences that help to form, and are informed by, a web of social relationships expressed spatially. Beliefs about the roles of ancestors are largely the reason for having ritual spaces.

Note that these spaces and their associated beliefs are not immutable. Transformations in settlement organization at K2 and Mapungubwe in the Limpopo Valley in the 13th century marked key changes in ideology and social organization (Huffman 1982). Indeed, the spatial expression of beliefs and social differentiation is *de facto* a tool for both reproduction and contestation.

To derive a settlement model that allows for contestation and change, I first draw on anthropological information on the worldviews of the descendants, in our case Eastern Bantu-speaking Nguni (e.g., Berglund 1976), Sotho-Tswana (e.g., Willoughby 1928), Shona (e.g., Bullock 1928) and Tsonga (e.g., Junod 1913),

and then demonstrate their necessary connections. The ancestry of these Eastern Bantu speakers can be traced back in time through continuities in ceramic style at a scale that does not imply a rigid one-to-one correlation between a specific style and a specific social formation (Huffman 2007). The next step is to apply the model back in time beyond the ethnographic period, phase by phase. In this second application step, the model becomes a hypothesis about social organization and worldview in the more distant archaeological past. In both steps the relevance and success of the overall interpretation compared to other alternatives is of paramount importance. The hypothesis covering the most data and with the greatest coherence and predictive potential is superior (Laudan 1996). Using this approach, archaeologists and anthropologists have developed two models relevant to Southern Africa: the Zimbabwe Pattern (ZP) and the Central Cattle Pattern (CCP). I am concerned here only with the Central Cattle Pattern.

For criticisms of the CCP see Hall (1986), Lane (1998) and Badenhorst (2009), and for replies see Huffman (2001, 2010). Much of this criticism concerns the differences between norms and daily action. To some colleagues, the meaning of space is invoked only through social action (e.g., Moore 1986; Lane 1994/95, 1998, 2005). This post-processual perspective, informed by both Pierre Bourdieu and Giddens, emphasizes the contingent and reciprocal nature of norms and social action. Following Bourdieu's (1977) *Theory of Practice*, they give priority to the human body, social action and agency. There is a danger, however, that the post-processual reaction to classic Lévi-Straussian structuralism will privilege daily action over social structure. While daily action may well invoke meaning, it does not follow that all meaning is absent before action. Indeed, cognitive models, such as the CCP, must have meaning at some scale beforehand because societies intentionally divide their spatial environment into a set of inter-related places. Thus, broad meanings of spatial categories exist before, during and after social action.

I first focus on high-level abstractions such as patrilineal descent and a preference for bridewealth in cattle. The CCP and ZP settlement models, however, do not exclude everyday lives. Because normative rules restrict and make possible the range of behavioral choices, the models help to provide the broader cultural context necessary for understanding social action. Some studies, for example, have used the intertwined relationship between house-womb-pots and graves to investigate a 19th century pot burial (Boeyens, et al. 2009), the correlation of beakers and burials during the Middle Iron Age (Hattingh and Hall 2009)

and the distribution of graves at a Middle Iron Age site in Botswana (Huffman and Murimbika 2003). In a similar way, Gavin Whitelaw (1993) used the relationships between pots–womb and beer–semen to interpret bottomless pots found in Early Iron Age sites.

Regardless of whether one considers agency in terms of the individual, relational or collective (Robb 2010), the intentional placement of burials and burial goods as well as the removal of a pot base are archaeological examples. These examples in turn lead us to consider the ethnographic and Iron Age records in greater detail.

Cosmology and the Central Cattle Pattern

In the cosmology of Bantu-speaking people, the earth sits between the world above of heavenly forces and the world below of the ancestors. The world below is where all people originated and where all people go after death, completing the cycle of life. Burials belong to this world below. Furthermore, nature, or the ‘wild bush’, is the terrain of witches and other anti-social forces, while human settlements are the centers of cultural order (e.g., Comaroff 1985: 54). The CCP is a specific form of social order.

As is now well known (e.g., A. Kuper 1982; Huffman 1982, 2001), the CCP (Figure 2) is characterized by a male domain in the center, encompassing cattle kraals where men and other high status people were buried, sunken grain pits and raised grain bins for long-term storage, a public smithy, and an assembly area where men resolved disputes and made political decisions. The outer residential zone, the domain of married women, incorporates the households of individual wives with their private sleeping house, kitchen, grain bins, graves and pits for short-term storage. These outer households were arranged according to a system of seniority expressed through left and right, starting with a ‘great hut’ built upslope of the court and kraal. At a lower scale the same dimension applies to the great hut itself: the central fireplace, equivalent to the grain pit in the cattle kraal, divides the hut into right–male and left–female space. At right angles is another distinction between front–secular and back–sacred activities that informs not only behavior in the great hut but also in the household and whole settlement.

This front–back dimension is particularly important for sacred spaces: back areas were reserved for ancestral activities. I turn now to the empirical evidence for ritual spaces within a settlement.

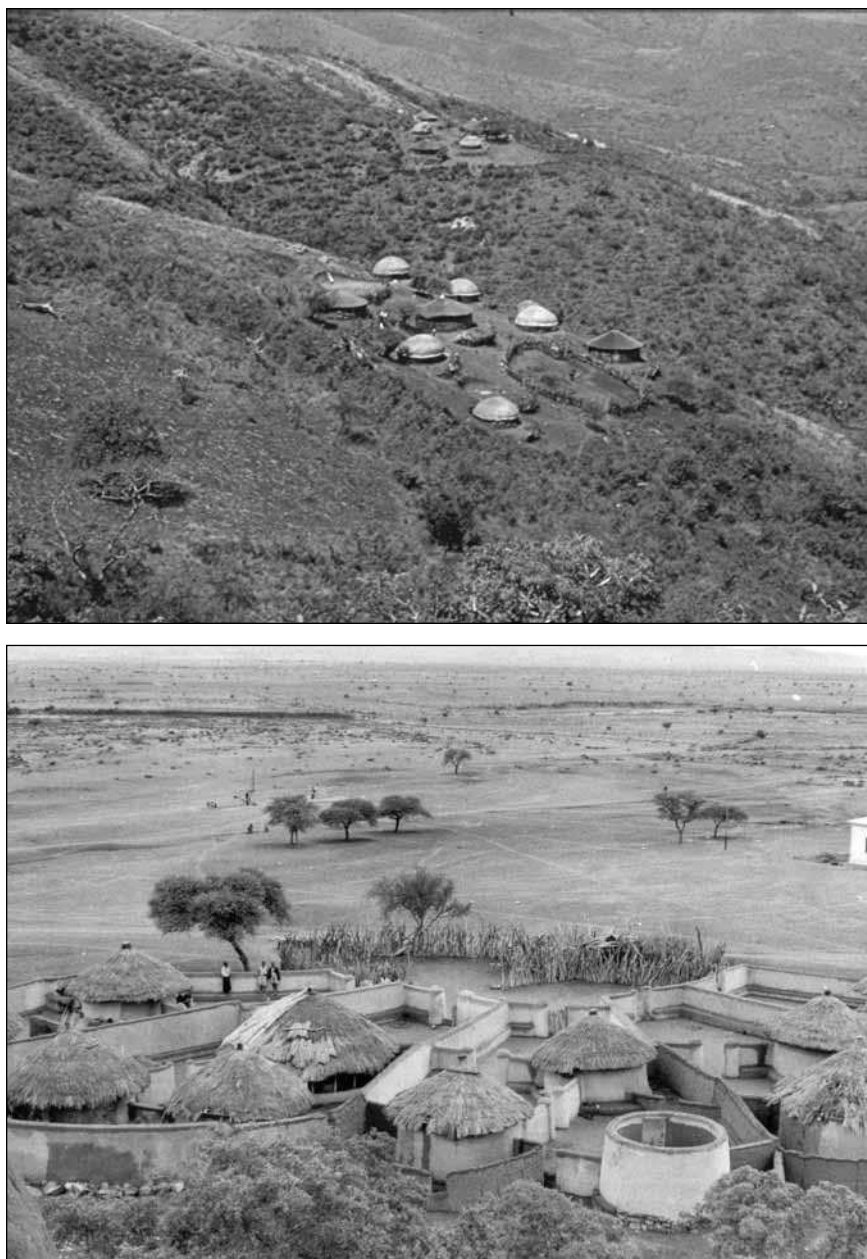


Figure 2. Present-day version of the Central Cattle Pattern: above, Zulu; below, North Sotho (photo courtesy National Culture History Museum, Pretoria).

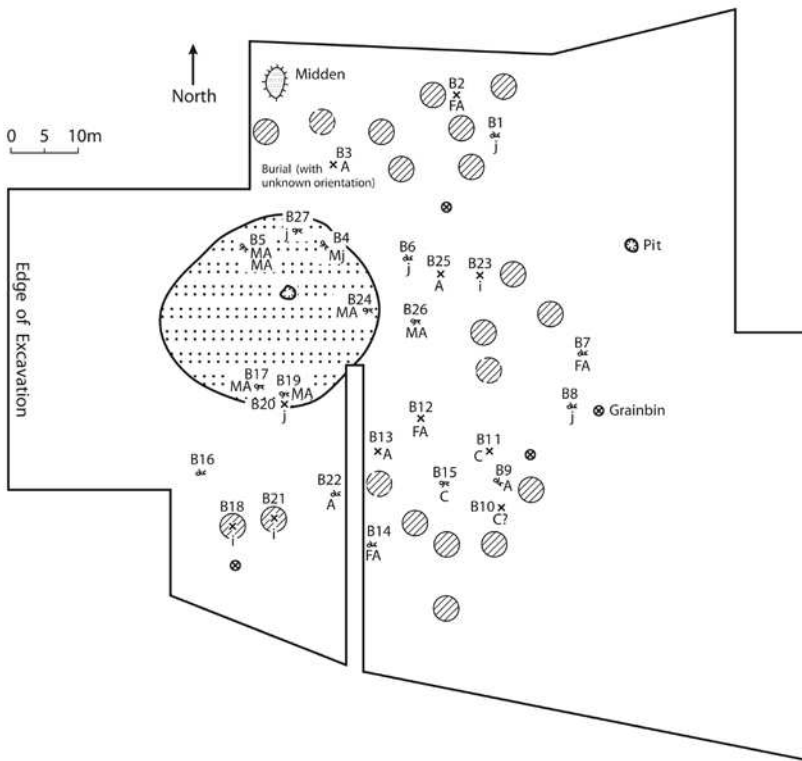


Figure 3. Distribution of burials at Kgaswe Middle Iron Age site, adapted from Denbow 1986.

Central Male Zone

Cattle Kraals

As part of the male domain, men should be buried in the cattle kraal (Figure 3). Sometimes senior women or the whole family of a chief could also be buried there. Generally, people buried in the kraal lay on their right hand side, the side associated with seniority. Further, the bodies of adult men (and women) should be oriented east/west with the head pointing west, the direction of death. Furthermore, adults were buried in a 'sleeping' posture (i.e., flexed) because death was only temporary: the dead enter the spirit world when they are brought back to the village a year later, perpetuating the cycle of life. Chiefs, on the other hand, are said to rest, rather than sleep, and so they were buried sitting upright. At the Early Iron Age (AD 400–900) site of Happy Rest, H. P. Prinsloo (1974) uncovered two sitting buri-

als in a central cattle kraal; one had a lion's tooth around his neck and an ivory band around his arm. These are items restricted to important people. Furthermore, R.J. Mason (1981, 1986: 170) found a male burial in a sitting posture in a cattle kraal in Area X at Broederstroom (Huffman 1990, 1993) along with the remains of some four other people. Ivory fragments and cowrie shells, another elite marker, were also associated with some of these Early Iron Age burials.

Ancestral roles depended on the position of the ancestors when they were alive: family heads, for example, looked after their family, while chiefs looked after their former chiefdom. Because of this principle, only people with a family could become ancestors. Male ancestors were propitiated at various times of fortune and misfortune, such as good crops and sickness as well as rites-of-passage. There is archaeological evidence for this kind of ritual behavior throughout the Iron Age. Cattle kraals, for example, frequently yield ash, broken pottery and burnt bone. Much of this residue probably results from ritual sacrifices: when a beast is slaughtered for rites involving the ancestors, people collect all bones and other objects that came in contact with the sacrifice, break and burn them to a powder and throw the residue into the kraal (e.g., Berglund 1976: 240). Because the ancestors are buried there, the kraal provides ritual protection for objects susceptible to witchcraft. The important graves in the kraals are also shrines where other rituals take place. Ideally, these graves are placed at the back of the kraal, in the most sacred area.

The back location of graves allowed for the use of the center for other purposes. For example, men dug deep pits in the center (Figure 4) to store communal grain as a long-term measure against bad times. The crops, such as sorghum (*Sorghum*) and millets (*Eleusine* and *Pennisetum*), are grains associated with men through ritual beer (Berglund 1976: 209), and their storage here was under their control. The pits were hidden under the 'male' cattle kraal and protected spiritually by the male ancestors.

Another kind of artifact appears to have had ritual significance. Bottomless pots (Figure 5) frequently occur in central storage pits after they were emptied of grain (Maggs 1980). Many of the bottoms, as the example from Nanda shows (Whitelaw 1993; see also Maggs and Ward 1984: 133), were purposefully removed. As a rule, ritual objects should be protected against malevolent forces after discard. The purposeful breakage and careful burial therefore suggest that bottomless pots were part of important rituals. GavinWhitelaw (1993) used Sotho ethnography to provide a likely analogy. Among the Kgaga (Hammond-



Figure 4. Tops of storage pits in 19th century cattle kraal.



Figure 5. Bottom-less pot in Early Iron Age storage pit. Note cattle dung at base.

Tooke 1981: 60), for instance, a series of symbolic linkages such as pots–women and beer–semen inform female puberty rituals. We can now go further: at the end, the beer pot is broken to symbolize the loss of virginity that comes later with marriage. More specifically, when a young bride is pregnant for the first time, she is particularly vulnerable to witchcraft and a danger to her parents. She is so dangerous that her parents cannot interact with her in-laws. To establish normal relation between the two families, Shona people perform the *masungiro* ritual, symbolizing the transfer of fertility to the next generation (Holleman 1952: 177–181). Because a young bride could be pregnant after her first sexual union, Venda people have an equivalent ritual (*vhofhela*) just before the young couple sleep together to avoid the danger to come (Van Warmelo 1948: 205–206). Thus, the bottomless pot may have been the first step in avoiding the supernatural danger of fertility and pregnancy that begins with puberty. The distribution of the discard suggests that this ritual was performed at the family level, as it is today.

Figurines

A type of clay figurine probably also represented a family-level concern with fertility. Many Iron Age sites have yielded female figurines that emphasize breasts and buttocks (Figure 6), but not the head (e.g., Maggs and Ward 1984; Matenga 1993; Summers 1957). Modern-day interpretations of these ancient figurines suggest that they were fertility dolls with an educational aspect (Roumegeure and Roumegeure-Eberhardt 1962; Wood 2002). Mothers made the dolls for their young daughters when they were ready for marriage. As part of the marriage process, the girl's fiancé must take the doll to her grandmother to learn its meanings. Essentially, the head is small and phallus-like because a woman's fertility is a blessing from her ancestors, and the husband only acquires rights to it (and to subsequent children) through bridewealth in cattle. To make this point further, some figurines have a line separating the head from the body. At another level the gender ambiguity may reflect social discontent between the sexes (Dederen 2010: 27). These figurines have been found as individual specimens in a variety of locations. This distribution is in keeping with their individual use.

Other figurines occur in large clusters. Over 400 fragmentary specimens were found in the Middle Iron Age site of Schroda (Hanisch 2002) in the Mapungubwe landscape. They occurred together in a small area near the main cattle kraal (Figure 7). A line of posts divided this small area into two portions

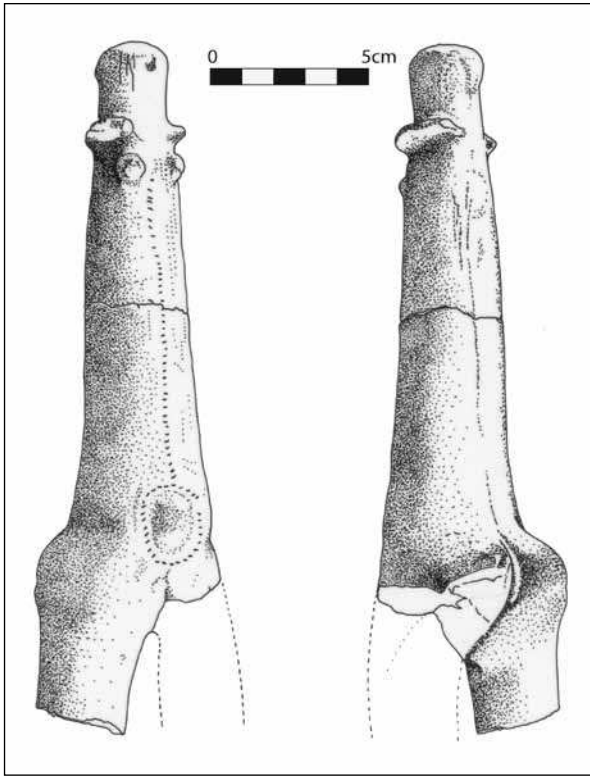


Figure 6. Middle Iron Age female figurine (redrawn from Van Schalkwyk and Hanisch 2002).

that contained different kinds of figurines: on one side were small, finely made domestic cattle, sheep and goats along with highly stylized human beings; on the other side were larger more roughly made wild animals and creatures of fancy, some with vestiges of red, black and white — the colors loaded with symbolic significance in the Bantu-speaking world (e.g., Turner 1967: 59–92). Throughout Southern Africa, Eastern Bantu speakers marked female puberty initiations with a period in a settlement (such as *byale* of the Sotho-Tswana), and these rites-of-passage often involved the use of figurines as educational props (Mönnig 1967: 126–7). In fact, Schroda may well have been the forerunner of Domba, the premarital school of the Venda (Nettleton 2002). If this is true, then Domba provides a direct model for the meaning (status and life forces) and use of the large cache (educational), and for the division of space into nature versus culture (see Blacking 1969 for details). Other clusters of unusual figurines are known from Early Iron Age sites in Zimbabwe (Goodall

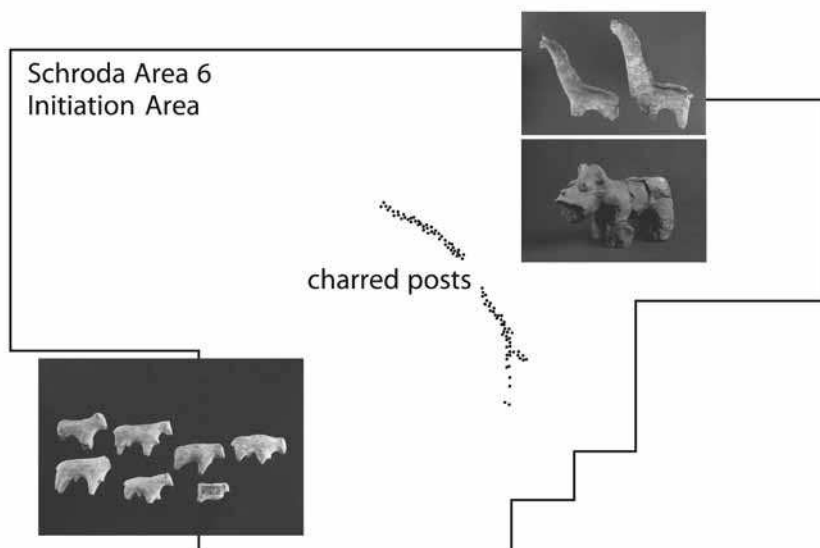


Figure 7. Early Iron Age initiation area at Schroda (photos courtesy National Culture History Museum, Pretoria).

1960; Matenga 1993; Summers 1957), and they too probably served educational functions in female rites-of-passage.

Some other famous ceramic sculptures probably also represent rites-of-passage. Seven hollow ceramic heads (Figure 8) were found in an Early Iron Age site near Lydenburg (Evers 1982; Inskeep and Maggs 1975). Two of these Lydenburg examples fit over a person's head, but the other smaller masks were probably mounted on poles. Vestiges of color still remain, and holes around the bottom show that the heads were attached to clothing of some sort. If we use West African analogies (e.g., Lamp 1985), these heads were probably used in ritual dramas to represent ancestors or other spirits. By covering the person underneath, the costumes and heads would have helped to mediate visually between the supernatural and everyday worlds (Maggs and Davison 1981). The seven heads were found together (and apparently broken) in the same storage pit, and so they too were probably stored (or discarded) in a place that provided ancestral protection. Fragments of similar masks have been found at a few other related sites, such as Ndongondwane (Loubser 1993), and the oldest, from the Rhino Early Iron Age village (Huffman 2007) probably dates to the 6th century. All these sites belong



Figure 8. One of the original Lydenburg Heads (redrawn from photograph, courtesy Iziko Museums, Cape Town, and the University of Cape Town) with fragment from the Rhino Early Iron Age site.

to a separate ceramic tradition (KALUNDU) from those with the figurine clusters (UREWE). They may therefore represent a different way of conducting initiation schools. Without further contextual data, however, it is unclear whether the initiations focused on young women or young men, or both. Whatever the focus, at the end, young people would have been eligible for marriage.

Residential Female Zone

Houses

Because people can only become an ancestor if they had been a parent, their link to the ancestral world is through marriage. In a marriage, once a wife has had her first child, she moves into her own home. The three new hearth stones in the cen-

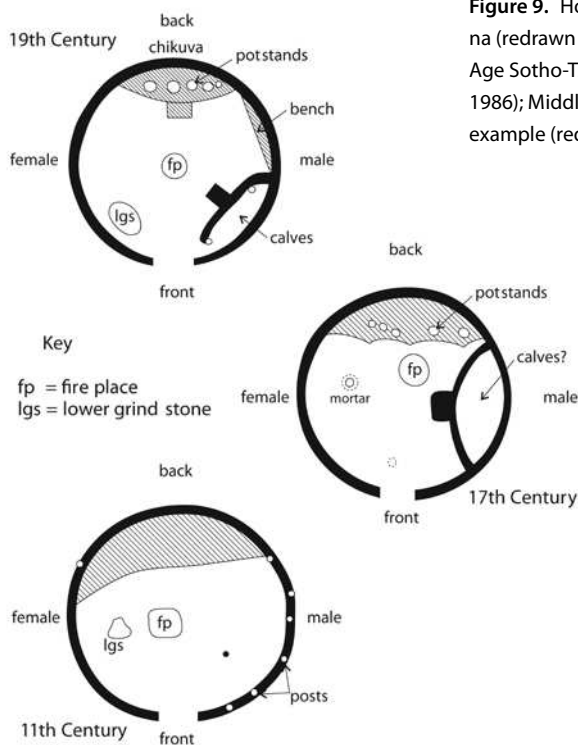


Figure 9. House plans: 20th century Shona (redrawn from Taylor 1927); Late Iron Age Sotho-Tswana (redrawn from Mason 1986); Middle Iron Age Leopard's Kopje example (redrawn from Huffman 1974).

tral fireplace are a particularly important symbol of independence. This hearth is structurally related to the central pits in the cattle kraal. It is in this home, at the back, where a man communicates with his ancestors on family matters (Figure 9). In the Shona world, a raised structure here (Taylor 1927) is known as a *chikuva*, (*umsamo* in Zulu) which is a cognate of *guva* — a grave (Aschwanden 1982: 203). The *chikuva* is made to look like a grave and it should be treated with equal respect. A husband prays here in front of a pot (symbolizing a woman) containing beer (symbolizing semen). In the Nguni world the *umsamo* is structurally related to the preferred location for burials at the back of the cattle kraal (Berglund 1976: 112). Some sort of raised back area characterizes houses throughout the Iron Age.

In all graves both adult men and women usually lay in a fetal, or sleeping, position. This was how they slept in their mother's womb and this was how they slept in their house. For this and other reasons, the house, womb and grave were

associated. Because of this association, stillbirths and other short-lived infants were usually buried under or near the house: they never experienced the world outside the womb, and so they should be buried in the house–womb (Huffman and Murimbika 2003).

A pot can also symbolize the womb (Boeyens *et al.* 2009; Hattingh and Hall 2009). Sometimes a stillborn infant was buried in a pot with the head emerging. Many children died of breach births, and their death was considered ‘hot’. Such heat should not be taken into the spirit world, and so the wrong was rectified symbolically by correcting the angle of birth. K2 in the Limpopo Valley South Africa has yielded burials of this kind (Gardner 1963: 46). Children who died before reaching puberty (from about 10 to 13, depending on gender) were buried in front of the household where they had played. Because they were too young to follow the rules in life, their orientation and specific side were not important, but they were buried in a fetal position.

Middens

In some cases, ‘hot’ deaths were ‘cooled’ by placing them in ashy middens. Because ash was produced by fire but is no longer hot, it can symbolize coolness, and the ash midden was an appropriate place to bury people who died in hot circumstances. A person killed in ‘hot blood’, for example, should be buried in a cool situation to prevent his spirit from seeking revenge. Wosi (Van Schalkwyk 1994) and KwaGandaganda (Whitelaw 1994) have yielded this kind of burial dating to the Early Iron Age. If people who died away from home, soldiers for example, could not be brought back, then the head — the site of all knowledge and emotion — should have been returned. If this was not possible, then a domestic animal, such as a goat, could be buried in their place.

Grain Bins

Married women who had children were buried in their household area, behind the main house around the grain bins. The Middle Iron Age site of Kgaswe (Denbow 1986; Huffman and Murimbika 2003) provides examples of this and other burial locations. Although a woman’s ancestors are ever present, they are not normally propitiated at these graves. If they were, it would only be by their blood relatives who came to the homestead for this specific purpose.



Figure 10. Artist's reconstruction (by Johan Delannoie) of Middle Iron Age decorated grain bin: inset is actual fragment.

Typically, grain bins are raised on stones to allow circulation to keep the produce dry. A thick mud floor often covers a layer of grass and poles placed across the stone uprights. The bin itself may be a miniature clay hut, basket, unfired clay or dung container. Whatever the container, most grain bins are associated with women, and both may bear similar markings. The 'breast-and-furrow' pattern recorded among 19th century Shona (Bent 1892: 46–48), for example, parallel the scarification marks on a woman's belly (Figure 10). Because women were 'fields to be cultivated' (Aschwanden 1982: 181), the grooves, known as *mi-hombwe*, represent furrows in a cultivated field and by extension female fertility. Examples of grain bins marked this way occur in the Mapungubwe landscape, dating to the 13th century e.g., Site 2229AA14C).

Women dug shallow pits at the back among their private grain bins for the temporary storage of crops associated with them, such as ground beans (*Voandzeia subterranea*). These temporary, private pits were only lightly sealed so that the first rains could cause the plants to sprout, providing young shoots for planting. Because ground beans are associated with women, and therefore female fertility, there are various rules about their planting and harvesting. In the Nguni-speaking world, for example, strange men and menstruating women should not walk across the fields (Raum 1973; Ngubane 1977). If a farmer disregards these rules and a drought shortly follows, he is to blame. This point leads us to consider one of the most important ritual aspects of pre-colonial farming life.

Rain Kraals

McEdward Murimbika's (2006) recent ethnoarchaeological research shows there was a specific ideology about agriculture and rainmaking associated with the CCP. During normal climatic times, rainmaking activities were part of the agricultural cycle. Over all, chiefs controlled the process, but unless they received specific training, they were usually not rainmakers themselves. Various people assisted the specialists. During the cycle, for example, pre-pubescent girls spread rain medicines on the fields. Later, headmen and other important elders would take burning cattle dung from the capital to their homes so that the smoke would call the clouds to all corners of the chiefdom. Throughout this time, rainmakers worked with their medicines, calling the rain and combating enemies who tried to prevent it. They performed this work in a special area called a 'rain kraal' located at the back, or just behind their homesteads (Schapera 1971). These locations are part of the front–secular/back–sacred dichotomy inherent in the CCP.

Among Eastern Bantu speakers, humans help to cause natural disasters such as drought. Usually, severe droughts (from three to five consecutive years) are blamed on a breach in pollution rules regarding something new brought from outside, such as a new variety of seed. Because the new seed comes from somewhere else, it is considered automatically polluted and therefore requires cleansing (see Ngubane 1977). If a farmer fails to have the foreign seed cleansed and drought follows shortly afterwards, the farmer is to blame. To bring rain under these circumstances, the rainmaker moves out of the settlement into the terrain of supernatural forces.



Figure 11. Rainmaking hill.

The Wild Bush

Rainmaking Hills

In times of severe drought, rainmakers abandoned their rain kraals and climbed special hills to ‘pull the rain down.’ Rainmaking hills are distinctive in that: they are usually steep-sided with difficult access (Figure 11); too small and too awkward for normal settlement, yet covered in pottery from different periods; and exposed rock often bears artificial cupules in association with natural cisterns. According to the ethnography collected by Murimbika (2006), the hills represent mountains that are the source of streams; the cisterns represent pools, while the cupules receive ritual beer to propitiate various spirits. There are often many cupules because each spirit must be separately propitiated each time. The copious pottery is the result of another important principle noted earlier: once used in ritual, a sacred object cannot be returned to a domestic context. As a third principle held by the people themselves, these rainmaking places stood outside the settlement, on hilltops associated with heavenly forces.

Alex Schoeman (2006) uncovered the archaeological signature of rainmaking hills at sites such as EH, MS3 and JC in the Mapungubwe landscape. As a

rule, the hilltop is comparable to the back of a settlement where grain bins, small stock kraals, middens and rain kraals were located. Grain bins on the hilltop, however, were temporary because they were built directly on the ground, while untrammelled dung shows that the associated small-stock kraals were also temporary. Burnt sorghum is a common find along with other burnt plant remains with symbolic value. All these features are present because the rainmaker must start again; whatever he did in his rain kraal must be repeated on the hill. If he sacrificed a goat at the beginning, for example, he must sacrifice another on top.

Ritual Links

At the end of his hilltop activities, the rainmaker burns down the temporary grain bin, and then every citizen must perform cleansing rituals. Those people who are thought to have caused the drought have to burn their own grain bins (doctored with traditional medicines) and build a new one on top. Excavations (Huffman 2009) in Transitional K2-Period (13th century) homesteads in the Mapungubwe area uncovered the remains of several such double grain bins (Figure 12), some with small medicine cups. Because of pollution concepts, no stranger would knowingly build his grain bin on top of someone else's. Thus, the same family built the double grain bins.

These granary remains consist of thick mud pieces with pole and grass impressions on one side and flat surfaces on the other. Red, oxidized zones show that these grain bin floors were burnt from underneath: so veld fires, accidental sparks or lightning could not have been the principal cause. Moreover, burnt mud structures are not as common as one might think. Out of some 1150 Iron Age sites now on record in the Mapungubwe landscape, only 3% have this feature (Huffman 2009). The random distribution of these few sites in time and space eliminates systematic violence as an explanation.

Throughout the area, in fact, occupation levels containing burnt structures correlate with Jeannette Smith's (Smith et al., 2007) independent isotopic evidence for drought. Overall, 19 levels with burnt structures correlate with 60 high $\delta^{15}\text{N}$ values (over 8.9), while 15 levels without burnt mud have 35 low values (Huffman 2009). These correlations are too numerous and complex to be a coincidence. Instead, burnt grain bins in ordinary settlements result from a ritual of cleansing linked to hilltop rainmaking and severe drought. It is noteworthy that rainmaking models incorporate the roles of leaders, rainmakers, helpers and 'the



Figure 12. Grain bins: above, present-day Kalanga example; below, burnt remains of Middle Iron Age double grain bin with fragments of upper floor on right.



guilty' (Murimbika 2006) and are therefore concerned with daily behavior. This link to rainmaking shows that the act of burning an ordinary structure can have ritual significance.

Circumcision

Because settlements in general and a chief's capital in particular represent the center of cultural order, activities representing great disorder, such as male circumcision, must take place in the 'wild bush,' away from normal society. In the recent past, male circumcision was a widespread rite-of-passage that marked the transition to young adulthood (Hammond-Tooke 1993: 134–147). Today, circumcision lodges are difficult to find in the field because they are built in isolated places and because they are not supposed to be permanent. Fortunately, they are often marked by distinctive stone cairns (Figure 13). A general understanding of circumcision in Sotho-Tswana society (Mönnig 1967; Roberts and Winters 1915) puts the cairns and isolated locations into perspective.



Figure 13. Four present-day circumcision cairns: stones stuck into ash with aloe on top, symbolizing longevity.

Whenever a chief or headman's son reaches puberty, boys of similar age in the surrounding districts assemble at the chief's capital. The boys are then taken to the circumcision lodge. 'Shepherds', the young men who had passed through the previous school, take the boys to the lodge, and then a ritual specialist performs the circumcision itself. Once the wounds have healed, the initiates hunt for food, practicing military tactics. Indeed, the school is a type of military induction, and it is not supposed to be easy: some may die (Chief Sekhukhune IV, pers. comm. 1980). Besides military aspects, the initiates learn what society expects of them as well-behaved men. Various lessons are taught through songs and proverbs, and many ordinary objects have special names and symbolic referents (see also Hammond-Tooke 1981). The physical organization of the lodge is supposed to reflect the society's social organization, although this is not always apparent. In keeping with status divisions, the shepherds usually sleep on one side of the lodge and the initiates on the other. At the end of the school, some three to four months later, the lodge and other paraphernalia associated with childhood are burnt, and the initiates receive their adult names. A short while later the shepherds erect stone cairns to mark the birth of a new regiment. The cairns resemble graves but yet signify birth — a noteworthy reversal. In some cases, long-living aloes are placed on top of the cairns to symbolize the permanency of the new age set. A year or so later, the young men attend another ceremony at the capital, or headman's place, to complete their training, and then they can participate in court proceedings.

A special enclosure at Ndongondwane (Loubser 1983) may well have been the spot where young men attended the second school. Among other finds, this

area yielded ceramic masks, like the famous examples from the Lydenburg site (Inskeep and Maggs 1975).

Summary and Conclusions

Some ritual activities, such as circumcision, are difficult to find physically, and the archaeological record is clearly incomplete. Rainmaking sites are easier to recognize, but they too remind us of another problem: the meanings of objects, features and spaces are not self-evident. In the case of burnt grain bins, their rarity shows that they are not a defining characteristic of Iron Age villages. Nor can their presence be used to estimate the longevity of a settlement or the number of people living there. Instead, they mark a ritual of cleansing.

The evidence presented here shows that to interpret ritual in archaeological sites, we need some understanding of the people's worldview. Fortunately, there is empirical evidence that allows us to trace the Central Cattle Pattern back, phase by phase, from the ethnographic present through the Late and Middle Iron Ages to the first appearance of Eastern Bantu speakers in Southern Africa. As this case study shows, the associated worldview provides the necessary context in which to interpret ritual artifacts, features and spaces.

In the case of the Central Cattle Pattern, the worldview incorporates a number of interlocked and related concepts. The organization of the main household parallels that of the entire settlement: the central fireplace in the house is homologous to the storage pit in the central kraal; the left-right division mirrors the system of status that informs the location of other houses; and the ancestral area at the back is like the private zone around a woman's grain bins, as well as the back of the cattle kraal and back of the settlement. Female fertility, of paramount importance conceptually, was represented in a variety of objects, including pots and clay figurines as well as houses and grain bins. The graves and storage pits — both full and as places of discard — belong to the world below, the world of the ancestors. With a positive attitude towards their ancestors, the proper place to bury the dead was in the settlement: the location and mode of burial depending on age, status, gender and cause of death. Rainmaking hills, in contrast, belong to the world above, the world of heavenly forces. Finally, these hills stand in the 'wild bush', outside the social order of a settlement.

None of this is self-evident in the archaeology. But the 'fit' between worldview and empirical evidence has multiple strands that help to explain the

archaeological record through time. At the same time, it is through case studies such as this, from different kinds of societies in different parts of the world, that we can derive principles that will help us to recognize and interpret ritual activity when ethnography is not available. As a discipline we need to study both action and norms; but which one a person studies first, or at all, depends on personal interest framed by a variety of factors besides pure theory. Those interested in the 'big picture' may turn to cultural principles before daily behavior. Whatever the interest, to understand the last 2000 years, ethnographically derived models are essential.

Acknowledgments

This paper was read at the 76th meeting of the Society of American Archaeology, Sacramento, 2011. I thank Leon Jacobson, David Lewis-Williams, Jannie Loubser and Gavin Whitelaw for comments on the manuscript. Wendy Voorvelt prepared the figures, while Johan Delannoie provided the reconstruction in Figure 10. My research has been sponsored by Archaeological Resources Management, De Beers Educational Trust, SANParks and the South African National Research Foundation.

References

- Aschwandien, Herbert. 1982. *Symbols of life*. Gweru: Mambo Press.
- Badenhorst, Shaw. 2009. The Central Cattle Pattern during the Iron Age of Southern Africa: A critique of its spatial features. *South African Archaeological Bulletin* 64(190): 148–55.
- Bent, J. Theodore. 1892. *The ruined cities of Mashonaland*. London: Longmans, Green.
- Berglund, Axel-Ivar. 1976. *Zulu thought-patterns and symbolism*. London: C. Hurst and Company.
- Blacking, John. 1969. Songs, dances, mimes and symbolism of Venda girls' initiation schools. Part 1: Vhusha. Part 2: Milayo. Part 3: Domba. Part 4: The great Domba song. *African Studies* 28 (1): 28–35, (2): 69–118, (3): 149–99, (4): 215–66.
- Boeyens, Jan, Maria Van der Ryst, Francois Coetzee, Maryna Steyn, and Marius Loots. 2009. From uterus to jar: The significance of an infant pot burial from Melora Saddle, an early nineteenth-century African farmer site on the Waterberg Plateau. *Southern African Humanities* 21: 213–38.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Bullock, Charles. 1928. *The Mashona*. Cape Town: Juta.
- Comaroff, Jean. 1985. *Body of power, spirit of resistance: The culture and history of a South African people*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Comaroff, John L., and Simon Roberts. 1981. *Rules and processes: The cultural logic of dispute in an African context*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Dederen, Jean-Marie. 2010. Women's power, 1000 A.D.: Figurine art and gender politics in prehistoric southern Africa. *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 19: 23–42.
- Denbow, James R. 1986. A new look at the later prehistory of the Kalahari. *Journal of African History* 27: 3–29.
- Evers, T. M. 1982. Excavations at the Lydenburg Heads site, eastern Transvaal, South Africa. *South African Archaeological Bulletin* 37 (135): 16–33.
- Gardner, Guy. A. 1963. *Mapungubwe: Volume II*. Pretoria: J.L. Van Schaik.
- Gelfand, Michael. 1959. *Shona ritual*. Cape Town: Juta.
- Giddens, Anthony. 1984. *The constitution of society: Outline of a theory of structuration*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Goodall, E. 1960. A specific and early pottery tradition of northern Mashonaland. *Proceedings First Federal Science Congress*: 441–51. Salisbury.
- Hall, Martin. 1986. The role of cattle in southern African agropastoral societies: More than bones alone can tell. In *Prehistoric pastoralism in Southern Africa*, eds. Martin Hall and Andrew B. Smith (South African Archaeological Society Goodwin Series 5), 83–87.
- Hammond-Tooke, W. David. 1981. *Boundaries and belief: The structure of a Sotho worldview*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.
- _____. 1993. *The roots of black South Africa*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball.
- Hanisch, Edwin. 2002. Schroda: The archaeological evidence. In *Sculptured in clay: Iron Age figurines from Schroda, Limpopo Province, South Africa*, eds. J. A. van Schalkwyk and E. O. M. Hanisch, 21–45. Pretoria: National Cultural History Museum.
- Hattingh, Shawn, and Simon Hall. 2009. Shona ethnography and the archaeology of the K2 burials. *Southern African Humanities* 21: 299–326.
- Hiller, Bill., and Julienne Hansen. 1984. *The social logic of space*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Holleman, J. F. 1952. *Shona customary law*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Huffman, Thomas N. 1974. *The Leopard's Kopje Tradition*. Salisbury: National Museums and Monuments of Rhodesia.
- _____. 1982. Archaeology and ethnohistory of the African Iron Age. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 11: 133–50.
- _____. 1990. Broederstroom and the origins of cattle-keeping in southern Africa. *African Studies* 49(2): 1–12.
- _____. 1993. Broederstroom and the Central Cattle Pattern. *South African Journal of Science* 89: 220–26.
- _____. 2001. The Central Cattle Pattern and interpreting the past. *Southern African Humanities* 13: 19–35.

- _____. 2007. *Handbook to the Iron Age: The archaeology of pre-colonial farming societies in Southern Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal press.
- _____. 2009. A cultural proxy for drought: Ritual burning in the Iron Age of Southern Africa. *Journal of Archaeological Science* 36: 991–1005.
- _____. 2010. Debating the Central Cattle Pattern: A reply to Badenhorst. *South African Archaeological Bulletin* 65 (192): 164–74.
- Huffman, Thomas N., and McEdward Murimbika. 2003. Shona ethnography and Iron Age burials. *Journal of African Archaeology* 1: 237–46.
- Inskeep, Ray, and Tim Maggs. 1975. Unique art objects in the Iron Age of the Transvaal. *South African Archaeological Bulletin* 30 (119–120): 114–38.
- Junod, Henri. A. 1913. *The life of a South African tribe, Vols I and II*. London: David Nutt.
- Kuper, Adam. 1982. *Wives for cattle: Bridewealth and marriage in Southern Africa*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Kuper, Hilda. 1984. The language of sites in the politics of space. *American Anthropologist* 74 (3): 411–425.
- Lamp, Frederick. 1985. Cosmos, cosmetics, and the spirit of Bondo. *African Arts* 18 (3): 28–43, 98.
- Lane, Paul. 1994–1995. The use and abuse of ethnography in Iron Age studies of southern Africa. *Azania* 29–30: 51–64.
- _____. 1998. Engendered spaces and bodily practices in the Iron Age of Southern Africa. In *Gender in African prehistory*, ed. Susan Kent, 179–203. Walnut Creek, California: AltaMira Press.
- _____. 2005. Barbarous tribes and unrewarding gyrations? The changing role of ethnographic imagination in African archaeology. In *African Archaeology*, ed. Ann Brower Stahl, 24–54. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Laudan, L. 1996. *Beyond positivism and relativism: Theory, method and evidence*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Lawrence, Denise L., and Setha M. Low. 1990. The built environment and spatial form. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 19: 453–505.
- Loubser, J. H. N. 1993. Ndondondwane: The significance of feature and finds from a ninth-century site on the lower Thukela River, Natal. *Natal Museum Journal of Humanities* 5: 109–51.
- Maggs, Tim. 1980. Msuluzi Confluence: A seventh century Early Iron Age site on the Tugela River. *Annals of the Natal Museum* 24(1): 111–45.
- Maggs, Tim, and Patricia Davison. 1981. The Lydenburg Heads and the earliest African sculpture south of the equator. *African Arts* 14(2): 28–33.
- Maggs, Tim, and Val Ward. 1984. Early Iron Age sites in the Mudén area of Natal. *Annals of the Natal Museum* 26(1): 105–40.
- Mason, R. J. 1981. Early Iron Age settlement at Broederstroom 24/73 Transvaal, South Africa. *South African Journal of Science* 77: 401–16.

- _____. 1986. *Origins of Black people of Johannesburg and the southern western central Transvaal AD 350–1880*. (Occasional Paper 16) Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand Archaeological Research unit.
- Matenga, Edward. 1993. *Archaeological figurines from Zimbabwe*. (Studies in African Archaeology 5) Uppsala: Societas Archaeologica Upsaliensis.
- McGuire, Randal H. 1996. Why complexity is too simple. In *Debating complexity*, eds. Daniel A. Meyer, Peter C. Dawson and Donald T. Hanna, 23–29 (Proceedings of the 26th Annual Chacmool Conference). Calgary: The Archaeological Association of the University of Calgary.
- Mitchell, Peter. 2002. *The archaeology of Southern Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mönnig, H. O. 1967. *The Pedi*. Pretoria: Van Schaik.
- Moore, Henrietta. 1986. *Space, text and gender: An anthropological study of the Marakwet of Kenya*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Murimbika, McEdward. 2006. Sacred powers and rituals of transformation: An Ethnoarchaeological study of rainmaking rituals and agricultural productivity during the evolution of the Mapungubwe state, AD 1000 to AD 1300. PhD dissertation, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.
- Nettleton, Anitra. 2002. Materials, meanings, *matano*: Venda initiation figures, In *Sculptured in clay: Iron Age figurines from Schroda, Limpopo Province, South Africa*, eds. J. A. van Schalkwyk and E. O. M. Hanisch, 95–111. Pretoria: National Cultural History Museum.
- Ngubane, Harriet. 1977. *Body and mind in Zulu medicine*. London: Academic Press.
- Phillipson, D. W. 1977. *The later prehistory of Eastern and Southern Africa*. London: Heinemann.
- Prinsloo, H. P. 1974. Early Iron Age site at Klein Afrika. *South African Journal of Science*. 70: 271–73.
- Raum, O. F. 1973. *The social function of avoidance and taboos among the Zulu*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Roberts, Noel, and C. A. T. Winter. 1915. The *Kgoma*, or initiation rites of the Bapedi of Sekukuniland. *South African Journal of Science* 12: 561–78.
- Robb, John. 2010. Beyond agency. *World Archaeology* 42 (4): 493–520.
- Roumeguere, Pierre, and Jacqueline Roumeguere-Eberhardt. 1962. Human clay figurines and fertility dolls: Their initiatic laws. *Proceedings First International Congress of African Culture*. Salisbury: The National Gallery.
- Schapera, I. 1971. *Rainmaking rites of Tswana tribes*. Leiden: Afrika-Studiecentrum.
- Schoeman, Maria H. 2006. Imagining rain-places: Rain-control and changing ritual landscapes in the Shashe-Limpopo Confluence Area, South Africa. *South African Archaeological Bulletin* 61(184): 152–65.
- Smith, Jeannette, Julia Lee-Thorp, and Simon Hall. 2007. Climate change and agropastoralist settlement in the Shashe-Limpopo river basin. *South African Archaeological Bulletin* 62(186): 115–25.

- Summers, Roger. 1957. Human figurines in clay and stone from Southern Rhodesia and adjoining territories. *Occasional Papers National Museums of Southern Rhodesia* 3(21A): 61–75.
- Taylor, Guy A. 1927. A Mashona hut. *NADA* 5: 22–26.
- Turner, V. W. 1967. *The forest of symbols: Aspects of Ndembu ritual*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Van Schalkwyk, Len. 1994. Mamba confluence: A preliminary report on an Early Iron Age industrial centre in the lower Thukela Basin, Natal. *Natal Museum Journal of Humanities* 6: 119–52.
- Van Warmelo, N. J. 1948. *Venda law, Part 2: Married life*. (Ethnological Publications 23). Pretoria: Government Printer.
- Weinrich, A. K. H. 1982. *African marriage in Zimbabwe*. Gweru: Mambo Press.
- Whitelaw, Gavin. 1993. Customs and settlement patterns in the first millennium AD: Evidence from Nanda, an Early Iron Age site in the Mngeni Valley, Natal. *Natal Museum Journal of Humanities* 5: 47–81.
- _____. 1994. KwaGandaganda: Settlement patterns in the Natal Early Iron Age. *Natal Museum Journal of Humanities* 6: 1–64.
- Willoughby, W. C. 1928. *The soul of the Bantu*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Doran and Company.
- Wood, Marilee. 2002. Poupée de fertilité: An interview revisited. In *Sculptured in clay: Iron Age figurines from Schroda, Limpopo Province, South Africa*, eds. J. A. Van Schalkwyk and E. O. M. Hanisch, 81–93. Pretoria: National Cultural History Museum.