

# Pottery, pollution and problem-solving in household space. A comparative study of Tswana- and eastern Shona- speakers with some archaeological implications for the Moloko sequence

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How may we understand changes to pottery in relation to significant changes in spatial arrangements of households? This is a key question central to the understanding of the Moloko pottery sequence, associated with Tswana-speaking people on the western Highveld, South Africa. The pottery underwent significant changes during three settlement phases from the 15th to the 19th century AD. These spatial changes are linked to changes of political scale, from small and dispersed homesteads to large numbers of aggregated homesteads. This paper proposes a comparative approach to the problem by discussing Tswana ethnography and ethnoarchaeology in addition to aspects from my ethnoarchaeological fieldwork undertaken among the Manyika Shona in Mozambique, articulating some key sociological principles of pollution ideas and strategies employed in order to avoid pollution in household space.

Among Sotho/Tswana-speakers houses and households were intimately linked both physically and conceptually to the human body, and the female body served as a basic cognitive model used to experience the world. And the concept of pollution is found elaborated within a ‘thermodynamic philosophy’ (de Heusch 1982), in which the potentially polluting states and actions were regarded as ‘hot’ while cleansing agents were ‘cool’ (Kuper 1982). Women were the main medium through which pollution could be transferred. Data from ethnoarchaeological studies of Kwena pottery (Thebe 1996, Kgang 2003) indicate that the most recurrent pollution ideas were:

- not allowing men near the production (restricted access to the potting house)
- prohibition against potting activities during menstruation
- avoiding sexual contact prior to contact with clay

Thus, pottery making is located within the nexus of sexual, menstrual and pregnancy taboos, emphasising its analogy to human reproduction but at the same time invokes the danger that human reproductivity may imperil pottery and vice versa, as pointed out by Eugenia Herbert. Turning to a specific focus on the relationship between taboos and domestic spatiality, I emphasise certain principles of the relationship between pollution ideas and household space from my fieldwork among the Manyika Shona in Mozambique:

- women and fire: the transformation of pots and food at the fireplace – central and low
- men vs. fire: ceremonies, approaching ancestors at the *chikuva* – back and high
- pots are given ‘life’ by their content and user through heat transformations
- storage of water and beer – ‘cool’ fluids – at the back

The hearth as a central focal point for both physical and symbolic transformations: the hearth-centred activities become metaphors for human experience and social relations (Haaland 1997). There are strong associations between women, pots and fireplace; the elements entering the house are veritably ‘cooked’ together. And within such a ‘thermodynamic philosophy’ the different localisations in household space are foci for social problem-solving strategies against pollution at the different phases in the life histories of pots. These aspects may be of relevance to understand key changes in household space and ceramics observed for the Moloko sequence.

The links between oral history and the ceramic types found at the early and late Moloko sites at Olifantspoort have been discussed in detail by Thomas Huffman (2002, 2004). Here I wish to focus

specifically on the organization of household space at Olifantspoort 29/72 and 20/71. Typical for the first phase is a multipurpose space for sleeping, cereal storage, preparation and cooking of food. The raised platform and the sharp curb at its front define the ritually charged and private rear of the hut that is often associated with ancestors. On the other hand, at late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century settlements, food storage, preparation, and cooking seem to have been fragmented and ‘bounded’ in dedicated spaces, with a storage platform at the rear and the hearths, more commonly elevated, placed either on the front veranda or in designated cooking huts.

Simon Hall’s (1998) analysis of Moloko pottery assemblages reveals that the first- and second-phase (1400 to 1700 AD) assemblages have a relatively high stylistic variability, with a high number of bowl classes with decoration. Third-phase (post AD 1700) assemblages show much less stylistic complexity. Bowls occur in low frequencies and decoration is minimal. Placement of ochre and graphite is a highly visible and extensive attribute to first- and second-phase ceramics, though infrequent on third-phase pots. What may explain the changes in ceramic types and decoration?

The changes may be viewed as closely related to the shift from internal sunken firebowls and elevated rear platforms to external and elevated hearths; that the compartmentalization of third-phase household space did what the firebowls and the decorated bowls charged with symbolic meaning had done in the first phase. The sunken firebowl as a central point inside the hut disappeared, and the associations moved with it; the focal point for hearth-centred activities shifted from internal firebowls to external and, in some instances, elevated hearths. And elements of material culture strongly associated with the sunken firebowl and activities related to it – the bowl and elaborate ceramic decoration with frequent use of ochre and graphite – became of relatively less importance.

The ideas of cohabitation and kinship – the ‘cooking’ together of the different elements entering the house – were experienced around the hearth in the womb of the house. And the curb separated that sphere of experience from the elevated rear platform. In the later phase, on the other hand, the symbols in the form of bowls and colour decoration became of less importance. The strong association between the sunken firebowl and the other central elements – house, body, womb and pottery – became weaker. And the sharp curb between the multipurpose space in front and the raised platform at the back in first-phase houses lost much of its purpose as a boundary. The breaking away of the closely interwoven association between the ‘hot’, central and low hearth inside the women’s womb of the house from the ‘cold’ elevated platform at the back – perhaps with strong link to men and ancestors – had important consequences for a ceramic technology that for a large part took place in household space, leading to a comparatively more ‘bland’ pottery style.

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Figures

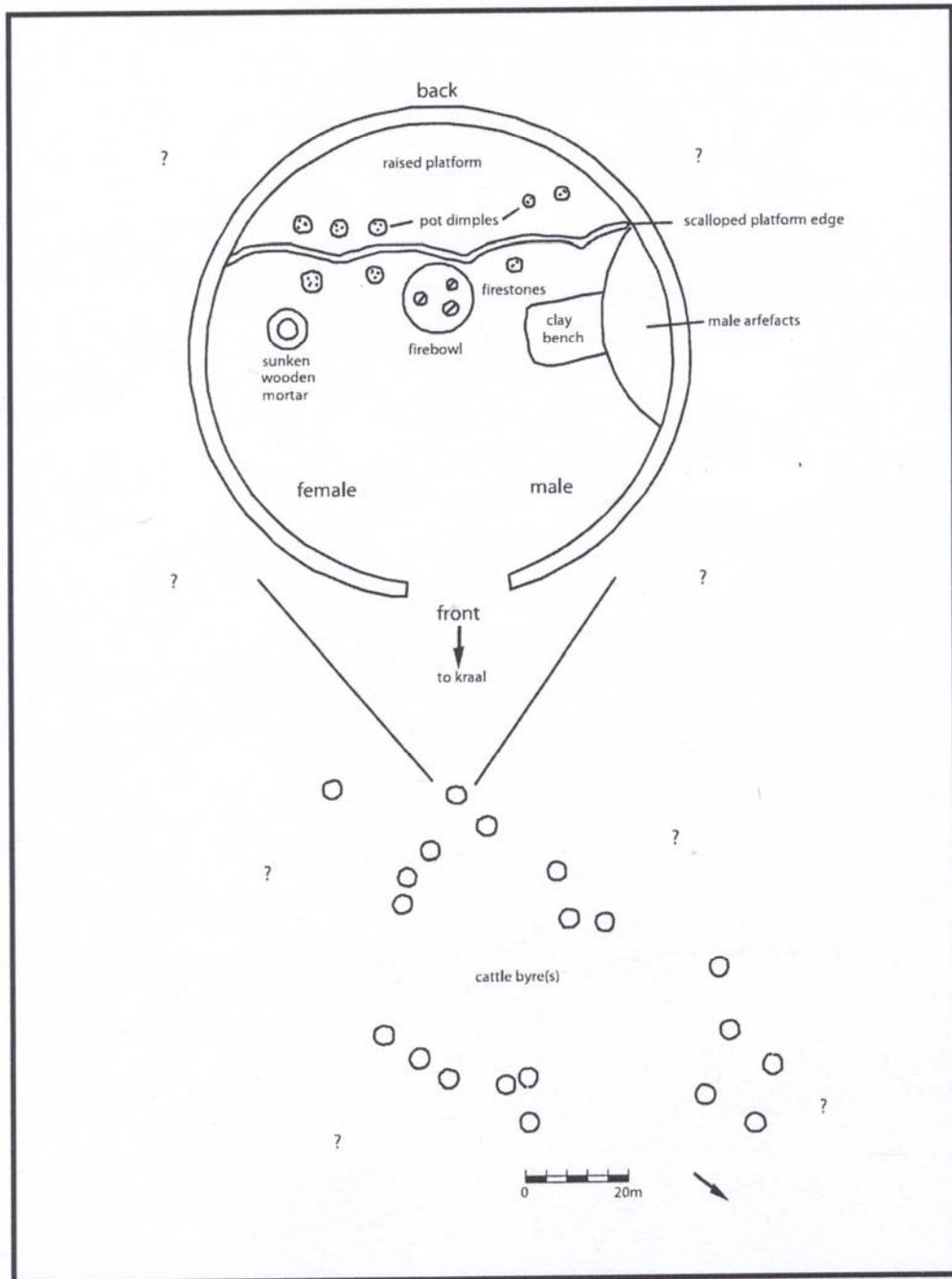


Fig. 1. Site plan of an Olifantspoort 29/72 homestead and a composite plan of an early Moloko floor (after Hall 1998)

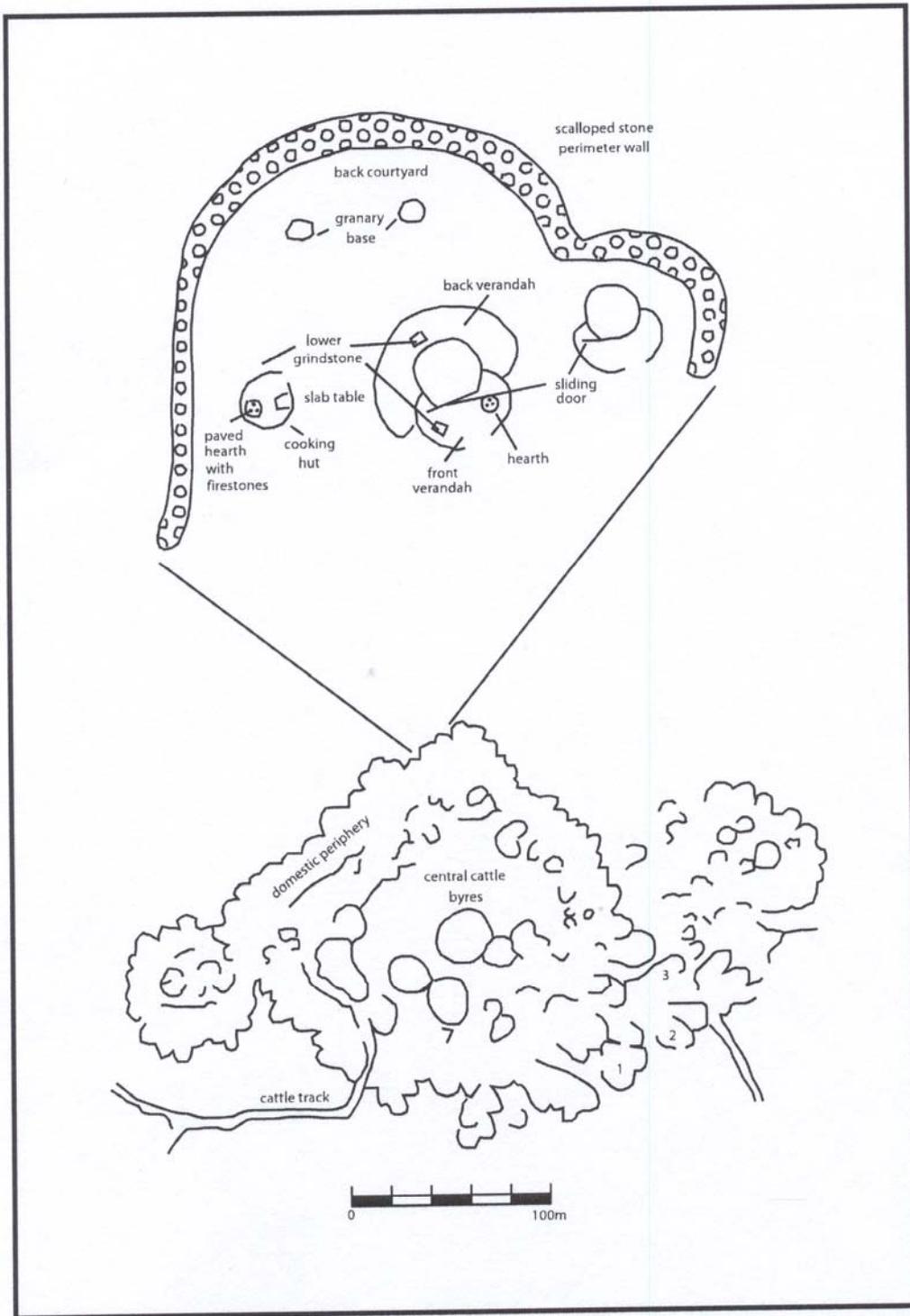


Fig. 2. Site plan of the Olifantspoort 20/71 settlement and a composite plan of a late Moloko household (after Hall 1998)

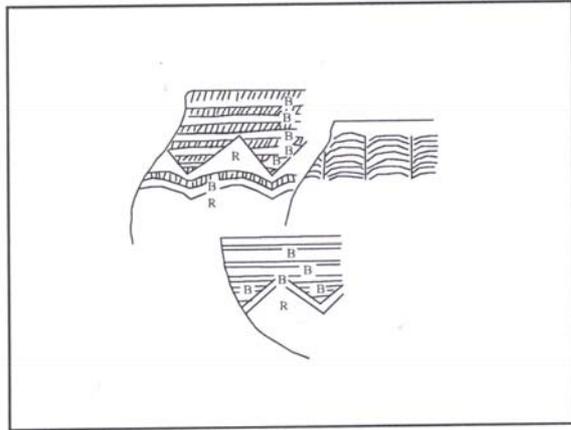


Fig. 3. The early Moloko *Olifantspoort* facies, found at Olifantspoort 29/72. B = black; R = red (after Huffman 2002)

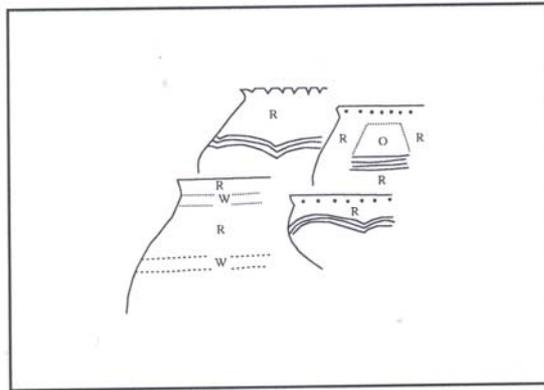


Fig. 4. The late Moloko *Buispoort* facies, found at Olifantspoort 20/71. R = red; O = orange; W = white. Stippling indicates a coloured area without a textured boundary (after Huffman 2002)